

Ruth Glynn. *Women, Terrorism, and Trauma in Italian Culture.* Italian and Italian American Studies Series. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. ix + 288 pp. \$100.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-137-29406-7.



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With this book, Ruth Glynn provides an analysis of cultural representations of women and terrorism in Italy. She examines a variety of cultural portrayals of female-perpetrated violence that took place during the *anni di piombo* (years of lead), or the political violence of the 1970s, the memory of which is problematic today. Glynn employs what she describes as a “gendered critique of trauma theory” to demonstrate her thesis that Italian society has largely interpreted women’s involvement in the *anni di piombo* as signifying an intensification of violence (p. 2). This thesis is grounded in the fact that, as Glynn shows throughout this work, women who perpetrate violence are seen as upsetting established gender roles. She describes women’s involvement in this violence as a psychological “double wound” — a phrase borrowed from Sergio Lenci, an architect who was shot by a group of terrorists that included a woman — because, she posits, violence committed by women is construed as abnormal and therefore doubly traumatic. The author draws on Jeffrey Alexander’s scholarship in the field of collective psychology to demonstrate that trauma is a social phenomenon and that for an event to be classified as traumatic it must become a cultural crisis, something that Glynn argues occurred in Italy in the 1970s.[1] She deftly uses her gendered critique of trauma theory to examine

the wider societal implications of women’s involvement in political violence on the collective memory of the *anni di piombo* in Italy today.

Glynn has written extensively on the subject of terrorism of the *anni di piombo* and on the current perception of that period and its protagonists. Her previous work includes studies of cinematic portrayals of political violence in Italy as well as analyses of biographies and autobiographies of former terrorists, victims, and victims’ children. She has published several articles on representations of women and terrorism; some of these articles form the basis of several chapters in this book.

Over the course of the book’s seven chapters, Glynn focuses on a variety of cultural representations of women terrorists to illustrate her theory that violent women are perceived as signifying the intensification of violence and to show that men who are victims of violent women experience a “double wound.” She draws on books that have been written by female former terrorists, as well as representations of these women in film, television, and novels. Her arguments, grounded in theories from a number of disciplines, are convincing and satisfying overall.

In the first two chapters, Glynn outlines the ways

in which these women are portrayed as abnormal. In chapter 2, she focuses on newspaper depictions of female terrorists in the 1970s, and by highlighting a small selection of cases, she skillfully and methodically details the changes of media representations of women over the course of the decade. Press reports of the deaths of two female terrorists in 1975 connected their involvement in political violence to the men in their lives, whereas two women who were killed two years later were portrayed in the press as “aggressive and rebellious in nature” (p. 56). She concludes that this change in the portrayal of female terrorists is evidence that their involvement in violent acts had begun to be seen as evidence of an increased level of threat.

In the following chapters, Glynn examines cinematic representations of female terrorists in three films that were released in the 1980s, autobiographical works written by female former terrorists, and more recent representations of female terrorists from both fiction and non-fiction. The final chapter, in which she brings her analysis up to the present, examines media representations of female members of the New Red Brigades who have been active in the last decade. Her analysis returns again and again to the reasons for these representations of female terrorists, and she reaches the conclusion that “the problematic representation of the woman terrorist intersects and is bound up with the status of the *anni di piombo* as a cultural crisis and an experience of collective trauma” (p. 142).

Examining a difficult collective memory through such a gendered lens might seem restrictive, but Glynn’s arguments are strong and the phenomenon of female participation in armed violence is a fascinating segment of this “divided memory.”[2] Glynn’s thesis never feels nar-

row. By examining such a wide range of sources and including a great many strands of criticism and theory in her analysis, she easily proves that hers is a useful and interesting focus.

This work complements another recent study of post-*anni di piombo* cultural discourse, *Ending Terrorism in Italy* (2013), by Anna Cento Bull and Philip Cooke. Their book analyzes the history of that period and the processes of disengagement from terrorism that have taken place in Italy in the intervening years. While the issue of female-perpetrated violence is included in their study, it is not their main focus; Glynn’s work, therefore, adds another interesting perspective to this field of research. The majority of the studies that examine the history of the *anni di piombo* have been written in Italian and other recent works on the subject include various edited volumes that focus on the experience of victims and their families. *Women, Terrorism, and Trauma in Italian Culture* is an original and topical addition to the existing literature both because it is written in English and is therefore accessible to scholars from outside the Italian-speaking community and because of its emphasis on gender. Accessible and engaging, *Women, Terrorism, and Trauma in Italian Culture* will be valuable to scholars working in a wide range of disciplines, including history, gender studies, and trauma studies.

Notes

[1]. Jeffrey Alexander, “Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma,” in *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, ed. Alexander et al. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 1-30.

[2]. John Foot, *Italy’s Divided Memory* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

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