

Women terrorists in the Italian news: the representation of agency from ‘red witches’ to ‘lady Jihad’

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Abstract

Women are usually considered as peaceful, domestic and caring mothers, whereas men are considered strong, autonomous and political individuals. This appears to be true also when politics turns into political violence: ‘terrorism’ is usually associated with the sphere of masculinity, while women terrorists challenge this construction. This article investigates the press representation of four Italian militant women in two different historical moments: in the ’70s, the Red Brigades’ members Margherita Cagol and Barbara Balzerani, and nowadays the Jihadists Maria Giulia Sergio and Alice Brignoli. The aim of this study is understanding if the Italian press has been assigning or depriving women terrorists of political subjectivity, autonomy and agency. Our results suggest that these women are often represented through so-called cautionary tales, namely frames showing them as not ‘real women’, attributing them characteristics like masculinity, folly or monstrosity. Also, the explanation of why women commit terrorist acts is often connected to the fact they are partners of terrorist men. The results however suggest interesting differences in the representation of

women terrorists in the different historical moments, and among the different news outlets (with different political affiliations) under analysis.

Keywords: terrorism, women, Italy, media representation, agency.

1. Introduction

The literature on representations of women terrorists in the media has highlighted that although radicalization is a complex and multi-causal process, the media often oversimplify the decision-making processes of becoming women terrorists. Instead of considering them “complex actors making complex choices” (Sjoberg and Gentry 2016), their decisions to participate in armed groups are interpreted through a ‘gender lens’, denying their agency and constructing these subjects as incapable of autonomous political choices. According to these narratives, female terrorists might be motivated to join the armed struggle out of love or madness, which have nothing to do with politics, following and reinforcing the stereotype that women are interested in the private, not in the public sphere.

It thus emerges that the fundamental concern, and the most important consequence, of these narratives is to restore the traditional order of gender roles, rather than to understand the complex phenomenon of radicalization so as to be able to implement effective measures to counter it (Rizzo 2017; Martini 2018). In fact, female terrorists – like criminal women or women who perpetrate violence in general – undermine the stereotypes that would like women to be of a peaceful nature, dispensers of life and well-being and inclined to care (Elshtain 1987; Sjoberg and Gentry 2016; Nacos 2016). Faced¹ with this threat to the established order of meanings, the framing activity of the media

¹ In the Italian context, a parallel can be traced with the literature on mafia women, who, in the 1960s, used to be portrayed as lacking agency and victims of the criminal choices of their family. Progressively, instead, as early as the 1970s, their representation increasingly focused on their leading roles and specific autonomous choices (De Toni 2012).

– defined as the activity of building “interpretative structures that frame a particular event within a wider context” (Norris 1997) – stages so-called “cautionary tales” (Giomi and Magaraggia 2017), rather than developing new narratives capable of questioning the specific phenomenon. These narratives tend to stigmatize and show women who perpetrate violence as ‘not real women’, thus restoring ‘correct’ gender roles. This process entails the attribution of characteristics such as masculinity, madness, exceptionality, being a ‘monstrum’ against nature (Estrada, Nilsson and Petterson 2019), and highlights in the narrative the status of wife or partner following her man.

Investigating the media representation of female terrorists intersects two research themes: the identification of communication strategies aimed at normalizing the figure of the violent woman, representing her as “not a real woman”, and the denial of agency in the political field, considered appropriate for male and not female roles (Glynn 2013).

In this framework, the present work analyzes the representations of Italian female terrorists in the Italian press, focusing on four case studies in two different historical moments: for the 1970_s and 1980_s – the so-called ‘years of lead’ – we focus on the cases of the Red Brigade members Margherita Cagol and Barbara Balzerani, while for the contemporary period the focus is on the cases of the Italian jihadists Maria Giulia Sergio and Alice Brignoli.

The aim of the research is to identify the frames elaborated by the different Italian newspapers and evaluate whether the narratives have changed and evolved over time and possibly how. We dedicate particular attention to investigating the presence of cautionary tales and the affirmation or denial of agency.

2. Materials and methods

As explained by Rosalind Gill, news is “a cultural product that reflects dominant cultural presumptions about who and what is important, determined by race, gender, class, wealth, power and nationality, and what social relationships and

organizations are considered normal, natural and inevitable” (2007, 113). Furthermore, news is often conveyed through specific frames: a discourse can thus be considered both a social construction and a constructor of the social (Luckmann 1966; Silverstone 1999). It is also crucial to remember that some themes are more prone than others to be influenced by their media representations. McCombs differentiates between ‘obstrusive’ and ‘non-obstrusive’ issues (2014): readers have direct experience of the former, while the latter are only encountered in the news and often not experienced in everyday life. We could call terrorism an ‘unobstrusive’ topic; most people do not have direct experience of it and its interpretation depends heavily on the news. In this case above all, the media are therefore our ‘window’ beyond direct experience: they determine our ‘cognitive maps’ (Noelle-Neumann 1984), our ‘images of the world’ (Lippmann 1922).

