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# Maria Luisa Berneri Richards (1918-1949)

Antonio Senta

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2019

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Patrizia Guarnieri (Editor), *Intellectuals Displaced from Fascist Italy. Migrants, Exiles and Refugees Fleeing for Political and Racial Reasons*, Firenze, Firenze University Press, 2019. Open online publication. Translated by Tom Dawkes

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- \* Archivio Famiglia Berneri-Aurelio Chessa, Reggio Emilia, Epistolario Giovanna Caleffi.
- \* Ibid., Fondo Colonia Maria Luisa Berneri.
- \* Ibid., Fondo Vernon Richards.
- \* Ibid., Fondo Serge Senninger.
- \* Ibid., oral memoir of Celestino Caleffi.
- \* Ibid., written memoir of Suzanne Képès.
- \* International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam, Vernon Richards Papers.
- \* Ibid., Freedom Papers.
- \* Ibid., Freedom Defence Committee Papers.

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The project was meant to give substance to one of Maria Luisa's most urgent aspirations. At the age of seventeen she had made her ideal place explicit in a letter to Vero:

"I would like to have a school [...] but not a school where the children come for five or six hours a day, no, I would like to create a real environment. Now laugh a bit! The school would be made in the middle of a large forest. The classes (like certain socialist schools in Germany) would be in different colours, children dressed in the same colour as their class. The classes would be large, laughing, with lots of flowers. The children would do the cleaning themselves. They would be completely free. There would be no need for overseers, the young ones would be looked after by the older ones. The older ones would take up a manual occupation as soon as possible, in order to be independent soon. There would be seamstresses who would dress everyone, bricklayers who would do necessary repairs, gardeners to cultivate the garden. So we would try to support ourselves with our own work. We would have only a few things to buy outside, as we will already have vegetables, fruit, wood, etc. For the older ones I also thought that it would be good to give them sex education lessons, which would allow them to be free to get together as much as they would like and feel the need to. What if a baby is born? Just one more comrade. So everyone would be happy, no sick people, no neurasthenics. "Tout serait bien, dans le meilleur des mondes" [...]<sup>43</sup>

### ***Principal publications***

*Workers in Stalin's Russia*, London, Freedom Press, 1944.

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nel secondo dopoguerra, Reggio Emilia, Biblioteca Panizzi - Archivio Famiglia Berneri-Aurelio Chessa, Reggio Emilia, 2015, pp. 99-105.

<sup>43</sup> Archivio Famiglia Berneri-Aurelio Chessa, Fondo Vernon Richards, Maria Luisa Berneri to Vernon Richards, Paris, 28 June 1935.

## *A children's camp*

After the end of the worldwide conflict, Giovanna Caleffi re-established relations with the anarchist movement. To honour her daughter, with a group of activists from Romagna and with the support of London militants close to Maria Luisa, in 1950 she tried to create a summer camp in Cesenatico. Her initial idea was to build a school, but the promoters finally decided to establish a place where the sons and daughters of anarchists and sympathizers could spend a summer vacation. The initiative received approval, and contributions for its establishment came from different parts of the world.

The project took off the following year, in 1951, not in Cesenatico but in Piano di Sorrento, in a property made available by Cesare Zaccaria, with whom Giovanna Caleffi was emotionally linked. Thus was born an experiment that, in addition to its support function (accommodation was free), aimed at educational purposes inspired by the practice of a free and secular social life, based on equality: in the community adults and children met each other as equals, without "indoctrination" or conditioning of any kind. The colony operated in that house for seven years, until the end of the summer of 1957, when Zaccaria, breaking up with Giovanna and her movement, wanted it to be again entirely at his disposal. Giovanna did not lose heart and, with the help that her comrades sent her from all over the world, she managed to buy a house and a beautiful stretch of pine forest in Ronchi (Marina di Massa). The Colony was reborn in 1960, with some ambitious projects, including that of creating "a permanent secular school [...] a pedagogical community centre". After Giovanna died in 1962, the Colony survived her another two years, until 1964.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Archivio Famiglia Berneri-Aurelio Chessa, Colonia Maria Luisa Berneri <<https://www.comune.re.it>> (accessed 10 December 2021). Cf. also Antonio Pedone, *Colonie anarchiche: testimonianza di un ex ragazzo*, in Fiamma Chessa, Alberto Ciampi, *Gli anarchici e l'autoformazione. Educazione e libertà in Italia*

