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WOMEN IN THE RED BRIGADES

ABSTRACT: The article presents an analysis of women's participation in the Italian terrorist organization, the Red Brigades, approached from the perspective of critical theories, particularly gender studies, while also drawing on tools of hermeneutics (theory of interpretation). Various sources were analyzed, including strategic documents, court records, television and press interviews, as well as personal documents and epistolography. Due to the limited volume, the case study method was used to create a functional and genre-appropriate catalog of the narratives of women-brigadisti. The hypothesis posited that women in the Red Brigades embodied the phenomenon of 'new femininity', shaped by the global socio-cultural movement of the late 1960s (the '68 movement), which manifested in a new form of women's political violence that transcended traditional patriarchal roles. The narrative is divided into three distinct sections. The first section examines the Italian feminist movement, emphasizing its local specificity and connections to other trends in the Italian left during that period. The second section focuses on the gender-based division of roles within the Red Brigades, highlighting the equal participation of women, including their involvement in the organization's most violent actions. The third section amplifies the voices of the women involved, exploring their motivations, autonomous choices, expectations, and the disappointments they encountered throughout the armed struggle. The analysis confirms the hypothesis that women in the Red Brigades represented a new generation formed by profound global socio-cultural transformations at the turn of the 1960s and 1970s, while also reflecting the distinctive characteristics of Italian leftist ideology.

KEYWORDS: critical theories, gender studies, 'new femininity', Red Brigades, women

KOBIETY W CZERWONYCH BRYGADACH

ABSTRAKT: Poniższa narracja jest analizą zjawiska partycypacji kobiet we włoskiej organizacji terrorystycznej – Czerwonych Brygadach, podjętą w perspektywie teorii krytycznych (szczególnie: gender studies), otwartą również na narzędzia hermeneutyki (teorii interpretacji). Interpretacji poddano różnorodnie dostępne źródła: dokumenty strategiczne, akta sądowe, wywiady telewizyjne i prasowe oraz literaturę dokumentu osobistego i epistolografii. Ze względu na ograniczone ramy objętościowe, dla zbudowania wystarczającego funkcjonalnie i gatunkowo katalogu narracji kobiet-brigatisti zastosowano zasadę case studies. Przyjęto hipotezę, iż kobiety w Czerwonych Brygadach wpisują się w fenomen „nowej kobiecości” ukształtowany na fali globalnego ruchu kulturowego i społecznego („ruch '68”), który ujawnił nową jakość przemocy politycznej kobiet, wychodzącą poza schemat tradycyjnych „patriarchalnych” ról. Narrację podzielono na trzy wyraziste części. W pierwszej części scharakteryzowano włoski ruch feministyczny, zwracając szczególną uwagę na jego lokalną specyfikę, w tym powiązania z innymi nurtami włoskiej lewicy tego okresu. W drugiej części zwrócono uwagę na istniejący w strukturach Czerwonych Brygad podział ról, oparty w pełni na równości płci, także w zakresie bezpośredniego udziału kobiet w najbardziej krwawych akcjach. W trzeciej części oddano głos kobietom – ich motywacjom, autonomicznym wyborom i decyzjom, oczekiwaniom i rozczarowaniom, jakie towarzyszyły brigatisti przez cały okres walki zbrojnej. Przeprowadzona analiza pozwoliła na weryfikację przyjętej hipotezy, iż kobiety należące do Czerwonych Brygad były typowym przykładem nowego pokolenia, generowanego przez głębokie globalne zmiany społeczno-kulturowe zachodzące na przełomie lat 60. i 70., ale zakorzenione także w specyfice włoskiej lewicowości.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: Czerwone Brygady, gender studies, kobiety, „nowa kobiecość”, teorie krytyczne



The only measure of truth is the revolutionary practice of millions of people.

Brigate Rosse. Risoluzione della Direzione Strategica,

INTRODUCTION

The aim of the following narrative is to analyze the phenomenon of women's participation in the leftist avant-garde (*avanguardia*) – *Brigate Rosse*, the most important far-left formation in the history of political violence in the Italian Republic, and one of the leading terrorist organizations in Western Europe at that time.

The central hypothesis is that the phenomenon of 'new femininity' was shaped by the implications of the global university reform movement (known as the '68 movement), existing in relation to the paradigm of the Italian resistance movement, embodied by women-*brigatisti*.

The university reform movement developed in parallel in the capitalist countries of Western Europe and in the global South – particularly Latin America, drawing inspiration from the so-called Córdoba reform. A significant source of inspiration for the leftist avant-garde in Western Europe was the *guerrilla* that emerged from the university reform, with Latin American *guerrilleros* (in Italian: *guerriglieri*) viewed in the same light as Italian *partigiani* (resistance fighters). The Brigate Rosse emphasized their ideological roots in the anti-fascist resistance movement, which had largely developed mainly in northern Italy. They saw themselves as heirs to the tradition of the armed struggle of the *Movimento di Resistenza*, against the German occupation of Italy from 1943 to 1945, which had been fought "in the name of a socio-economic order alternative to the inequality and irrationality of capitalism"¹.

This paper assumes that the critical theories used in the analysis (including gender studies) will allow for a widening of the description of women's participation in the Red Brigades, situating this phenomenon within a wider cultural and social conditions. The critical approach (critical theory/theories) enables a more comprehensive analysis of the motivations behind women's decisions to engage in the creation of armed political violence and offers insight into the broader contextualization of the phenomenon from cultural and social perspectives². The critical perspective allows us to move beyond the typical research on political violence, where gender-based stereotypes and meanings that fit the so-called "male paradigm" often dominate, leading to the marginalization of the women's autonomous significance³. The methodological basis for the following analysis is, on the one hand, a broadly understood critical theories, and on the other, hermeneutics, which helps to find the symbolic content in the interpreted texts. The source base for this analysis includes all available materials – court records, media reports, and literary sources. This allows us to build a

¹ *Brigate Rosse. Risoluzione della Direzione Strategica*, febbraio 1978; <http://www.sebbenchesiamodonne.it/risoluzione-della-direzione-strategica-febbraio-1978/>.

² A. Gasztold, *Perspektywa feministyczna w badaniach nad terroryzmem*, "Przegląd Politologiczny" 2018, 2, pp. 45-46.

³ It is within this perspective, although not directly referring to critical theories, that a comprehensive narrative on women's participation in the jihadist terrorism sector is situated, See M.S. Stempień, *Terrorystki. Role kobiet w organizacjach terrorystycznych na przykładzie Boko Haram i Państwa Islamskiego*, Siedlce 2024.

functionally and genre-sufficient catalog of the narratives of women-*brigatisti*⁴, who became entangled in a bloody episode of Italian history⁵. Due to constraints of a standard for a scientific article, case studies were selected, with the author assuming that the chosen cases would confirm the functionality of the constructed catalog.

FEMINISM

Feminist protest was deeply rooted in the emancipated society of industrial northern Italy⁶. Therefore, it can be considered an important motivation for the revolutionary avant-garde, which advocated armed struggle.

The revolutionary movement in Italy emerged in parallel with the activity of feminist movements, simultaneously challenging not only the nation-state, but also traditional patriarchal culture. Women in this struggle were seen as an element of destabilizing the state's security in its socio-cultural sector, as they sought to break the internal cohesion of traditional society. The conservative Italian press, which dominated the official discourse of the 1970s, framed women involved in all structures of the *lotta armata* (armed struggle) in the patriarchal paradigm, thus depriving them of political subjectivity, autonomy, and agency, while oversimplifying the motivations for decisions to participate in these groups⁷. According to such narratives, women's armed actions, usually driven by love or madness, have nothing to do with politics, reinforcing the stereotype that women put private interests above public concerns⁸. The patriarchal paradigm also oversimplifies women's decision-making processes, both in terms of joining an organization and participating in individual actions, as well as choosing a 'post-terrorist path'.

Before the strategic document of the Red Brigades was formalized in 1978 (a few weeks before the spectacular kidnapping of the leading politician of Democrazia Cristiana, Aldo Moro), the boundaries between the objectives of this organization and other Italian left-wing social

⁴ The author consistently refers to the term *brigatisti* as a collective entity, members of the Red Brigades, and differentiates the individual entity by using the definite article 'una'/'la' 'brigatista' for a woman and 'un'/'el' 'brigatista' for a man.