The four case studies have been chosen through an analysis of the literature on Italian women terrorists (Staccioli 2015; Martini 2018). Margherita Cagol, Barbara Balzerani, Maria Giulia Sergio and Alice Brignoli stand out as key figures in relation to the terrorism ongoing in Italy in the seventies, and later involving Italian citizens in the years following 2014. In June 2014 the Islamic State in Iraq and Levant (ISIS) declared the “reconstitution of the caliphate” in Iraq and Syria², calling numerous supporters from all over the world to join them on the ground (‘foreign fighters’).

The newspaper articles in the paper editions examined in this essay were published in the 10 days following the arrest, or death, of these four women. The outlets analysed are *Il Corriere della Sera*, *L’Unità* and *Il Giornale* for the cases of Cagol and Balzerani, and *Il Corriere della sera*, *La Repubblica* and *Il Giornale* for the cases of Sergio and Brignoli. Specifically, 37 articles on Mara Cagol were collected between 6 and 16 June 1975 (Cagol’s death in a firefight with the police in 1975 was taken as the starting point for the collection); 36

² <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/30/isis-announces-islamic-caliphate-iraq-syria>

articles were collected on Barbara Balzerani between 20 and 30 June 1985, after her arrest on 19 June 1985, following a long period in hiding. Regarding Maria Giulia Sergio, 37 articles were collected from 1 to 11 July 2015, the 10 days following the issue of a pre-trial detention order against her and the arrest of her family with charges of international terrorism. Finally, for the case of Alice Brignoli, 18 articles were collected from 30 September to 10 October 2020, following her arrest on 29 September 2020. In total, the collection consists of 128 articles.

The news outlets were chosen for their different political affiliations: various studies have shown that Italian journalism has been characterized by strong political parallelism since the mid-twentieth century (Murialdi 1978; Hallin and Mancini 2004), when party newspapers developed significantly after the fall of fascism; the newspaper of the Italian Communist Party (PCI), *L'Unità*, reached a circulation of 300,000 (700,000 on Sundays) in the 1960s, playing a fundamental role in the vast political subculture surrounding the party (Hallin and Mancini 2004). A large part of the Italian press instead consisted of mainstream newspapers such as *Il Corriere della Sera*, which in most cases supported the centrist policies of the ruling party, the Christian Democrats (DC) (Murialdi 1978). Newspapers that were more politically oriented, but not party-oriented, were established in the 1970s, such as *Il Giornale*, in 1974, directed by Indro Montanelli, tending towards the centre-right, and *La Repubblica*, in 1976, directed by Eugenio Scalfari, a liberal left oriented newspaper.

Critical discourse analysis is the methodology used to analyze the texts (Fairclough 1992; Lindekilde 2014). The theory foresees the use of different methods of analysis, which not only allows scrutiny of the content of the texts, but also of their production and reception, as well as social practices more generally, thus paying particular attention to the contexts within which certain discourses are produced.

In this essay, in light of the studies on the representation of female terrorists, careful attention has been given to the labeling processes and to the identification of the frames existing in the articles.

3. The socio-political context

The seventies were years of profound socio-political change in Italy, when numerous student and worker movements flourished, multiplying strikes and demonstrations, similarly to elsewhere in the world. In parallel, and not necessarily therefore, armed groups of the far right and far left were established and radicalised in the course of the seventies: violent attacks escalated, of different political and ideological natures³. The most intense wave of far-right violence took place between the end of the sixties and the first half of the seventies: the massacres perpetrated by neo-fascist groups – including Piazza Fontana, the Brescia massacre, the Italicus train – represented the most brutal form of terrorism in the country, killing and wounding hundreds of people (Della Porta and Rossi 1985). After 1974 there was a decline in right-wing actions parallel to the growing activity of far-left groups, first of all that of the Red Brigades (BR): among the many episodes, the most well-known is the kidnapping and killing of the prime minister, Aldo Moro, in 1978. It is in this context that Margherita Cagol and Barbara Balzerani acted within the BR group: both had prominent roles in the so-called ‘armed party’, Cagol in the first years of its activity and Balzerani in the second phase. However, women always remained a minority in the armed groups of the seven-ties, especially regarding active roles, making Cagol and Balzerani two notable exceptions.

The ‘red’ terrorism of the seventies and eighties had completely different ideological foundations and objectives compared to the contemporary terrorism of Islamic origin; proof of the vagueness of the concept of terrorism itself and therefore of the wide range of narrative possibilities when the figure of ‘terrorist’ is described in the news. Focusing instead on the forms of terrorism linked to radical Islam, it is inevitable we think of the Twin Towers in 2001, which materialised what Huntington defines as a ‘clash of civilizations’ (Huntington

³ Between 1969 and 1982, 4,362 episodes of political violence, 6,153 unclaimed bomb attacks against property, 2,712 claimed attacks by terrorist groups – 324 of these against people – took place, leading to 768 injuries and 351 deaths (Della Porta 1992).