They were little girls—Malù was 8 and Giliana was 7—when they began their migrant wanderings in France with their mother, so as to be not too far from their father, Camillo Berneri, a professor expelled in 1926, an anarchist killed in Spain in 1937. She opted for studies in psychology, of which her father had been a sophisticated enthusiast, for life in London with her partner, for militancy and a thousand international contacts, for work at the Freedom Press. She had an existence that was almost a Journey through Utopia, as she entitled her main work, published posthumously, as well as in Spanish, Japanese, German, Korean, Arabic and, in 1981, in Italian.

## *An anarchist family under Fascism*

She was given the name Maria Luisa in memory of a paternal aunt, who had died in 1906, just fifteen months old.<sup>1</sup> Immediately after her birth, in Arezzo on 1 March 1918, her family moved to Florence; she lived at Viale Volta 13 with her father Camillo, who was deeply involved in militant activity in the anarchist movement, her mother Giovanna Caleffi, and her sister Giliana, born on 5 October 1919.<sup>2</sup>

Their house was a meeting place for the democratic and radical left: the parents' friends and acquaintances included Gaetano Salvemini and the prime movers of the Circolo di Cultura in Florence, including Pietro Calamandrei, the Rosselli brothers, Ernesto Rossi, and Pietro Jahier. With the coming of fascism, the family

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<sup>1</sup> Francisco Madrid Santos, Camillo Berneri. *Un anarchico italiano (1897-1937). Rivoluzione e controrivoluzione in Europa (1917-1937)*, Pistoia, Archivio Famiglia Berneri, 1985, p. 42.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Gianni Carrozza, Camillo Berneri, in Maurizio Antonioli, Giampietro Berti, Santi Fedele, Pasquale Iuso, *Dizionario biografico degli anarchici italiani*, vol. 1, Pisa, Biblioteca Franco Serantini, 2003, pp. 142-149; Fiamma Chessa, Giorgio Sacchetti, Giliana Berneri, *ibid.*, pp. 149-151; Fiamma Chessa, Giorgio Sacchetti, Giovannina Caleffi, *ibid.*, pp. 294-296; Fiamma Chessa, Giorgio Sacchetti, Maria Luisa Adalgisa Giovanna Berneri, *ibid.*, pp. 151-152.

was subjected to police checks, and Camillo suffered two assaults. Unable to continue his work as a teacher for refusing to take the oath to the regime, he was forced to leave the country in April 1926. On 1 August following, Giovanna, Maria Luisa—also called by family members Marisa or Malù—and Giliana also emigrated, crossing the border at Ventimiglia. They settled first in Nice, and shortly afterwards moved to Saint-Maur-des-Fossés, near the Marne, on the eastern outskirts of Paris. Her father, after escaping to the French capital, was engaged in numerous activities: propaganda by day went hand in hand with the underground struggle, not least against the plotting and attempts at provocation by the Ovrá, but also with various activities of study and research, including that on the regime and the complex relationship between the Duce and the masses, which he was pursuing in his book *Mussolini grande attore*.<sup>3</sup>

### *In Paris and the Spanish Civil War*

In Paris Maria Luisa attended the lycée Victor Hugo. Good-looking, with a sunny disposition, she had great abilities and meant, like her sister, to live an intense life, free from moralistic constraints. She was immersed in the world of anti-fascist political exiles, with her father repeatedly imprisoned and expelled from France, Belgium, Holland and Luxembourg. In 1933 her mother Giovanna, with financial help from her sister Maria and the support of the French anarchist militant Louis Lecoin,<sup>4</sup> opened a small grocery shop in Saint-Maur-des-Fossés, rue de Terre-Neuve 20, in

<sup>3</sup> Camillo Berneri, *Mussolini grande attore*. Scritti su razzismo, dittatura e psicologia delle masse, edited by Alberto Cavaglione, Santa Maria Capua Vetere, Spartaco, 2007.