⁵ Milena Gabanelli, *Giovanni Bianconi, Gli anni di piombo: dove sono oggi i terroristi?*, "Corriere della Sera", 06.05.2018.

⁶ Alison Jamieson, *Maftiosi and Terrorists: Italian Women in Violent Organizations*, "SAIS Review" (1989-2003) 2000, 20(2), pp. 51-64.

⁷ Giuseppina Bonerba, Sofia Verza, *Women terrorists in the Italian news: the representation of agency from 'red witches' to 'lady Jihad'*, "About Gender" 2024, 13(25), pp. 273-297. An example is the information that appeared on the front pages of Italian newspapers on June 6, 1975, after the death of Margharita Cagol. It focused on the emotional relationship between Cagol and Renato Curcio, labeling her as the "wife of the head of the Red Brigades." This type of representation assumes that a woman's participation in acts of political violence is attributed to the influence of her partner. The "wife/partner" frame denies a woman's autonomy in making ideologically motivated political decisions, reducing these choices to those of her partner, while at the same time making them less threatening to the traditional social order.

⁸ Ibidem, pp. 273-274.

movements, including feminism, were blurred. This is because the fight against the state, dominated by the Christian Democrats, was ipso facto a fight against its patriarchal order⁹.

Direct links between the Red Brigades and feminist activity are not obvious, although *operaismo*, a key element of Italian feminist strategy, also dominated the first phase of the Red Brigades' activity. As Alison Jamieson notes, it was for this reason that feminism made the Red Brigades' extremism attractive to women¹⁰. This is largely confirmed by Leonard Weinberg and William Lee Eubank's analysis of the biographies of over 450 women in Italian terrorist organizations between 1970 and 1984, which shows that the presence of women in these organizations was largely a consequence of their prior political and social involvement¹¹. The activity of women in the extra-parliamentary European left in the 1970s, which aimed to break with patriarchal and misogynistic hierarchies, was, as Gisela Kaplan aptly put it, a kind of spectacle of the battle of the sexes, entangled in a political and ideological context¹².

Italian feminists were influenced by European women's experiences in social struggles over issues of equal pay, family benefits, and abortion rights¹³. The feminist position included a broad critique of the welfare state, which perpetuated a hierarchical division between contract/productive work (the industrial working class) and non-contract/reproductive work (women's domestic work).

One of the leading figures of Italian feminism was Mariarosa Dalla Costa, an active participant in the student and workers' movement and a member of Potere Operaio, who was the first to openly acknowledge the need to give special prominence to women's issues. She encountered theoretical Marxism at the university, where in July 1967 she defended her master's thesis in philosophy of law under the supervision of Enrico Opochera, assistant to Antonio Negri. Later cooperation with Antonio Negri also resulted in the discovery of the proletariat reality and a deeper understanding of revolutionary struggle theory. After defending her thesis, Della Costa traveled several times to the United States, Canada, and Great Britain, where, in addition to giving lectures at universities, she met with feminist activists¹⁴. In London, she met Selma James, and their collaboration led to the establishment of the Movimento di Lotta Femminile di Padova (Women's Struggle Movement of Padua) in June 1971. The two also initiated discussions on housework and its remuneration, women's subjectivity, and the family as a site of production and reproduction of labor power. Dalla Costa's publication *Potere*

⁹ The long-standing dominance of the Christian Democrats (Democrazia cristiana) on the Italian political scene has led to the perpetuation, among a part of Italian society, of the phrase *moriremi democristiana* ("we will die under Christian democracy" – precisely: under the rule of Christian democracy)

¹⁰ A. Jamieson, *Mafiosi and Terrorists: Italian Women in Violent Organizations*, 'SAIS Review' (1989-2003), 2000, 20(2), pp. 51-64..

¹¹ L. Weinberg, W.L. Eubank, *Italian women terrorists*, "Studies in Conflict & Terrorism" 1987, Vol. 9, pp. 241-262

¹² G. Kaplan, *Contemporary Western European Feminism*, London-New York 2013, p. 249.

¹³ Example: S. Federici, *Wages Against Housework*, "Women in Struggle", *Italy Now. Wages for Housework*, ed. Leopoldina Fortunati, No. 3, 1975. The legalization of abortion in Italy is one of the effects of women's involvement in left-wing organizations in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Until 1978, abortion was illegal in Italy.

¹⁴ *Biographical note of Mariarosa Dalla Costa*, Retrieved from: https://www.bibliotechecivichepadova.it/sites/default/files/archivio/nota_biografica_mariarosa_dalla_costa_eng.pdf.

femminile e sovversione sociale (The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community), published in Marseille in March 1972 and in Bristol in October of the same year, gained international importance in the feminist debate on the status of women. That same year, in Padua, Mariarosa Dalla Costa, Selma James, Silvia Federici, and Brigitte Galtier founded an international feminist collective, and shortly afterwards, within the international network, the Italian organization Gruppi e Comitati per il Salario al Lavoro (Movement of Groups and Committees for Wages for Housework) was established.

Mariarosa Dalla Costa laid the foundations of the theory of ‘autonomous workers’ feminism’ – a blend of feminism and operaiismo (workerism), which allowed for the connection of the issue of work and wages with the problem of physical and sexual violence against women in the workplace¹⁵. In Italy, Dalla Costa’s activities were supported mainly by Leopoldina Fortunati, an activist of the extra-parliamentary left and participant of anti-militarist demonstrations, workers’ and students’ strikes in Padua, where she encountered Marxist thought during the lectures by Rossi-Landi Ferruccio. Both recognized the need to separate feminism from the structures of the Potere Operaio discourse, which, in their opinion, lacked awareness of the condition of women¹⁶.

Italian feminism tended to the conclusion that women were dominated by patriarchy in all social relations, which led to the creation of the first autonomous organizations by women to defend their rights. Its essential feature, in comparison to other European countries, as emphasized by Mariarosa Dalla Costa, was the mass mobilization of women.

Italian feminism promoted and supported the aspirations for changes in the organization of production and society that, starting from economic autonomy, would guarantee women personal autonomy. Founded in Padua, on the initiative of Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Silvia Federica, Lotta Femminista (Feminist Struggle) was part of the Italian tradition of workers’ movements, incorporating elements of the ‘international women’s strike’. In a speech delivered in Mestre under the slogan ‘general strike’, Dalla Costa emphasized that all previous strikes had not been general in nature, since they had involved only men. One of the strategic actions was the Wages for Housework campaign, which aimed to raise awareness (until then marginalized) the importance of housework and childcare for the development of the capitalist state, and to recognize the economic value of housework and the right to be paid for it. By demanding wages for housework, activists drew attention to its strategic importance for the capitalist economy

¹⁵ The operaiismo movement emerged from the wave of strikes and social conflicts in the Italian Republic during the hot autumn (autunno caldo) of 1969, with Potere Operaio (Workers’ Power) playing a key role in it. It was an autonomous workers’ movement challenging capitalist exploitation in the factories of the North. The operaiismo movement did not propose the abolition of capitalism, but the recognition of the working class as the main engine of capitalist development. It sought to recognize that workers, not only through their resistance to the logic of capitalist domination, but also through their self-organization, set the course for the development of the forces of production. It also sought to recognize immaterial labor as an essential component of the social process of production.

¹⁶ Based on the autobiographical narrative: L. Fortunati, *Learning to struggle: my story between workerism and feminism*, <https://libcom.org/article/learning-struggle-my-story-between-workerism-and-feminism-leopoldina-fortunati> (10.10.2024),

through the reproduction of the next generation of workers and the care of the current generation, without direct costs to the state and the market¹⁷. In 1974, the *Salario al Lavoro Domestico* (Wages for Housework) campaign began in major Italian cities, calling for economic compensation for housework, but also drawing attention to the exploitation of professionally active women by capitalist economies and inequalities in access to jobs. Lotta Femminista developed the theoretical foundations of classical Italian operaismo, transforming it into an autonomist-feminist interventionist practice¹⁸. It explained, among other things, women's opposition to participating in the referendum¹⁹ and the fight for the right to divorce²⁰. It brought working-class experience to the feminist movement, while at the same time becoming a minority tendency within the broader feminist movement, where women were wary of any theories developed in the 'male' political tradition²¹. The strength of Lotta Femminista lay in the discovery of class consciousness in women, which later became their driving force in later social struggles, including armed struggle.