1996). ‘Islamic fundamentalism’ (understood as a branch of the theoretical and political activism that advocates a return to the ‘foundations’ of Islam) is a phenomenon that has ancient roots, but which during the twentieth century asserted itself as a factor in collective mobilization (Guolo 2002), up to the most modern formations of political Islam such as Isis and Al-Qaeda. In recent years, some Italian citizens or residents in Italy, often young people, have embarked on the path of Islamist radicalization; among them, about a hundred people have fought in Syria and Iraq (Guolo 2018). The role of women within ISIS has been evolving: from the ancillary roles of homemakers (wives, giving birth to future fighters...), to emerge on the front lines as suicide bombers, recruiters, or as part of ISIS’s official women’s police brigade (Gan *et al.* 2018). The analysis that follows reflects such changing roles of women in the terrorist organizations they belonged to (BR and ISIS), over time.

4. The representation of terrorist women, yesterday and today

4.1. Margherita Cagol: (*bourgeoise*) revolutionary for love

The starting point for a discussion on the representation of female terrorists in Italy is certainly the figure of Margherita (Mara) Cagol. ‘Comrade Mara’ was one of the founders of the Red Brigades and one of the first victims in an armed clash with the police, becoming a symbol for the adherents to the left-wing armed struggle and a particular model of the leftist “strong woman” (Glynn 2013).

Although her name came to the fore in the press as the woman who allegedly enabled the escape of Renato Curcio, co-founder of the BR and her partner, from the Casale Monferrato prison in February 1975, it was on the occasion of her death (5 June 1975) that her name garnered the greatest media attention.

On 6 June 1975, the front pages of the Italian newspapers announced the release of the kidnapped industrialist Vittorio Gancia, the death of one of the

kidnappers in the countryside near Acqui Terme and the wounding of three police officers. The following day, accompanied by comments and in-depth reports in the inner pages, the news headlines announced that the dead terrorist was Mara Cagol.

The reports focused a lot on biographical details, personalizing the news story by talking about Cagol's love life, her bourgeois origins and accompanying the narrative with numerous images, among which the photos of her wedding with Curcio and of her disfigured face after the gunfight. The great attention paid to the emotional relationship between Cagol and Curcio is central to the narrative of the figure of the terrorist: the 'wife/partner' frame is crucial in the case under study. On 7 June 1975, none of the newspapers under analysis reported Margherita's name in its headlines: "The woman killed is the wife of the head of the Red Brigades", reads the headline of *Il Corriere della Sera*; "The woman killed was the wife of Curcio", wrote *L'Unità*. This kind of representation implies that a woman's participation in acts of political violence is of secondary importance, often attributable to the influence of her partner (Staccioli 2015; Bini 2017). With rare exceptions, Cagol's name always appears alongside Curcio's in the newspapers of the seventies, so that Margherita Cagol as a person, woman and political militant simply disappears. This characteristic is found in the representation of many other women belonging to the armed groups of the time, often defined as 'sisters', 'daughters', 'wives', 'partners', or more ambiguously 'friends' of a militant man (Staccioli 2015; Glynn 2013). *Il Corriere della Sera* of 7 June 1975 headlines: "From church marriage to guerrilla warfare: a young life burnt down in six years", explaining that "following the fate of their men and their dark revolutionary dreams" we are faced with "women who have followed their path to the end, turning from being supporters and comforters of their companions to the role of protagonists". In the same article, the journalist discredits the figure of Cagol as a militant, saying that her comrades in Trento "remembered her only for the diligence with which she went to pick up Curcio by car after political meetings, and for her grace in playing guitar during the many occupations of the faculty". On the same day, *Il*

Corriere della Sera headlined “The death of Margherita Curcio pieced together: she died to save her husband”.

The ‘wife/partner’ frame denies a woman’s agency in making politically and ideologically motivated decisions, instead bringing these choices back into a more traditional frame, a woman subordinated to the choices of her partner (Glynn 2013; Staccioli 2015; Bini 2017) and, therefore, less threatening for the traditional social order⁴.

In addition, the frequent use of foreign words to refer to female terrorists can also be seen as an attempt to debunk the threat of armed women, implying that women’s involvement in political violence is not the norm in Italy. In the case of Cagol, the press often uses the epithet ‘*pasionaria*’, referring to the deeds of the Spanish revolutionary Dolores Ibarruri, who has acquired the not always positive meaning of a woman who fights desperately for a political ideal (Bini 2017). In Italy, instead, a woman is considered as angelic and sweet (Buonanno 2014): on 7 June 1975, *L’Unità* recalls that “the terrorist [Cagol] is not a threat: even in the most heated moments of the students’ struggle, Margherita never stood out. With her sweet face, nobody spoke about her”. Moreover, the frequent use of foreign epithets for female terrorists can also be interpreted as a means of evoking exotic fantasies about women and violence (Glynn 2013).

The second most frequently traceable frame in the journalistic representation of Mara Cagol, in the articles examined, is related to her ‘bourgeois family’ and to her being (almost as a consequence) a ‘good girl’, who strayed from the right path by meeting her husband. This element is in line with the literature on the representation of women terrorists (Bini 2017; Nacos 2016; Glynn 2013). *L’Unità* (7 June 1975) writes: “The tragic parable of Margherita Cagol. From the quiet bourgeois life to adventurous deeds”; *Il Corriere della Sera* explains that

⁴ By contrast, the first-hand reports by Alberto Franceschini, co-founder of the BR group with Curcio and Cagol, are striking: “Mara was absolutely convinced of the need to arrive to an armed struggle. [...] I think it was her who dragged Renato into action, perhaps he would otherwise have continued to only write about it, to make theories” (Franceschini 1994).