<sup>4</sup> On Lecoin, one of the central figures of the French anarchist movement between the two wars, cf. the entry by Édouard Sill, Guillaume Davranche, Lecoin Louis, in *Dictionnaire des anarchistes*, published 28 February 2014, latest update 31 May 2020 <<https://maitron.fr>> (accessed 8 February 2022).

Her death caused great consternation within the libertarian movement. A committee was formed in her memory, made up of anarchist militants who circled around her group, which recalled her "exceptional qualities" in the commemorative volume *Marie Louise Berneri 1918-1949. A Tribute*, printed in London in 1949. In subsequent years the committee helped to publish her *Journey through Utopia*,<sup>38</sup> on which she had also worked during her pregnancy and had finished in July 1948. This work, which constitutes to the present day "the most important anarchist examination of utopian thought" and was later translated into several languages,<sup>39</sup> analysed dozens of utopian projects from antiquity to the twentieth century with a careful eye to highlighting their libertarian aspects and authoritarian tendencies. It was reviewed in 1951 in Panunzio's "Mondo" by Enzo Tagliacozzo, a historian and intellectual close to Salvemini, and the rights to the book were acquired, at the end of the 1950s, by Edizioni di Comunità. A translation of the book was ready but remained on the back burner; it was not until 1981, thanks to the initiative of the Berneri family archive, headed at that time by Aurelio Chessa in the historic town of Pistoia, that the publication of *Journey through Utopia* came about.<sup>40</sup>

The same committee also edited *Neither East nor West*, a collection of articles that appeared in "War Commentary" and "Freedom", which uncompromisingly condemned the policies of Western powers as much as those of the Soviet Union.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>38</sup> M.L. Berneri, *Journey through Utopia*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1950.

<sup>39</sup> Giampietro Berti, *Utopia e critica dell'utopia* in Maria Luisa Berneri, in C. De Maria (ed.), *Maria Luisa Berneri e l'anarchismo inglese*, cit., pp. 33-45: p. 33. Cf. also Pietro Adamo, *Maria Luisa Berneri, l'utopia e l'anarchismo britannico nella seconda metà degli anni Quaranta*, ibid., pp. 47-68.

<sup>40</sup> C. De Maria, *Una famiglia anarchica*, cit., p. 253.

<sup>41</sup> M.L. Berneri, *Neither East nor West. Selected Writings*, London, Freedom Press, 1952.

by Vernon Richards. Intellectuals such as George Orwell, George Woodcock, Herbert Read, Alex Comfort and the young Colin Ward rallied around their initiatives.<sup>34</sup>

With her, the English anarchist movement in the 1940s came to exercise "a real, albeit minority, influence, especially from a cultural point of view."<sup>35</sup>

She devoted herself intensely to journalistic activity for the anarchist press, but her interests also extended to other fields; she took an interest in child psychology, helped to popularize Wilhelm Reich's work in England with an article entitled *Sexuality and Freedom* in George Woodcock's "Now" magazine, and maintained a lively interest in literature, painting and photography.<sup>36</sup>

In December 1948, by her and Vero's choice, she decided to give birth at home, assisted by Doctor John Hewetson, their friend and comrade in ideas. The baby died shortly after it was born, leaving her shattered and weakened. On 13 April 1949, Maria Luisa died of a viral infection, probably septicaemia. Her body was cremated in Kensal Green Cemetery, the ashes scattered in the wind by about twenty close friends and family in a park in north London.