ORGANIZATIONAL LEVEL – DIVISION OF ROLES²²

In the resolution of the Strategic Directorate of the Red Brigades, the problem of women was presented as follows: “Women of any proletarian component always occupy worse, subordinate, and less paid positions than men. They also suffer from slavish domestic work. Women's work, even that done at home, is therefore antagonistic to capitalist society” (...) “The awakening of women's struggles and the hidden and explicit content of these struggles will have an ever greater importance and significance in the revolutionary movement. The rapacity of capitalist relations of production and their social implications have also awakened this enormous social force; the power of radical critique has finally also touched the last tabernacle (*l'ultimo tabernacolo*): the sphere of the family and male-female relations, a sphere of decisive and fundamental importance for opening the doors to changes in life and the world. With the entry of women onto

¹⁷ *Nuovo Movimento Femminista: Documenti Autonomi; maggio 1973*; <http://www.nelvento.net/archivio/68/femm/nuovo.htm> (11.10.2024).

¹⁸ *Lotta Femminista – Proposte per costruire la prima scadenza nazionale della campagna SLD, 1972*; <https://archive.leftove.rs/documents/AKGH/1>; *Lotta Femminista – draft notes on power and organization, 1973*; <https://archive.leftove.rs/documents/AKGG>; *Lotta Femminista – Perché Femminismo, 1973*; <https://archive.leftove.rs/documents/AKGF>; *Lotta Femminista - Vogliamo Decidere Noi, Marzo 1974*; <https://archive.leftove.rs/documents/AKGN/1> (11.10.2024).

¹⁹ *Perché diciamo no al referendum*, [in:] *Lotta Femminista - "Vogliamo Decidere Noi"*, Marzo 1974; <https://archive.leftove.rs/documents/AKGN/1>; pp. 1-4.

²⁰ *Ibidem*. The main achievements of feminism in Italy during this decade were the introduction of the divorce law (1970), the reform of family law (1975) by removing adultery from the list of crimes, the recognition of equality in marriage, abolishing the husband's dominance, and the abolition of discrimination against children born out of wedlock, and the introduction of a law regulating abortion (1978). Italy signed the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women in 1980 and ratified it in 1985.

²¹ Based on the autobiographical narrative: Leopoldina Fortunati, *Learning to struggle...*, op.cit.

²² *Brigate Rosse. Risoluzione della Direzione Strategica*, febbraio 1978; <http://www.sebbenchiesiamodonne.it/risoluzione-della-direzione-strategica-febbraio-1978/> (11.10.2024).

the stage of revolution, all the forces are already ripe, and for the pigs it is truly the beginning of the end! (*per i porci è veramente l'inizio della fine!*)”²³.

Gender equality as an element of distance from the traditional cultural paradigm was an obvious element in the structures of the Red Brigades. The organization, created by the baby boomers generation, shaped by progress, industrialization and creating the foundation and strength of socio-cultural protests at universities²⁴, was at the same time part of the long-lasting Italian myth of *partigiani* – heterogeneous partisan heroism, where a woman involved in military activity became a negation of customary norms, entering a purely male world²⁵.

As Barbara Balzerani recalls, in the Red Brigades, an underground armed organization, “women killed and died like men”. Weapons were used for everyday defense, their offensive potential was an exception, and at the same time, access to weapons and contact with them made death seem like an absolute abstraction²⁶. Susanna Ronconi walked around with a weapon on her for seven years, for defense and protection. The abstraction in the perception of death was reinforced, as Ronconi emphasized, by the appropriate categorization of the ‘enemy’, who, by becoming a symbol, lost the characteristics of an individual person, and therefore weapons could be used against him²⁷. The decision to join a combat group required the women to familiarize themselves with weapons. They had to learn how to load them, disassemble them, clean them, and most importantly use them. For those who were underground, it was also important to always have a weapon on them for defense, allowing escape in the event of an attempted arrest. In the skill of using weapons, as well as in their use, there was no recognition of gender differences. Susanna Ronconi recalls that there were practically no women in combat training, so the men took her under their care and taught her the basics²⁸.

Discipline, which did not recognize gender differences, resulted from the hierarchical structure of the organization, based on three levels: columns, brigades, and cells, subordinated to the Strategic Directorate (*Direzione Strategica*) created in 1974, composed of four leaders²⁹. The first group of leaders included a woman: Margharita (Mara) Cagol. The *Direzione Strategica* was responsible for the functional integrity of the columns (*colonne*) and brigades (*fronti*). The columns, operating in Milan, Genoa, Turin, Rome, Naples, and the Veneto region, consisted of several brigades, containing three to five members. Below the brigades, there were

²³ Ibidem.

²⁴ M. Henninger, *The Postponed Revolution: Reading Italian Insurrectionary Leftism as Generational Conflict*, “*Italica*” 2006, 83(3/4), pp. 629-648 .

²⁵ L. Coci, *Guerra alla guerra: le donne nella Resistenza italiana*, <http://www.universitadelledonne.it/ampiL.htm> (15.10.2024).

²⁶ Statement by Barbara Balzerani, documentary by *Loredana Bianconi: Do you remember revolution?* (1997).

²⁷ Statement by Susanna Ronconi in an interview given to P. Guerra, Bergamo, November 27, 1985, quoted from: *Le donne e il loro rapporto con le armi nella lotta armata degli anni '70*, “*Machina Rivista*”, February 2, 2022.

²⁸ Ibidem.

²⁹ The first group of leaders consisted of: Renato Curcio, Margherita (Mara) Cagol, Mario Moretti and Alberto Franceschini.

cells, commanded by members of the brigades, consisting of no more than ten members³⁰. Complete secrecy defined the tactics of the Red Brigades. None of the brigades knew about the actions of the other. In many cases, even members of one brigade did not know about the actions in which the others participated. The initial attacks of the Red Brigades focused mainly on burning the cars of the management staff of the companies. Gradually, their tactics evolved to increasingly frequent kidnappings of factory owners and right-wing trade unionists and finally led to armed robberies and murders of people considered ‘enemies of the working class’. The organization saw its actions as an armed vanguard (*avanguardia armata*)³¹. Despite the hierarchy, in the Red Brigades, as we read in Renato Curcio’s statement from 2023, there was ‘full autonomy’ (*piena autonomia*) according to the principle “whoever proposes, does!” (“chi propone fa!”)³².

The first manifesto of the Red Brigades, published in 1975, defined the goals and tasks of the organization as a concentrated attack against the imperialist state. This manifesto justified the political goals of the group and argued for the necessity, if required, of an armed struggle against the organs of state power, justice and security.

The doctrinal change of the Red Brigades toward aggressive militancy took place largely after the death on June 5, 1975 of Margharita Cagol, the first bloody victim in the fight of the Red Brigades against the institutions of the state. The circumstances of this death were revealed in a statement on 25 February 2023 by Renato Curcio in response to the prosecutors conducting the investigation into the case. It shows that Mara Cagol, sitting on the ground, wounded and unarmed, was killed in circumstances that were never explained, with a shot under the armpit during a shootout that took place after a Carabinieri patrol arrived at the Spiotta farm in Arzello in the province of Alessandria, where the Turin column of the Red Brigades was hiding the kidnapped industrialist Vallarino Gancia³³.

After the death of Margharita Cagol, the presence of women in the Red Brigades increased significantly. At that time, after the arrest of Renato Curcio, Mario Moretti took over the leadership of the organization, announcing in the spring of 1977 that the time had come to create the Partito Comunisti Combattente (Communist Combat Party) whose dominant force was armed extremism³⁴. As new recruits were recruited into the organization (including women who took part in the later, bloodiest actions), violence escalated rapidly, culminating in the

³⁰ S. Quirico, *Il modello organizzativo delle Brigate rosse in una prospettiva comparata*, https://www.isral.it/wp-content/uploads/2009/02/qsc_44_04_studi-e-ricerche_quirico.pdf.

³¹ V.H. Sundquist, *Political Terrorism: An Historical Case Study of the Italian Red Brigades*, “Journal of Strategic Security” 2010, 3(3), p. 57.