Margherita, originally from Sardinia, near Trento, “comes from an upper middle-class family: excellent grades at school, classical guitar and acrobatic dance lessons, two sisters married to professionals”⁵ (6 June 1975). On 7 June, *Il Giornale* explains in its headline: “The guerrilla with the ring” and wrote: “the revolutionary was recognized on the morgue table by the most bourgeois of objects: a ring”.

4.2. Barbara Balzerani: the “hard, uncatchable” woman, made ugly by the armed struggle

While women remained a minority in armed organizations, their presence increased considerably in the years following Cagol’s death, also in relation to the general increase in relevance of the armed actions of far-left groups (Della Porta 1992; Bini 2017). This has led to much less lenient representations of women terrorists in the press (Glynn 2013), involving the use of different frames than those highlighted in the case of Cagol.

Barbara Balzerani was a leading member of the BR, part of the executive committee and implicated in many violent actions, such as kidnappings and murders, first among them that of Aldo Moro, the prime minister. Barbara was arrested on 19 June 1985, putting an end to many years in hiding, which had led to her being called ‘uncatchable’ and the ‘scarlet pimpernel’⁶.

The various newspapers under analysis often refer to Barbara Balzerani as a ‘leader’ of the BR: after her arrest, *L’Unità*’s headline read: “Barbara Balzerani caught, she was the last head of the BR” (20 June 1985); *Il Corriere*, the same lines on the same day: “Balzerani, the BR commander, arrested. Considered the number one among the terrorists still on the loose”. The same article explains that “she is implicated in all the most heinous subversive actions. The woman

⁵ As in Cagol’s case, her sisters’ credentials are also constructed in relation to those of their husbands.

⁶ ‘Scarlet pimpernel’ is an epithet used to refer to the reputation of uncatchable militants, which however could sound like an ironical joke (Bini 2017): in fact, it originates from the novels of Baroness Orczy featuring the Scarlet Pimpernel, an English nobleman, a reactionary hero who fought for the defense of the nobles at the time of the French Revolution.

[...] has very high organizational skills, she is endowed with great courage and at the same time with a ruthlessness that is difficult to imagine". When Balzerani is brought to a courtroom for the first time, *Il Giornale's* headlines were: "Balzerani in the bunker room of Mestre must answer about Taliercio's murder. She was welcomed by the diehards [members of the BR] as a leader of the Red Brigades" (25 June 1985).

Furthermore, compared to Mara Cagol, Balzerani is represented as a serious threat to public order: "The elusive 'godmother' of the BR was arrested in Ostia. The most dangerous fugitive in Italy was pursued by 13 arrest warrants" (*Il Giornale*, 20 June 1985). Balzerani has a "deadly curriculum as a terrorist", writes *Il Corriere* of 22 June 1985. Again, *Il Corriere's* headlines: "The long trail of blood of the Red Pimpernel of the Red Brigades. She is accused of the murders of magistrates, police officers, industrialists and managers" (20 June 1985). The text of the article explains: "Balzerani is able to take up a machine gun and kill ruthlessly, as well as to stay closed in a small room and prepare an erudite report". Balzerani is also often associated with international terrorism networks (a much more felt threat in the 1980s, above all with reference to the Middle East): from the news articles, it emerges that Balzerani was believed to be in contact with the Organization for the Liberation of Palestine (PLO) and travelled to Nicaragua, where various international terrorist groups would allegedly organise meetings.

Another new frame, compared to Cagol's representation, emerges in the case of Balzerani: this describes her attitude to violence as "against nature", once again accentuating the "otherness" of a woman's choices of joining an armed struggle, with respect to the norm. *Il Giornale* recounts, for example, that Barbara "has no mercy on her parents, who are elderly and sick. [...] Her mother hasn't been healthy since Barbara was on the news. Everything they knew about her, they learned from the TV" (20 June 1985). Furthermore, Balzerani is represented as a 'hard' person, a woman who does not reveal her emotions: "she is huddled in the back of the cage, with her wrists chained [...]. There is no emotion on her face. Her mouth is firm and her expression impenetrable" (*Il*

Giornale, 25 June 1985). The ‘natural’ deviance of female terrorists, their ‘alienness’ (Staccioli 2015), is described in a more general way in an article in *Il Corriere* (23 June 1985) in which a sociologist teaching at the University of Trento, upon hearing the news of Balzerani’s arrest, recalls Mara Cagol, who “appeared physically small and psychologically fragile: fragile as other girls seemed at the beginning – little more than teenagers – who later chose the path of violence”. In describing the psychological traits of the typical girl who gets persuaded by the armed struggle, the sociologist says: “Even their human itineraries resemble each other: they became terrorists for psychological problems of various kinds or, in other cases, for love. However, beyond this, they became harsh, implacable. Those who choose a blatantly deviant path always have personal problems [...] Often, there were painful family accidents or emotional disappointments. [...] In the environments where the culture of terrorism was growing, there were many of these inflexible women, first fragile and then aggressive, first insensitive but later ruthless”.