She left unfinished several projects on which she was working: the critical edition of some of Bakunin's works, the English translation of the pamphlet *Al caffè* by the Italian anarchist theorist Errico Malatesta, an anthology of unpublished writings by Sacco and Vanzetti to be published both in English and in Italian, the edition of a collection of her father's writings and a study of the libertarian tendencies of the Marquis De Sade.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> C. De Maria, *Una famiglia anarchica*, cit., p. 256. On Colin Ward (1924-2010), architect, thinker and anarchist activist, Carl Levy (ed.), *Colin Ward. Life, Times and Thought*, London, Lawrence & Wishart, 2013.

<sup>35</sup> P. Di Paola, *Marie Louise Berneri e il gruppo di Freedom Press*, in C. De Maria (ed.), *Maria Luisa Berneri e l'anarchismo inglese*, cit., pp. 133-157.

<sup>36</sup> *Sexuality and Freedom*, "Now", 5, August 1945.

<sup>37</sup> L. Pezzica, *Maria Luisa Berneri*, cit., p. 181. Cf. also David Goodway, *Conversazioni con Colin Ward. Lo sguardo anarchico*, Milano, elèuthera, 2003.

the same building where they lived. This grocery shop became the meeting place for many exiles, who met in the back room. Thanks to this venture, Maria Luisa and Giliana, who sometimes helped their mother in her work, were able to complete their studies.

Two years earlier, in 1931, at the Paris hotel Terminus, she had met Vero Recchioni: Maria Luisa was with her mother Giovanna, and Vero was with his father, the anarchist Emidio Recchioni.<sup>5</sup> The meeting between Giovanna and Emidio took place at a point where Camillo Berneri, entangled in a web of police intrigues, was split between prison and a precarious freedom over which loomed threats of expulsion.<sup>6</sup> Maria Luisa was thirteen, Vero three years older. It was love at first sight, and their instant rapport turned into an intense love story, which for the first six years was mostly at a distance, with Luisa in Paris and Vero in London; their bond was strengthened by a staunch intellectual and political partnership. Considered too young by their respective parents, they established a close correspondence by using a friend of Maria Luisa as a go-between, who wrote to them both, inserting in her own letters the correspondence of one or the other. Even though young, Maria Luisa was already politically active: in November 1932, when she was 14, she told Vero that she joined with her parents in a lottery on behalf of political victims.<sup>7</sup>

In a letter to Vero in June 1935 she recalled with feeling how they had gone to see Rigoletto together at the end of a day when they had taken a long walk, thinking yearningly of "kisses", "caresses" and their long conversations. The two of them—wrote Maria

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Pietro Di Paola, *Emidio Recchioni*, in M. Antonioli, G. Berti, S. Fedele, P. Iuso, *Dizionario biografico degli anarchici italiani*, cit., vol. 2, pp. 418-420. Cf. also Erika Diemoz, *A morte il tiranno. Anarchici e violenza da Crispi a Mussolini*, Turin, Einaudi, 2011, under name.

<sup>6</sup> G. Carrozza, *Camillo Berneri*, cit., pp. 142-149.

<sup>7</sup> Carlo De Maria, *Introduzione. La biografia di Maria Luisa Berneri attraverso le ombre dell'Europa*, in Id. (ed.), *Maria Luisa Berneri e l'anarchismo inglese*, Reggio Emilia, Biblioteca Panizzi - Archivio Famiglia Berneri-Aurelio Chessa, 2013, pp. 9-31, 18.

Luisa, before greeting him with "a thousand kisses full of love"—felt themselves to be simultaneously "lovers" and "partners", who "discuss with each other, exchange ideas, make plans, help each other to fight in life."<sup>8</sup>

## ***Studies in psychology and militancy***

That same June of 1935 she sat her exams in French, physics, mathematics and foreign languages, obtaining her Baccalauréat. She was by now a convinced anarchist: she collected signatures in support of Gino Lucetti, who was serving thirty years in prison for his attack on Mussolini in 1926 and, among other things, she joined in the creation of various magazines, such as "Révision", to which she devoted herself with Louis Mercier Vega.<sup>9</sup>