³² R. Curcio, *Memorie di un indagato*, “Contropiano. Giornale Comunista Online”, 18 febbraio 2023.

³³ *La riposta di Renato Curcio ai pm che lo hanno indagato per i fatti della Spiotta; Chi ha ucciso Mara Cagol? Curcio chiede verità ma viene indagato*, “Contropiano. Giornale Comunista Online”, 18 febbraio 2023.

³⁴ Mario Moretti was one of the main decision-makers in Moro’s kidnapping and murder. He played a key role in the ‘people’s trial’ in the apartment on via Montalcini.

kidnapping and murder in 1978 of one of the leading Christian Democrat politicians – Aldo Moro, several times Prime Minister of the Italian Republic³⁵.

Caso Moro was not only a decisive event in Italian political history, but it fully defined the strategic goals of the Red Brigades of that period, anchored in the diagnosis of *coyuntura* (*ocasión*), which in the rhetoric of the guerrilleros of the Uruguayan Tupamaros, meant the choice of strategy or tactics and its implementation as a function of the assessment of specific conditions at a specific moment. The implication of this assessment was the adjustment of the *modus operandi*³⁶. The reorganization of the Red Brigades resulted in the formation of a numerically smaller, but stronger, and decidedly more radical group³⁷. Everyday life was subordinated to rigorous rules. It was, as *el brigatista* – Valerio Morucci recalled, a complete descent into the underground³⁸. Brigatisti left behind personal interests, business matters, emotions, and attachments. They renounced their property and their own name, adopting a combat pseudonym. Completely absorbed in waiting for the revolution to come, they severed all ties connecting them with the social order, law, morality and generally accepted conventions³⁹.

WOMEN – ‘BRIGATISTI’

Belonging to brigatisti was a transformative experience, regardless of gender. Choosing such a life, which can be explained both by the theory of individual motivation and the theory of social change, influenced the process of shaping a new identity during combat operations, but it also became an integral part of the new ‘I’ after the end of the armed struggle⁴⁰. One had to become completely “a man for armed tasks”, a soldier (*soldato*).

Returning to society was a challenge, because experiences from the past remained a permanent part of the present⁴¹. Autobiographical narratives became an effective tool on the path to regaining one’s own subjectivity and identity for many brigatisti. They constitute the basis for reconstructing ‘life trajectories’ inscribed in the history of armed struggle. Among them,

³⁵ According to The Global Terrorism Database, between 1973 and 1994, there were 220 attacks prepared and carried out by the Red Brigades, killing 223 people, including Italian government officials, law enforcement officers and businessmen. According to the Italian association for victims of terrorism, *Associazione Italiana Vittime del Terrorismo AIVITER*, in 14,615 attacks, terrorists killed 428 people and injured about 2,000. However, it notes that there are still no accurate and reliable figures for all victims. Statistics on terror in Italy vary depending on the source. Not all acts of violence during this period were claimed by the groups that committed them. See: *Associazione Italiana Vittime del Terrorismo AIVITER*, www.vittimeterrorismo.it/memorie/memorie.htm (15.10.2024).

³⁶ A.C. Porzecanski, *Uruguay's Tupamaros: The Urban Guerrilla*, “Hispanic American Historical Review” 1973, 55(2), p. 11. In historiography, *coniuntura* refers to a level of historical time intermediate between long duration and storage [of events], according to Fernando Braudel’s definition of history (*larga duración*). Crises and revolutions are, in this perspective, excellent examples of events of the *ocasión* character. *Coyuntura*, [in:] *Diccionario de la lengua española*, Real Academia Española, <https://dle.rae.es/coyuntura>; see also: M. Petrocchi, *From the Tupamaros to the Red Brigades, Common Tactics, and Strategies of the Urban Guerrilla*, <https://dspace.tsu.ge/server/api/core/bitstreams/5a43396c-7397-4248-ba3f-b67bb942f989/content>

³⁷ V.H. Sundquist, *Political Terrorism: An Historical Case Study of the Italian Red Brigades*. op.cit, p. 59.

³⁸ A. Orsini, *Toward the Bloodshed*, [w:] *Anatomy of the Red Brigades: The Religious Mind-set of Modern Terrorists...*, op. cit., pp. 48-92.

³⁹ A. Orsini, *Not a Conclusion: Portrait of a Red Brigadist*, [in:] *Anatomy of the Red Brigades...*, op. cit., pp. 253-262.

⁴⁰ Statement by Barbara Balzerani, documentary by Loredana Bianconi, op. cit.

⁴¹ Statement by Susanne Ronconi, documentary by Loredana Bianconi, op. cit.

there is a body of narratives written by women. They include both reflections on the role of women in armed struggle in the dimension of militancy and sabotage, as well as records of the crisis experienced after the defeat and the loss of ideological references. These stories are often related to personal dramas and disappointments regarding the rightness of the path they chose. Autobiographical narratives were created by, among others: Barbara Balzerani, Laura Anna Braghetti, and Adriana Faranda.

As Ruth Glynn claims, narratives of this type, analyzed from the perspective of feminist theories, reveal primarily issues related to identity as a key starting point for telling one's own story. Thus, it is not gender itself or membership in an armed organization, but transgression that leads to a separation from the previously existing 'I'⁴². This type of transgressive experience allows understanding going beyond the framework of identifying women's political violence (including participation in armed combat) with their sexuality, moral degradation, helplessness, or absolute dependence, allowing for the complete omission of the problem of relations between sexes inscribed in the patriarchal paradigm. Women's actions then become an expression of their own strength and abilities and the effect of rational self-decision.

Women in the Red Brigades played the role of armed *combattente*, participating in key actions requiring the use of force: assaults, 'expropriations' (*espropriazione*), kidnappings and assassinations, and they also had an influence on strategic decisions in the organization.

The first of the leadership roles in the Red Brigades was played by a woman, the aforementioned Margharita (Mara) Cagol. Her role, within the Direzione Strategica, was connected with the decision-making function in the planning of a specific strategy and combat tactics as well as with the executive area and was closely linked to the ideological role, consisting of setting the general directions of the development of the organization as well as its ideological base⁴³. 'Comrade Mara' was also found in April 1975, shortly before her death, in the decision-making group that developed a new strategy of action.

The last leadership role in the Red Brigades was also held by a woman, Barbara Balzerani, known as *primula rossa* (*scarlet pimpernel*). After her experience in the student movement and Potere Operaio, she joined the Red Brigades in 1975, taking the combat pseudonym Sara, and soon established herself in the leadership structures. During the dispute between the moderate and radical wings of the organization, she sided with the radical movement, the Partito Comunista Combattente (Fighting Communist Party), in which she remained until her arrest in

⁴² R. Glynn, *Writing the Terrorist Self: The Unspeakable Alterity of Italy's Female Perpetrators*, "Feminist Review" 2009, 92(1).

⁴³ Leadership roles, although considered the least common among women in terrorist groups, were held in leftist organizations by: Augusta La Torre Guzman in the Peruvian Sendero Luminoso, Bernardine Rae Dohr in American Weather Underground, Ulrike Meinhof in the West German Rote Armee Fraktion. After the murder of Andreas Baader and Gudrun Ensslin in prison in 1977, the leader of the 'second generation' of the Red Army Faction was Brigitte Monhaupt, a graduate of the Faculty of Philosophy at the University of Munich, who was arrested in 1982 and sentenced in 1985. The leadership role in the Japanese Red Army was held by Fisako Shigenobu, a graduate of Meiji University, who cooperated with the Palestinian national liberation movement, mainly with the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, in which women also played a significant role. One of them was Leila Khaled, called the 'Palestinian girl from the cover'.

1985. She was a member of the commando responsible for the kidnapping of Aldo Moro on March 16, 1978 on via Fani. Her task, together with Alvaro Lojacono and Alessio Casimirri, was to block traffic at the intersection of via Fani and via Stessa in order to prevent vehicles and people from moving to the ambush site. Her car, a Fiat 128, was facing the direction from which Moro's escort was supposed to approach. Mario Moretti recalls that during the action on via Fani, Barbara Balzerani held a Scorpion rifle, smaller than an ordinary machine gun, which would have been difficult for a woman to hide under her coat⁴⁴. She herself remembered both the possession of the weapon itself and its omnipresent, deafening roar as the most real aspect of the unreality of those moments⁴⁵. During Aldo Moro's stay in the people's prison (*prigione del popolo*) in an apartment on via Montalcini, Balzerani occupied an apartment that served as a logistics base for the Red Brigades on via Gradoli 96, discovered by officers on April 18, 1978⁴⁶. After Moro's murder, she moved to Milan.