In the second case analyzed for this study the terrorist is given greater agency over her political choices than in the Cagol case, and is described as a more aggressive and threatening character. In any case, other stereotypes, and frames typical of the representation of female terrorists – seen in the Cagol case – return in the representation of Balzerani by the Italian press. The ‘wife/partner’ frame can be found in the descriptions of her ex-husband, Antonio Marini, also a member of the Red Brigades and who would have, allegedly, directed her to the path of armed struggle; the same frame is present when the outlets speak about her relationship with Mario Moretti, a leading exponent of the Red Brigades. *Il Giornale*, on 20 June 1985, writes that: “She is smiling in that photo where she looks at her husband, Antonio Marini, also a member of the Red Brigades. She loves him, it is evident, and she will continue to love him even when he started cheating on her with her best friend. Until one day another man arrives from the north, and it’s a turning point. She’s already a ‘trigger-happy’ babysitter, but it’s only when he moves to Rome to set up the Roman column of the Red Brigades that the sweet-eyed former social worker begins

her climb to the top of the armed party”. *Il Corriere*, the day after her arrest, explains on the front page that Balzerani is “Moretti’s ex-partner”, “the terrorist had changed compared to when she disappeared to get together with Mario Moretti and to become a sort of first lady”.

The press often focuses on Balzerani’s physical appearance. *L’Unità* describes it by comparing it with her last mug shot, taken 10 years earlier: “With the freckles on her face and fattened up, [...] she doesn’t look at all like the person in the mug shot: that beautiful girl with long black hair has given way to a woman who is washed-out, ‘flaky’, unkempt” (20 June 1985). *L’Unità*’s description seems to imply that the girl is less beautiful because of the kind of life she has decided to live, which makes her an unattractive figure for both female readers, who are supposed to be sensitive to outward appearance, and male readers, for whom the ugly woman does not have the mitigating factor of charm to contrast with violence (Bini 2017). Thus *Il Corriere*, recounting the biography of Balzerani, says: “She was 20 years old, a cascade of blond hair and a slender figure. [...] Not even 10 years later the shy little blonde would become ‘Commander Sara’, the fierce terrorist super commander of the BR at the top of the wanted list for 16 murders” (21 June 1985).

For Balzerani too, the frame of the former ‘good girl’, ‘from a good family’, finally returns: “A 30-plus babysitter already charged with 3 life sentences”, was *Il Giornale*’s headline on 20 June 1985. *Il Corriere* delved into Barbara’s past, in the article “From the town of Colleferro: ‘She left dressed as a boarding school girl and disappeared into thin air’” (21 June 1985). The text explains that “all the four brothers of Barbara are married and have children [...]. They all agree: they are good people, they never had anything to do with the black sheep Barbara [...]. Barbara remains an enigma, a small provincial girl and exemplary student, who joined the BR, turning into a ‘lady killer’”.

Despite the presence of these recurring frames, it is evident how Balzerani is portrayed as a more fearsome BR member than Cagol. However, her toughness and ruthlessness, almost masculine⁷, contribute to labeling Balzerani as a deviant subject and can be interpreted as ‘defense mechanisms’ designed to downplay the threat of female violence (Glynn 2013). By representing the violent woman as exceptional, abnormal, ‘other’, these frames distance her from the rest of Italian women (Baraldini 2015).

As for the difference between the three newspapers under analysis, both in the Cagol and Balzerani cases, *Il Corriere* turns out to be the newspaper that pays more attention to the morality-related aspects, the love ties, and the biography of the two women. For the rest, it is important to point out that although polarization is a key characteristic of the Italian press in the years under analysis (Murialdi 1978), *Il Corriere*, *L’Unità* and *Il Giornale* – with their different political affiliations – propose narratives on gender that are cross-cutting and homogeneous, and no significant differences can be found between their representations of the two women terrorists.

4.3. Maria Giulia Sergio: the female clan and the brutality of the Italian woman jihadist

Born in 1987, Maria Giulia Sergio completed her studies in biotechnology at Statale University in Milan and in 2007 converted to Islam, taking the name Fatima al Zahara. In 2009 she married Jamal, a Moroccan Muslim, but in 2011 she divorced him, complaining that his faith was too weak, and in 2014 she married Aldo Said Kobuzi, an Albanian Muslim. This was a marriage arranged in a few days in order to join the caliphate. On 1 July 2015, while she was a fugitive, a remand order was issued against her and her father, mother, and sister, who were arrested on their way to Syria. In 2019 Maria Giulia Sergio was sentenced

⁷ On the processes of masculinization of women deviating from common gender stereotypes, see among others Kite *et al.* (2008).

to 9 years in prison. Her sister claims that she died in Syria, but this is not certain.