In November 1935, a new order of expulsion from French soil reached her father, and this time Maria Luisa was personally involved in organizing public lectures in support of the right of asylum for political refugees. At this point she enrolled in a course of psycho-pedagogical studies at the Institute of Psychology of the University of Paris, where she attended lectures in general psychology, applied psychology and pedagogy. She often went to the St. Anne hospital complex, where she attended lectures in clinical psychology and psychiatry. To earn some money she taught Italian, at home, to young French students.<sup>10</sup>

In 1936 the Spanish Civil War broke out. Her father, who was publishing the Italian-English newspaper "Italia Libera / Free Italy" published by Vero in Paris among the Italian emigré community in England, was one of the first who flocked to volunteer.

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<sup>8</sup> Archivio Famiglia Berneri-Aurelio Chessa, Reggio Emilia, Fondo Vernon Richards, Maria Luisa Berneri to Vernon Richards, Paris, 28 June 1935.

<sup>9</sup> On Vega, cf. the entry by Charles Jacquier, with the collaboration of Marianne Enckell, Mercier Louis, in *Dictionnaire des anarchistes*, published 7 March 2014, latest update 7 June 2021 <<https://maitron.fr>> (accessed 8 February 2022).

<sup>10</sup> C. De Maria, *Introduzione*, cit., pp. 21-22.

together with Maria Luisa (they are the only two people to have photographed George Orwell in everyday life); he designed a garden in central London which was then constructed by the council, took groups on trips to Italy and other parts of Europe, and after 1968 worked as a farmer, dedicating himself to the organic cultivation of tomatoes. He was always very busy. He died in Hadleigh in 2001, almost ninety years old.<sup>32</sup>

## ***Neither East nor West***

After World War II, Maria Luisa Berneri became a leading figure in the British and international anarchist movement. Her analyses often had as their concern the working class, which, in her opinion, had lost—during the world wars—all internationalist tension and had confined itself within nationalistic visions or been incorporated into alienating bureaucratic systems. But she also denounced the development of the atomic programme, American and British imperialist politics, the repression of political dissidents in the Soviet

Union and in other countries behind the Iron Curtain, in Romania, Bulgaria, Titoist Yugoslavia, and in Czechoslovakia, a country which she had the opportunity to visit in 1947.<sup>33</sup>

A full-time militant, an effective speaker, she held rallies for workers, circulated the press, organized meetings and dealt with international contacts, as in addition to Italian and English she also knew Spanish and French.

Maria Luisa Berneri's personality and spirit permeated all the initiatives of Freedom Press, the London publishing house founded

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<sup>32</sup> Cf. Vernon Richards, *Beauty is More than in the Eye of the Beholder*, London, Freedom Press, 1999, a book of photographs in which he recalled his meeting with Maria Luisa and her tragic end.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Antonio Senta, *Neither East nor West. La critica sociale di Maria Luisa Berneri nell'Europa degli anni Quaranta*, in C. De Maria (ed.), *Maria Luisa Berneri e l'anarchismo inglese*, cit., pp. 159-174.



time when each day they would write the main part of the journal, sustained by strong Italian coffee:

They were crowded, urgent days, with all the satisfaction of working to the edge of one's strength in common cause with a woman whose mind and mine seemed in almost perfect timing and who into the bargain was the best of companions, her fine Tuscan gaiety mitigating a fierce political dedication [...] In every way it was one of those times of heightened living when one's perceptions and one's mental responses are turned to their highest level and one has the strange sense of being outside oneself and above oneself.<sup>29</sup>

"Nothing could stop their work", her mother recalls:

"In fact, difficulties and persecutions tightened more than ever the bonds between the group and the many who sympathetically followed its efforts [...]. After the war, "War Commentary" changed title, while keeping the same spirit, and became "Freedom", first fortnightly, then weekly, with a circulation of about three thousand copies."<sup>30</sup>