In 1981, as a member of the Red Brigades' top command, together with Antonio Savasta, Francesco Lo Bianco, and Luigi Novelli, she planned and directed the kidnapping of American General James Lee Dozier in Verona on December 17, 1981, who was eventually released a few weeks later.

After the arrest of the Red Brigades leader Mario Moretti that same year, she became the leader of the armed wing of the Brigade Rosse – Partito Comunista Combattente.

She was one of the last people arrested in connection with the Red Brigades. On 19 June 1985, she was probably surprised on a bus in Ostia, in the company of her partner Giovanni Pelosi, by officers in civilian clothes after a customer in a restaurant recognized her and called the police⁴⁷. She was sentenced to several life sentences in the so-called 'Moro trial'. From prison, she joined in the reflection on the future path of the Red Brigades, proposing an end to armed action and the beginning of a critical reflection on them, going beyond the logic of *pentiti* (repentant) and *dissotati* (distanced).

On 21 March 1988, during a break in the Moro trial, when the final capitulation of the Red Brigades had already been sanctioned, together with former members of the organization, Renato Curcio and Mario Moretti, she gave an interview for the first time to journalist Ennio Remondino, in which she referred to her personal and collective experiences of the armed struggle⁴⁸.

The prison where she was held was named Compagna Luna after the title of her debut book, written there and published in 1998⁴⁹. In this first-person narrative, Balzerani told the

⁴⁴ M. Moretti, C. Mosca, R. Rossanda, *Brigate Rosse. Una storia italiana*, Milano 1994, p. 25.

⁴⁵ B. Balzerani, *Compagna luna*, Milano 1998, p. 70.

⁴⁶ There are speculations that on April 18, she deliberately left the shower unclosed, which led to the infiltration of the place, as the pouring water alarmed the neighbors who called the firefighters. During the trial, Balzerani testified that she had left the shower unclosed because she was absent-minded.

⁴⁷ *Libertà condizionata per la Br Balzerani*, "Corriere della Sera" 18 Dicembre 2006. https://www.corriere.it/Primo_Piano/Cronache/2006/12_Dicembre/18/balzerani.shtml (15.10.2024).

⁴⁸ *Curcio, Moretti e Balzerani dichiarano conclusa la lotta armata*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6qMuaDf2IIM> (15.10.2024).

⁴⁹ B. Balzerani, *Compagna luna*, Milano 1998. In this extensive story, Balzerani, for the first time in an *intra muros* situation, not only discovers many facts, but also attempts to settle accounts with the past of *anni di piombo*.

story of the collective experiences and actions of the combattente of the Red Brigades, describing them as fighters defeated by the state in an asymmetric struggle. Her narrative is an attempt to defend partisan memory and connect individual and collective history with the present. It was also in prison that she wrote the autobiographical *La sirena delle cinque* (*The Siren at Five*), published in 2003⁵⁰, in which the author justified her motivation to join an armed organization as the only possible form of rebellion against the helplessness of the weak, for whom the titular ‘siren at five’ was a symbol of exploitation and death⁵¹. On December 12, 2006, Barbara Balzerani was granted conditional release and, after serving the rest of her sentence in a semi-prison regime, she was finally released in 2011. Since then, she has devoted herself mainly to literature, especially autobiographical prose. Barbara Balzerani returned to her childhood spent in the working-class town of Colleferro in her latest interview with Christian Raimo. In it, she referred to the turning point of 1968 – for her and for many people from working-class families who were starting their studies at that time, for whom the slogans of the student revolt left no doubt that the revolution was inevitable⁵². She emphasized the impossibility of finding oneself in the role of a victim after the defeat of the revolution, but she considered it necessary to accept defeat and admit defeat, treating it as the first step towards recovery⁵³.

Balzerani addressed the failure of the revolution most fully in one of her last personal stories, told in epistolary form, *Lettera a mio padre* (*Letters to My Father*), a full of disappointment reflection on the lost illusions of *anni di piombo* (*The Years of Lead*) in the face of the triumph of capitalism⁵⁴.

These narratives allow us not only to understand Balzerani’s motivation to join the revolutionary struggle, but also to understand her decision to remain outside the circle of *pentiti* (*repentant*) and *dissotati* (*distanced*)⁵⁵. Although she never distanced herself from her past or showed remorse, she expressed her sorrow for the victims of terrorism.

In this context, *anni di piombo* refers both to the lead bullets that became the material determinant of political violence in the Italian Republic, as well as to the iron – the bars and armored cells in which thousands of fighters were imprisoned. For Balzerani, writing became a method and a tool for recomposing a fragmented, torn identity. In her narratives, the author recalls her experience of armed struggle, talks about the causes, personal and collective consequences, and above all about the questions that result from it, without seeking justification for her own and collective choices. See more on this topic: M. Thirion, *La scrittura di Barbara Balzerani. Estetica di una scrittura conflittuale*, traduzione di Silvia De Bernardinis, “Machina Rivista”, 11 ottobre 2021.

⁵⁰ B. Balzerani, *La sirena delle cinque*, Milano 2003. This is a fictionalized first-person narrative about childhood – the story of a little girl, the daughter of workers, born and raised in Colleferro on the outskirts of Rome, a city where the factory played a dominant role.

⁵¹ Ibidem.

⁵² C. Raimo, *L’ultima intervista: la storia di Barbara Balzerani, oltre il rapimento Moro e le Brigate Rosse...*, op. cit.

⁵³ Ibidem.

⁵⁴ B. Balzerani, *Lettera a mio padre*, Roma 2020.

⁵⁵ The withdrawal from armed action and the refusal to support further revolutionary activity was referred to as *dissociazione* (*dissociazione*), or *disintegrazione*, but also as *separazione* or *distancing*. The beginning of the disintegration of the Red Brigades was the so-called ‘document of ninety’, in which the former revolutionaries declared their complete separation from armed struggle. Ultimately, the brigatisti abandoned armed struggle in 1986. A. Negri, *Powrót. Alfabet biopolityczny. Rozmowy z Anne Douformentelle* [*The Return. The Biopolitical Alphabet. Conversations with Anne Douformentelle*], transl. Maciej Żakowski, Warsaw 2006, p. 19. ‘Pentito’ was originally defined in Italian law in the Act of 29 May 1982 (Measures to Defend the Constitutional Order), known as the Law on the Repentant, which was introduced under the ‘emergency legislation’ to combat terrorism in response

After Barbara Balzerani's death, journalist Stefania Limiti said that just as Caso Moro functions in the collective consciousness of Italian society, Barbara Balzerani also appeared in it not only as a female terrorist, but also as a 'collective hero' and icon of the revolutionary movement. Although the revolution fascinated many young people at the time, Barbara Balzerani was one of those who went as far as possible in her radicalism. She took care of her image as a guerrilla fighter, acting according to a specific strategy, which she never regretted and with which she identified until the end⁵⁶.

Other women from the Red Brigades were also connected to the kidnapping of the Christian Democratic Prime Minister. Adriana Faranda, among others, was directly connected to the ambush on via Fani. Her path to the brigatisti led from Potere Operaio, through the extremist Lotta Armata – Potere Proletario (Armed Struggle – Proletarian Power), co-founded in 1973 with Bruno Seghetti and Valerio Morucci, to finally joining the Roman column of Brigate Rosse. In preparation for Moro's kidnapping, Adriana Faranda, together with Valerio Morucci, as an engaged couple, tested the possibilities of where to kidnap the politician. Her role also included obtaining fake Al Italia uniforms, which were used by the kidnapers on via Fani. Both she and Valerio Morucci were against Moro's execution, which resulted in their decision to leave the organization. She was arrested in Rome in May 1979, along with Morucci, in the home of former Potere Operaio fighter Giuliana Conforto. Because she had 'splintered' from the Red Brigades – she admitted to participating in armed actions but did not provide the justice system with information about other members of the organization – she was imprisoned, but was released before the end of her sentence in 1994. In prison, she wrote her autobiography *Il volo della Farfalla*, published in 2006⁵⁷.