In the articles analyzed for this research, the most frequent epithets used to designate Maria Giulia Sergio are: ‘the Italian jihadist’, ‘the converted’, the ‘foreign fighter’, ‘lady Jihad’, while adjectives or expressions that define her as naïve or manipulated are completely absent; on the contrary, her fanaticism, determination, bloody ferocity, and impatience to be on the battlefield are emphasized. *La Repubblica*’s headlines: “Fatima’s diary: I kill disbelievers in the name of Allah” (2 July 2015); *Il Corriere*: “Terrorism. From Lombardy to absconding to Syria. Fatima’s ferocity: we behead the non-believers” (7 July 2015); *Il Giornale*: “Caliphate, ten suspects in Italy in the crosshairs of Lady Jihad’s clan. Milan Prosecutor’s Office investigates the network of Maria Giulia Sergio, 27, now a Jihadist in Syria: ‘I want to die as a martyr’” (1 July 2015).

In addition to her role as a foreign fighter, Maria Giulia Sergio is also portrayed in her role as a recruiter, which she plays with particular vehemence towards her own family. *La Repubblica*, in an article reporting on wiretaps writes: “Maria Giulia Sergio, alias Fatima, is like a hammer. She demands, and admits no excuses, that her family members join her in Syria [...]. There are a few little problems: her father Sergio is torn because he has to leave his job, her mother Assunta has to ‘look after her grandmother.’ Fatima’s approach is brutal. ‘They are the ones who have to be our slaves, the non-believers, not us,’ admonishes the unemployed father. ‘Take the 25,000 euros and quit your job!!! What’s the point? You are not healthy, and you are going to work for these cursed ones who kill our brothers’ [...] ‘The grandmother, unconverted, is a non-believer, you should not worry about her’” (2 July 2015). The newspapers under analysis then report that the recruitment activity is not limited to her family sphere but is actively carried out on the web as well.

Other articles in the collection analyzed suggest no clear gender discrimination in the representation of women terrorists compared to their male comrades. Noteworthy are two articles from *Il Corriere*, which, in a reasoning on the causes that led them to joining armed groups, puts the story of Maria Giulia

Sergio alongside that of Alessandro De Ponti, known as Depo, who left Italy to join the Kurdish fighters. These are the headlines: “Foreign Fighters in the Burning Middle East: Fatima and Depo, at War on Opposing Fronts” (8 July 2015) and “The two fighting guys. The meaning of life in a short-circuit” (11 July 2015). In the body of the articles an attempt is made to understand what factors could drive them to such a radical choice, “young people who grew up a few kilometres from each other, who in different ways, each with their own baggage of beliefs and convictions, wanted to immerse themselves in their era to the point of being overwhelmed by it” (*Il Corriere*, 8 July 2015). So, Maria Giulia and Depo are put on the same level, and no gender asymmetry is detected in the representation of their choices.

Maria Giulia Sergio’s agency, free will, and choice is therefore not denied by the press portrayal, as well as that of other women she encounters on her journey; *Il Giornale* emphasizes the active role of women in Islamist terrorism by writing of a ‘clan’ of which she was allegedly the leader: “From makeup to the veil, I’ll tell you about the turnaround of the female clan led by Lady Jihad” (3 July 2015). The article, with a non-linear syntax and a continuous repetition of female names, giving the reader the impression of dealing with a multitude of people, is about four women: Maria Julia Sergio and her sister, her mother-in-law and her sister. The four women thus become a ‘clan’, and the news to which the title refers to their alleged radicalization after a trip to Albania: “Alina, until August 2013, was a normal woman who liked to wear makeup and eat the sausage forbidden by the Koran [...]; then she came back with a veil from a trip to Albania, where her sister Donika, called Lina, brainwashed her [...] even told her not to work in the vineyards because picking grapes, with which wine is made, is a sin” (3 July 2015). Although we note references to what a ‘normal woman’ does (e.g. putting on makeup), the emphasis on the woman terrorist by *Il Giornale* does not paint her as a single black sheep, but as part of a dense and active female network, as well as hypothesizing and denouncing the networks of male terrorists.

Because the news of 1 July 2015 is that of a series of arrests in Italy and Albania, the discursive context in which the portrait of Maria Giulia Sergio is placed is of the investigations aimed at reconstructing the roles of the people involved in the affair; it is precisely on this, and not on the ‘gender characteristics’ of female terrorists, that we note the greatest differences between the newspapers under analysis. *La Repubblica* takes a very circumstantial approach, reporting the roles of individuals without generalizing. *Il Corriere della Sera*’s headlines, “Fatima and other wanna-be jihadists. The Isis network in the Italian provinces” (3 July 2015); the article traces a very precise and circumstantial description of events and of the relationships between the individuals involved. *Il Giornale*’s approach is completely different; on 2 July its headlines read, “Extremists in our home. Converts to Islam are the most dangerous”. And in the body of the article, it reported: “Converts to Islam, who embody homegrown terrorism and prefigure endogenous holy wars, are the internal enemy to whom we guarantee the rights enshrined in the Constitution [...]. The West cultivates the internal enemy [...] Once they cross the border of the ‘Islamic State,’ our converts are immediately entrusted with the dirtiest tasks, slitting throats, beheading and slaughtering. With hands dripping with blood, they undergo a mental and emotional trauma that will brand them for life. Let us not delude ourselves that they can be ‘recovered’ into the civilization that exalts the sanctity of life” (2 July 2015).

The excerpt quoted is representative of two constant discursive modes in the articles of *Il Giornale*: generalizations unsupported by facts, whereby the individuals involved in the investigation become ‘the converts’, and would be more dangerous than Arab terrorists because they ‘infiltrated’ our society. At the same time, the foreigners involved are referred to as ‘the Albanian community’ as a whole, is allegedly responsible for arranging the terrorist’s marriage and helping the couple organise their trip to Syria. This paints a scenario populated with gory images and murderers ready to strike at us, accompanied by the constant reference to the superiority of western civilization brought to its knees by

these ‘traitors’. These scenarios and considerations go beyond the communication of the facts themselves but are extremely functional to the second discursive mode characterising the articles of *Il Giornale*, namely the construction of the figure of the ‘migrant as a threat’, according to a frame already highlighted in the literature⁸. The gender issue thus appears to be a minor issue for this newspaper: the deviant woman who questions the established order is not the main threat, but rather the fear for our lives due to the migration.

4.4. Alice Brignoli: ‘Mama Isis’, driving force behind the jihadist couple

The story of Alice Brignoli as a terrorist began in March 2015, when, with her husband and three children aged two, four and six, she left the small Italian town of Bulciago for Syria, to join the caliphate fighters; she was found by the police special forces in the Hal-Hol refugee camp on 29 September 2020. Her arrest was part of an operation aimed at repatriating Italian foreign fighters and, in particular, the children involved. The articles about Alice Brignoli therefore focus on two intersecting themes: the description of the woman as a terrorist and the political decision by the authorities to engage in the repatriation of Italian foreign fighters, to ensure that the adults receive a fair trial and the minors involved receive care and social reintegration.

On the first issue, the newspapers report that Alice Brignoli became “radicalized” after her marriage to a Muslim Italian originally from Morocco and changed her name to Aisha: her choice is not portrayed as dictated by sentimental motivations or subservience to a husband who dominates her. On the contrary, *La Repubblica* presents the affair as: “a typical couple radicalization” (*La Repubblica*, 4 October 2020). Reporting the investigators’ statements, *Il Giornale* informs us that: “she, a Lombard convert, was the real driving force of the couple, she was the first to push towards the ‘liberated’ lands of the fundamentalists” (1 October 2020). *Il Giornale* also reports that Mohamed is

⁸ See for example Marini, Bonerba, Gerli and Verza, (2020).

eight years younger than Alice, suggesting he was the less powerful of the couple (*Il Giornale*, 30 September 2022). Even in the refugee camp, “Aisha was among the most orthodox in enforcing dress and behavior codes for the brides of jihadists” (*La Repubblica*, 30 September 2020).

In this case too, as well as in the case of Maria Giulia Sergio, the Italian terrorist woman who adheres to Islam, far from being deprived of agency, is invested with all her responsibilities, and described as a firm, autonomous and conscious subject of her own choices.

This, of course, does not prevent her from being stigmatized as a deviant and a distorted mother. Alice Brignoli appears in all the newspapers examined as ‘Mama Isis’. Because she brought three children with her to Syria – and gave birth to another during her stay in the refugee camp – she is a figure who challenges a very strong symbolic construction from the perspective of gender roles: that of the loving and protective mother. For ‘Mama Isis’, the caliphate is more important than anything else and she does not hesitate to involve the children in a dangerous journey, because “the woman wants her children to grow up steeped in radical Islam, ready to take up the arms” (*Il Corriere della Sera*, 30 September 2020). Confirming this, once in Syria, Alice proudly shows a photo of her son, about 10 years old, in a camouflage suit, holding a rifle (*La Repubblica*, 1st October 2020). The aberration and deviance of ‘Mama Isis’ is clearly stigmatized by the other mother figure in the story (Alice Brignoli’s mother), showcased by the articles examined, who represents precisely the right way to be a mother. *Il Corriere della Sera* headlines, “Isis. The radicalized woman. Mother’s outburst: Alice arrested in Syria ‘is no longer my daughter’”, and in the interview Fabienne Schirru, Brignoli’s mother says: “The only goal was to bring the children home” (*Il Corriere della Sera*, 30 September 2020). The grandmother thus replaces the maternal role by restoring its correct modalities, and the radicalization appears to be a choice that deserves no pity, nor any attempt at analysis, but only total ostracism. The other family relationship represented in the articles examined is Alice Brignoli’s relationship with her husband, a figure who nevertheless remains rather overshadowed, as shown

above, and is mostly represented in the news at the moment of his death in the refugee camp.