The main logistical role in the kidnapping of Aldo Moro and his trial in the people's prison was played by Anna Laura Braghetti, associated with the Roman column of the Red Brigades. Braghetti was the life partner of Bruno Seghetti, then already a 'regolare' of the Roman column of the Red Brigades, when in 1977, on his recommendation, she was recruited to play the role of an auxiliary member in the organization. She had been associated with the extra-parliamentary left much earlier, participated in organizing demonstrations, and then became involved in the activities of Lotta Continua. The decision to recruit Braghetti to the Red Brigades was, as Mario Moretti recalled, part of the plan to kidnap Aldo Moro, including the decision that he would be imprisoned in an apartment building in Rome, officially occupied by

to the kidnapping of American General James Lee Dozier and following the first reports by members of the Red Brigades: Patrizio Peci, Carlo Fioroni and Antonio Savasta. See: G. Boatti, *Pentito*, "Doppiozero", 3 maggio 2001. The law of 18 February 1987, Misure a favore di coloro che si dissociano dal terrorismo (Measures in Favor of Those Who Distance Themselves from Terrorism), also granted relief to *dissociati*, convicted of terrorism or sabotage, who had effectively abandoned the armed struggle and, by admitting to their activities, distanced themselves from violence as a method of political struggle. The provisions of this law are rooted in the content of the provisions on the 'repentant', which are superior from the point of view of legal logic. See also: A. Mantovano, *Dai «pentiti» ai «dissociati»*, "Christianità" 1986, pp. 139-140.

⁵⁶ *La scomparsa di Barbara Balzerani, intervista a Stefania Limiti*, "Radio Radicale. Conoscere per Deliberare", 4 marzo 2024.

⁵⁷ A. Faranda, *Il volo della Farfalla*, Milano 2006.

a person who was not a permanent member of the organization⁵⁸. In the autobiographical narrative of *Il Prigioniero*, Braghetti described her decision as the result of a long and slow process, of gradual approaching step by step, until finally integrating herself with full force into the structures of the organization. It was the result of a search for a way to change the world and an attempt to understand whether and to what extent the Red Brigades could be the realization of this revolutionary dream⁵⁹. Braghetti's main logistical task was to buy a 120-meter apartment on via Montalcini, part of which was used as a people's prison (*prigione del popolo*). The 45 million lire earmarked for the purchase came from the ransom of the kidnapped in April 1977 Genoese shipowner Pietro Costa. The apartment was officially occupied by Anna Laura Braghetti and the phantom engineer Luigi Altobelli⁶⁰. This name was used by Germano Maccari when signing the purchase agreement for the apartment concluded on July 11, 1977⁶¹. Maccari, a close friend of Morucci and Seghetti from their time in *Potere Operaio*, distanced himself from active armed combat, but, like Braghetti, he was recruited (in mid-1978) to the Red Brigades without being assigned to any structure, to act as a figurehead in connection with the kidnapping and imprisonment of Moro in via Montalcini. The base (as the apartment was called) was managed exclusively by four people: Laura Braghetti, Mario Moretti, Prospero Galinari, and Germano Maccari, none of the other members of the organization knew this location.

After Moro's kidnapping and murder, Braghetti went underground to continue her revolutionary struggle. In the following years, she participated in several bloody terrorist actions. Along with Bruno Seghetti, she was arrested in 1980 after participating in the assassination of a high-ranking civil servant, Professor Vittorio Bachelet, on the steps of a Roman university. She joined the circle of *pentiti* and expressed deep regret only after spending many years in prison, mainly thanks to the Jesuit Adolfo Bachelet, brother of the murdered Vittorio, who, she claimed, showed her the way to a new life⁶². Sentenced to life imprisonment, she has been on parole since 2002 (after twenty-two years in prison), coordinating social welfare for prisoners, ex-prisoners, and their families.

Carla Maria Brioschi also participated in many armed actions, together with Adriana Faranda and Barbara Balzerani. In the spring of 1976, after the arrest of key decision-makers, Brioschi found herself in the new composition of the executive committee of the Red Brigades⁶³, which jointly recognized that the previous *modus operandi* of the Red Brigades was

⁵⁸ M. Moretti, C. Mosca, R. Rossanda, *Brigate Rosse. Una storia italiana*, Mondadori, 2018, s. 138.

⁵⁹ A.L. Braghetti, Paola Tavella, *Il prigioniero*, Milano (quinta edizione) 2005.

⁶⁰ *Il caso Moro - Cronaca di un rapimento. Nella prigione del popolo*, Anni Affollati.it. L'Italia tra terrorismo e progresso, <https://www.anniaffollati.it/01%20CONTENUTI/25%20Caso%20Moro/25%20immagini/08%20Nella%20prigione%20del%20popolo.html> (13.11.2024).

⁶¹ *Processo Moro Quinquies - I grado. 02. Svolgimento del processo*, Documento aggiornato al 15/04/2005, Archivio '900; <https://www.archivio900.it/documenti/doc.aspx?id=416> (13.11.2024).

⁶² A.L. Braghetti, Paola Tavella, *Il prigioniero...*, op.cit., s. 130-131.

⁶³ In addition to Brioschi, the executive committee included Mario Moretti, Rocco Micaletto, Franco Bonisoli and Lauro Azzolini.

no longer adequate to the new level of conflict⁶⁴. On June 21, 1977, together with Bruno Seghetti, Adriana Faranda, and Barbara Balzerani, she participated in the attack in Rome on Remo Cacciafesta, Dean of the Faculty of Economics and Business⁶⁵. After Moro's kidnapping, she found herself among a group of 'dissidents', led by Valerio Morucci, who opposed the decision of the leader of the column Mario Moretti to execute the Christian Democrat politician⁶⁶. She was one of the founders of the Walter Alasia column, a group that split from the Red Brigades in 1980⁶⁷. Brioschi's name appears on the list of 54 accused of murdering Aldo Moro. For her participation in the Caso Moro and for the murders committed in Genoa, she was sentenced to life imprisonment.

Serving a life sentence in Opera Prison, she was released on parole in November 2008 after 26 years by the Court of Appeal in Milan because, in the judges' opinion, she had shown clear evidence (including "deep reflection on the crimes committed" and "criticism of the political and moral assumptions of past choices") to apply the provisions of the *pentiti* law, which allows her to serve part of her sentence in a semi-open system⁶⁸.

Along with other members of Brigate Rosse, another woman was arrested in connection with Caso Moro, Nadia Mantovani (alias Giulia), although she did not directly participate in the kidnapping and murder of the Christian Democratic leader⁶⁹. As a medical student at the University of Padua, she became involved with the far-left Autonomia Operaia (Workers' Autonomy)⁷⁰ and later joined the Red Brigades. After the death of Margherita Cagol, she became a companion of Renato Curcio. She was associated with the Venetian column of the Red Brigades, Annamaria Ludman-Cecilia. One of the first important actions in which she took part was the storming of the Christian Democratic headquarters in Mestre on May 15, 1975. She was arrested in Milan, at the base in via Montenevoso, and sentenced to 20 years and 2 months in prison for terrorist crimes, participation in an organized criminal group, kidnapping, theft, and subversive activities. She was held in special prisons in Turin and Voghera. In 1985, she officially broke up with Brigate Rosse. Transferred to a prison in Bologna, she spent three years in the same cell with Francesca Mambro from the neo-fascist militant organization Nuclei Armati Rivoluzionari, active between 1977 and 1981, with whom, despite radical political differences, she organized several joint ventures, including a photography exhibition in Bologna on February 4, 1989, and many years later, on August 23, 2004, both women participated in the

⁶⁴ The change in modus operandi led the Red Brigades towards political kidnappings and brutal murders. The first, in this new model, can be considered the murder in June 1976 in Genoa of prosecutor Coco and his escort.

⁶⁵ M.C. Brioschi, *L'alba dei funerali di uno Stato*, Archivio materiale sulle Brigate Rosse e il rapimento di Aldo Moro, <https://www.albadeifuneralidiunostato.org/tag/maria-carla-brioschi/> (14.11.2024).

⁶⁶ *Br Brioschi: concessa la liberazione condizionale!*, „Robbor.it”, 12.11.2008.

⁶⁷ It is named after the militant Walter Alasia, who was killed in a shootout with police in 1976.

⁶⁸ *Br, libera Carla Maria Brioschi*, “SKY tg24”, 11 nov 2008.

⁶⁹ In the first trial, in May 1985, 53 members of the organization were convicted on charges of terrorist activities.

⁷⁰ Autonomia Operaia was, alongside Potere Operaio and Lotta Continua, an Italian left-wing organization, particularly active in the years 1973-1979. See: E. Quadrelli, *Autonomia operaia. Scienza della politica e arte della guerra dal '68 ai movimenti globali*. Globali, 2020.

Friendship Meeting in Rimini⁷¹. In December 2013, the Bologna Court of Appeal rehabilitated Nadia Mantovani, erasing her criminal past⁷².

An active fighter in the Red Brigades was also Susanna Ronconi, the daughter of a former Air Force officer, who joined the organization in the early 1970s, with a background in the feminist movement. She is one of those women in the Red Brigades, along with Barbara Balzerani, who built and perpetuated the myth of the brigatisti as the ‘big losers’⁷³. In 1974, she participated as an observer in the attack on the headquarters of the post-fascist political party Movimento Sociale Italiano (Italian Social Movement) in Padua, in which Graziani Giralucci and Giuseppe Mazzola were killed. She served on the Red Brigades’ strategic planning board from 1975 to 1978. After the kidnapping and murder of Aldo Moro, she left the Red Brigades and became one of the founders of the Prima Linea, a rival militant group to Brigade Rosse, which officially condemned Moro’s execution. Initially, Prima Linea’s activities, whose members called themselves *nuovi partigiani*, were limited to armed propaganda actions, but soon also included active political violence. This was a kind of response, motivated by a ‘sense of justice’, to the increasing atmosphere of violence in the country, both from the state and from armed groups, which some of the population saw as a spiral with no way out⁷⁴. She was first arrested in Florence on 3 December 1980 and sentenced to 14 years in prison for terrorist offenses. Together with several other revolutionaries, she decided to escape from prison while the Red Brigades were searching for General Dozier, who had been kidnapped. In connection with her escape, she was sentenced in absentia to another 13 years in prison for her activities in Prima Linea⁷⁵.

She was arrested again on October 14, 1982, along with other members of the organization in a Milanese restaurant. The police accused Ronconi of participating in 133 attacks over a 10-year period. She received a total sentence of 22 years in prison. She was finally released in 1991. After her release, she became involved in social activities. In 2006, she became a member of the National Council for Drug Addiction, but resigned from her membership in 2007.

One of the most controversial figures in the Red Brigades was Natalia Ligas, from Sardinia, who held a leadership role in the Turin column of the Brigate Rosse. She was briefly associated with the Autonomia Operaia, and in the first period of armed activity supported the activities of Barbagia Rossa, the Sardinian branch of the Red Brigades, including participating in a series of attacks on the American military base of La Maddalena in Sardinia. In Rome, she

⁷¹ Rimini, *applausi alle ex terroriste I parenti delle vittime: "Indegno"*, *repubblica.it*, 23 Agosto 2004, <https://www.repubblica.it/2004/h/sezioni/politica/mambromeeting/mambromeeting/mambromeeting.html> (19.11.2024).

⁷² G. Selva, E. Marcucci, *Aldo Moro, quei terribili 55 giorni*, edizioni Rubbettino, 2003; *Riabilitata Nadia Mantovani ex compagna di Renato Curcio*, “La Tribuna di Treviso”, 13 Dicembre 2003, https://ricerca.gelocal.it/tribunatreviso/archivio/tribunatreviso/2003/12/13/VR6TC_VR605.html (19.11.2024).

⁷³ See mre: R.Simone, *Donne oltre le armi. Tredici storie di sovversione e genere*, Nuova ediz. 2021.

⁷⁴ See more: G. Del Vecchio, *The left-wing armed struggle in Italy from a critical-historical perspective: the case of study of Prima Linea*, “Critical Studies on Terrorism” 2017, 11(1), pp. 173-194.

⁷⁵ *Most-wanted woman terrorist arrested*, UPI, October 29, 1982, <https://www.upi.com/Archives/1982/10/29/Most-wanted-woman-terrorist-arrested/2124420707007/> (19.11.2024).

studied sociology and worked as a hospital nurse. There she met Emilia Libera and Antonio Savasta from the Roman column of the Red Brigades, then commanded by Giovanni Senzani, which she soon joined, adopting the combat pseudonym Angela. In the Roman wing, the brigatisti initially played a logistical role⁷⁶, organising a base in a rented apartment at via Ugo Pesci 11, where on 20 May 1980 a shootout took place between the carabinieri and members of the Red Brigades who managed to escape, but the police found a number of notes related to the organization's activities and some weapons there. One of the most spectacular actions in which she participated was the kidnapping, considered in terms of *vendetta trasversale* (transversal revenge), on 10 June 1981, in San Benedetto del Tronto, of Roberto Peci, brother of Patrizio Peci, who had joined the *pentiti* circle⁷⁷. Ligas was then among Peci's guards. She also became entangled in the Peci Case through her participation in the ambush on June 19, 1981, of public defender Patrizio Peci. In the shooting that took place, lawyer Antonio De Vita shot Natalia Ligas in the thigh. Fifteen days later, in a private clinic, she underwent surgery to clean the infected wound and remove the bullet. This was done by a respected doctor and politician – senator for the Italian Socialist Party – Domenico Pitelli, who, at the time not drawing up a report of the incident, only discovered two years later that the girl he had helped was Natalia Ligas⁷⁸. On 27 April 1982, Ligas participated in the murder of Raffaele Delcogliano and his driver Aldo Iermano, associated with the Christian Democrats, but her rifle jammed, and another woman, Anna Cotone, finished the job. Upon her return to Turin, she was arrested at Porta Nuova station on October 14, 1982. A .38 caliber pistol and important organization documents were found in her purse. Other brigatisti managed to escape⁷⁹. A week after Ligas' arrest, on October 21, 1982, Brigate Rosse commandos carried out an 'expropriation' of a Banco di Napoli branch. A statement from the Red Brigades was found on the security guards shot during the raid, stating that the execution was the result of cooperation between the *belva Ligas* (beast) and the carabinieri⁸⁰. A day later, members of the Roman column 'expropriated' an insurance company on Via Arezzo 54, also leaving a note about Ligas in place. The fact that she was indirectly threatened resulted in Ligas being placed in isolation from the other accused brigatisti

⁷⁶ Logistical activities included: courier service, providing shelter (organizing bases and hideouts), transport infrastructure, and organizing accessories necessary for actions.

⁷⁷ Roberto Peci was murdered after 55 days of being held prisoner. According to Giovanni Senzani, who was the initiator of the whole action, it was supposed to symbolize the connection with Patrizio's violation of the secret of Caso Moro. Rita Di Giovacchino, *Il libro nero della prima Repubblica*, Roma 2005, p. 208.

⁷⁸ The doctor was arrested on suspicion of participating in the terrorist activities of the Red Brigades. He was under house arrest in his home in the San Paolo a Lauria district, convicted of participation in an armed gang and sabotage activities. He was accused of having developed a plan with the Red Brigades to kidnap Ferdinando Schettini, his political opponent, in exchange for opening up his Sanatrix clinic to wounded fighters in Lauria. See Pantaleone Sergi, "Io delle Br non so nulla", "La Repubblica", 17.08.1984, <https://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/1984/08/17/io-delle-br-non-so-nulla.html> (15.10.2024).

⁷⁹ *La Ligas era seguita Stava ripartendo da Torino per il Sud*, "L'Unità", 16 ottobre 1982.