The other theme with which Alice Brignoli's press portrayal also intersects with that other theme, the operation to repatriate Italian foreign fighters. *La Repubblica's* headlines, "The Milanese model of counterterrorism. Saving children from the Jihadist nightmare" (30 September 2020), and in the article refers to the suffering of children, the need to take care of them, and to lead them along a path that will bring them back to a normal life. The initiative is deemed positive by *La Repubblica*, unlike *Il Giornale*, which is the most outspoken newspaper and also the most interested in this issue, dedicating a lot of space to it. Its headlines to their first article read: "A Jihadist arrested: 'Mama Isis', bringing her home (and prosecuting her) is a duty" (*Il Giornale*, 30 September 2020). It is interesting to follow the reasoning set forth in the article to understand the frame at work in the interpretation of the affair. In fact, despite the assertive title, the article does not fail to question 'duty', stating that Alice Brignoli "probably deserved to rot in Kurdish detention camps" along with terrorists like her, since "she lived in symbiosis with the murderous beasts of Abu Bakr Al Baghdadi". However, in the name of Italy being a civilized country, it can be said that repatriating her and the children is a rightful act, as long as an 'exemplary' punishment is granted to the terrorist, who is a "threat" to the country. Yet, her children are considered a threat too, and according to the news outlet they must be re-educated, "because the alternative is to raise little murderers" (*Il Giornale*, 30 September 2020).

Both the reasoning and the tone of the article highlight the distrust with which this humanitarian operation is viewed, and what cannot be spelled out in the article emerges clearly in a reader's letter about the affair: "She will go to prison, the minor children to a community centre. A room, food, heating guaranteed, she will be able to devote herself to redeeming other damned souls, perhaps instigating them to sacrifice and calmly instructing the children on how to become martyrs like their dad. So much money misspent. She should have stayed where she was, there she was surely closer to her God" (*Il Giornale*, 4

October 2020). Here in all its clarity is the frame depicting ‘Mama Isis’ in the pages of *Il Giornale*: it does not seem to matter much that the terrorist is a woman, the stakes are quite different. According to the logic of rejecting those who are “different” and the ‘us first’ logic, terrorism is of interest only as a matter for the construction of an otherness nourished by the dehumanization of the other (Dal Lago 1999), represented as a lethal threat, even when it comes to children.

5. Concluding discussion

This analysis conducted on newspaper articles dedicated to the female terrorists Margherita Cagol (June 1975), Barbara Balzerani (June 1985), Maria Giulia Sergio (July 2015) and Alice Brignoli (October 2020) in the days following their arrests, or death, published by the Italian papers *Il Corriere della Sera*, *Il Giornale*, *L’Unità* and *La Repubblica*, allows us to highlight a marked change in the representation of women terrorists on the level of their autonomy and awareness from the 1970s to the present.

In the 1970s, *Il Corriere della Sera*, *L’Unità* and *Il Giornale*, despite their different political leanings, are unanimous in representing women terrorists as deviants, ‘other’ than the normal Italian woman, and in using gender-related framing strategies that somehow reduce the sense that these women had complete agency in their choices of militancy. In the case of Mara Cagol, the frame of ‘partner of the leader’, a ‘*pasionaria*’ deviated by him from her ‘good family’ origins, pervasively informed her representation in the articles analyzed, with the effect of decisively denying her political autonomy and devaluing her activity within the Red Brigades. The portrait of Barbara Balzerani, ten years later, continues to emphasize her otherness from an ordinary woman, being described as ‘tough’ and ‘ruthless’; however, her representation in the news presents some significant elements of change (again, detectable in all the different newspapers under analysis). Alongside comments on her physical changes, and

that relegate her to the role of ‘always in love although betrayed’ by her husband, many recurring statements identify her as a leader of the group, a courageous leader, with excellent organizational skills and expert in the use of weapons.

The terrorist’s agency, at first completely denied, begins to be perceptible within a chiaroscuro representation that will become evident in the coverage of the two Italian women converts to Isis, whose awareness and steadfastness is never questioned and whose decision to engage in politics is never attributed to any other factor than their convinced adherence to the caliphate’s cause. Far from being devoid of agency, the two Italian women who leave Italy to fight in Syria are represented in their capacity as recruiters of others, and even as the ‘real engine’ of the radicalized couple.

The results of this research therefore suggest that the main Italian news outlets offered a representation of full autonomy of choice for contemporary Italian female terrorists, unlike what is shown in the findings of similar studies in other countries (Nacos 2016; Martini 2018).

What could be the interpretative hypothesis for this peculiarity of the Italian press? On a general level, a tendency has already been noted in the literature to stage female figures in the media that go beyond stereotypical gender roles and, in particular for female characters who act with violence, the spread of narratives that do not elaborate cautionary tales aimed at restoring correct gender roles (Buonanno 2014; Bonerba 2018). It could therefore be assumed that the Italian press is also part of this trend.

Finally, it is important to point out that, in the generally polarized context of the Italian press (Murialdi 1978; Hallin and Mancini 2004), no significant differences in the coverage of the newspapers studied emerge from this analysis: the articles of *Il Corriere della Sera*, *L’Unità*, *Il Giornale*, and *La Repubblica*, despite their different political leanings, propose narratives on gender that are cross-cutting and homogeneous in each of the case studies.

In contrast, diversity among the newspapers emerges sharply in the articles about female terrorist adherents of Isis, but only in terms of the context frame

in which their actions take place: although the terrorists are Italian, *Il Giornale* consistently applies the frame of ‘immigration as a threat’ to the news of the arrests, which appears to be decisively prevalent over gender frames.

In future studies, the analysis of larger collections of articles and cases could help in considering how the media agenda setting may influence the representation of “women terrorists” over time, over the single character under study and, more generally, with regards to the figure of the woman terrorist in different historical moments.

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