⁸⁰ N. Rao, *Colpo al cuore. Dai pentiti ai «metodi speciali»: come lo Stato uccise le BR. La storia mai raccontata*, Milano 2011, p. 163. Ligas' alleged collaboration with the justice system was blamed for the arrests of dozens of militants. She was also called an "agent of the counterrevolution" (*agente della controrivoluzione*). See: C. Marletti, *Il Piemonte e Torino alla prova del terrorismo*, Catanzaro 2004, s. 183.

during the Moro trial in Turin, against whom she made a self-criticism to deny the accusations of being an infiltrator. Although she met with contempt by her comrades.

For her participation in numerous armed actions and her overall activity in the Red Brigades, including her association with Caso Moro, Natalia Ligas was sentenced to several life sentences. She was strongly opposed to ending the armed struggle, criticizing the 1988 declaration by Renato Curcio and Mario Moretti sanctioning the end of revolutionary activity. In 1992, she was transferred to Messina, to a high-security prison, with a significantly reduced number of visits. She was even prevented from attending the funeral of her sister, who died in 1996. It was only from 2000 that she began to use alternative means, which allowed her to serve her sentence in a system of semi-freedom until her release in 2009. In 2013, after the death of Prospero Gallinari, Natalia Ligas was among the signatories of the events commemorating the revolutionary figure⁸¹.

The accusations of repentance and collaboration leveled against Ligas, the result of erroneous analyses, have never been confirmed by court or investigative documents. Moreover, in reality Ligas has never renounced or regretted her revolutionary past and has neither been among the *pentiti* nor the *dissotati*, which largely brings her closer to the circle of the *irriducibili*⁸².

A decidedly extreme attitude of lack of distance towards the ‘revolutionary act’ among women of the Red Brigades is also represented by Nadia Ponti, who after joining the Turin column of the Red Brigades, adopted the combat pseudonym Marta. In 1977 in Turin, she took part in numerous armed actions against people associated with the Christian Democratic circles. Also in Turin on 10 March 1978, together with Patrizio Peci (later *pentito*) during the assassination, she protected and supported the course of the assassination of Rosario Berardi. On 11 April 1978 during one of the Turin actions of the Red Brigades, she was shot by prison officer Lorenzo Cotugno⁸³. Like Ligas, she received medical assistance without a report being drawn up, while the other wounded man was taken to the hospital where he was arrested. The last spectacular action in which she took part was the murder of deputy police commissioner Alfredo Albanese in Venice on May 12, 1980. Arrested on 22 December 1980, she was sentenced to life imprisonment in the Moro trial. Since 2003 she has been serving her sentence in a semi-open system. Her application for provisional release, submitted in 2008, was rejected. Nadia Ponti is guided by the imperative of *scomodarsi*, stopping on the way, in pursuit of the past and

⁸¹ P. Abatangelo et al., *A Prospero Gallinari, “Fine di una storia. La Storia continua...”*, *Il discorso di saluto letto ai funerali di Prospero Gallinari da chi ha condiviso con lui la lotta politica nelle Brigate Rosse e la prigionia nelle carceri speciali* (Farewell speech read during the funeral of Prospero Gallinari by people who shared his political struggle in the Red Brigades and his stay in special prisons), “*Insorgenze*”, 23 gennaio 2013;

⁸² G. Galli, *Piombo rosso*, Milano 2013.

⁸³ S.E. Moran, *Inside a Terrorist Group. The Red Brigades of Italy*, Rand Corporation 1987, p. 42.

its desires⁸⁴. She has never regretted her actions, which is why she is placed among the irreducible (*irriducibili*)⁸⁵.

She justified her persistence in the armed struggle in a letter written from the Opera prison in Milan, dated May 1997, calling the struggle a desperate and naive attempt to sustain hope for a different way of life, treating it at the same time as a mandatory choice of a ‘one-way ticket’ to revolution. She referred to Mahatma Gandhi’s slogans – when the choice is only between cowardice and violence, one must choose violence, and to the popular song about five ducks that flew south and although only one arrived, this flight was definitely necessary “Ma quel suo volo certo vuole dire” that meant that one had to take up the challenge (fly), “Che bisognava volare”⁸⁶.

Some of the female fighters of the Red Brigades, such as Mara Nanni, who joined the Red Brigades in 1978, are little known. Arrested on September 24, 1979, she was sentenced to life imprisonment in the first Moro trial in 1981. In subsequent stages of the trial, the sentence was gradually reduced, first to 26, and then to 15 years of imprisonment. In 1994, Mara Nanni completed her sentence, but the years of lead, as well as her time in prison, left a lasting mark on her. Nanni was not a media person, she did not give interviews or speak publicly, yet the story of her difficult choices, dilemmas, and borderline experiences was presented in the comic book format by Paolo Cossi, thus making the comic book a new medium tool for telling the story of the Red Brigades⁸⁷. The case of Mary Nanni raises the question about the basic criteria of ‘recognizability’ – whether it is only self-narrative or perhaps also a secondary ‘penetration’ into mass culture as a form of perpetuating the myth of partigiani in social consciousness.

Undoubtedly, the greatest recognition comes from the self-presentations of the brigatisti – autobiographical books, meetings with readers, television and press interviews, sometimes turning into extensive documentary film material. They also provide the best opportunity for hermeneutic insight into the ‘I’ created in the narratives. An example of such material is Loredana Bianconi’s documentary, in which the aforementioned brigatisti entangled in the vortex of revolution – Adriana Faranda, Nadia Mantovani, Susanna Ronconi, and Barbara Balzerani, told about their decisions to join the armed struggle in the Red Brigades, which became the center and goal of their existence, for which they were ready to go underground and break all social ties. This radical choice required not only giving up the old ‘I’ but also risking their own lives⁸⁸. After many years in prison, they bravely admitted that their once undeniable political beliefs had given way to doubts and moments of conflict over time, and ultimately ended

⁸⁴ R. Simone, *Donne oltre le armi. Tredici storie di sovversione e genere*, Nuova ediz, 2021, p. 33.

⁸⁵ *The irreducible (irriducibili)* reject the current institutional structure without admitting that they have in any way made a mistake in undertaking the revolutionary struggle. See: Pino Casamassima, *Gli irriducibili. Storie di brigatisti mai pentiti*, Laterza 2012.

⁸⁶ *Letter di Nadia Ponti*, Rete Nazionale Sprigionare, <http://www.ecn.org/rete.sprigionare/italia2.htm> (15.10.2024). This is a popular song by Francesco Guccini from 1978: *Le cinque anatre*.

⁸⁷ P. Cossi, *La storia di Mara*, Santa Maria Capua Vetere 2006.

⁸⁸ Documentary by L. Bianconi, op. cit.

in condemnation of armed struggle and pain at the sight of the lives destroyed – the lives of the victims and their own⁸⁹.

CONCLUSIONS

The description and analysis of women's participation in the structures of the Red Brigades ipso facto leads to a redefinition of the traditional understanding of the fighter-terrorist as a male fighter. The use of feminist theories allowed to conclude that the motivations of the women presented above constitute a contamination of complex autonomous choices and political decisions, going beyond love or madness. In this approach, women – brigatisti, simultaneously committing violence and autonomous perpetration in the political field – undermine stereotypes established by the cultural domination of masculinity, but do not deprive themselves of truth⁹⁰.

The decisions of the women brigatisti were made in a period of dynamic, profound socio-political changes, numerous student protests and workers' strikes, implying the radicalization of armed groups and the intensification of brutal attacks of political and ideological nature⁹¹. The revolutionary activity of the women of the Red Brigades was typical of the generation of their peers in Western Europe and other parts of the world, who entered leftist politics in 1968-1969, represented in Italy by the student movement, Potere Operaio and autonomist feminism, to achieve the ultimate goal as armed *guerriglieri*. Their decisions were influenced, above all, by their social environment and previous political involvement, and the fight for gender equality became part of the revolutionary struggle.

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⁸⁹ Ibidem.

⁹⁰ G. Bonerba, S. Verza, *Women terrorists in the Italian news: the representation of agency from 'red witches' to 'lady Jihad'*, "About Gender" 2024, 13(25), p. 274.

⁹¹ Currently, it is also being implemented against jihadists: Maria Giulia Sergio and Alice Brignoli. Narratives of this type tend to stigmatize women who commit politically labeled violence as 'unreal' and thus seek to restore 'traditional' ('correct') gender roles. See: Giuseppina Bonerba, Sofia Verza, op. cit., pp. 273-297.

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