The Freedom Press Defence Committee changed into the Freedom Defence Committee, a body for the protection and safeguarding of individual freedoms. Immediately after the proclamation of peace, the Committee launched a campaign for an amnesty for all deserters and prisoners condemned by special war legislation.<sup>31</sup>

In almost all of her militant activities Maria Luisa worked together with Vero Recchioni, who had now become Vernon Richards; he worked as a railway engineer, but gave this up after his arrest. A capable violinist, he was editor and administrator of Freedom Press and devoted himself professionally to photography,

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<sup>29</sup> Woodcock, *Letter to the Past. An Autobiography*, Markham (Ontario), Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 2010, p. 268. Quoted in P. Di Paola, *Maria Luisa Berneri e il gruppo di Freedom Press*, cit., p. 148.

<sup>30</sup> G. Berneri, *Anarchici all'opera*, cit., p. 373.

<sup>31</sup> Carlo De Maria, *Una famiglia anarchica. La vita dei Berneri tra affetti, impegno ed esilio nell'Europa del Novecento*, Roma, Viella, 2019, p. 257.

Maria Luisa worked with the pro-Spain Italian anarchist committee in Paris by promoting relief efforts for Spanish children orphaned during the civil war; the committee was supported by "Le Libertaire", the organ of the French anarchist-communist union and by "Spain and the World", which Vero and other militants were publishing in London. She herself went, together with her mother, at least twice to the Iberian Peninsula to visit her father. In the autumn of 1936 she stayed in Spain for about a week, from 26 October to 3

November, stopping mainly in Barcelona and Valencia.

The last time she went to Barcelona was to attend the funeral of Camillo, who was killed on 5 May 1937 at the hands of the Stalinists. Helped by Louis Lecoin with documents, Maria Luisa and her mother managed to reach the Catalan city only as the funeral was already in progress. Camillo had written to her a few weeks before, asking her how school was going and urging her to "not waste time and energy in too many things. It was the mistake of my youth and I would like you to avoid it."<sup>11</sup> For her the pain of losing her father would be insurmountable.<sup>12</sup> Camillo's example, his political ardour, his energy in giving substance to anarchist ideas, remained for her cardinal points, on the basis of which she was to continue her libertarian militancy. Back in Paris, in May 1937 she was in time to get her university degree with full marks from the Institut di Psychologie;<sup>13</sup> she also helped organize a meeting in

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<sup>11</sup> Camillo Berneri to his daughter Maria Luisa, Barcelona, 1937, in Camillo Berneri, *Epistolario inedito*, edited by Aurelio Chessa, Pier Carlo Masini, Paola Feri, Luigi Di Lembo, 2 vol., Pistoia, Archivio Famiglia Berneri, 1980-1984, vol. 1, p. 18.

<sup>12</sup> Lorenzo Pezzica, *Maria Luisa Berneri*, in Id., *Anarchiche. Donne ribelli nel Novecento*, Milano, Shake edizioni, 2013, pp. 173-181.

<sup>13</sup> Giovanna Caleffi to Maria Caleffi, Parigi, 10 giugno 1937, in Giovanna Caleffi Berneri, *Un seme sotto la neve. Carteggi e scritti. Dall'antifascismo in esilio alla sinistra eretica del dopoguerra (1937-1962)*, edited by Carlo De Maria, Reggio Emilia, Biblioteca Panizzi - Archivio Famiglia Berneri/Aurelio Chessa, 2010, pp. 6-7.

memory of her father, which was attended by about six thousand people.

### ***Organizer for the anarchist movement in London***

But in October 1937 she left the French capital and stopped her literature studies at the Sorbonne to go, after "hundreds of love letters",<sup>14</sup> to be with Vero in London and to work on Freedom Press ventures, following through a decision taken in the previous April.

After Camillo's death, Maria Luisa and Vero had thought of postponing the wedding date, as Giovanna explained in a letter to her sister Maria:

Maria Luisa and Vero offered to postpone their union, but, you know, I don't want others to give up for me. It will only be delayed for a few months (that is, for September or October). We don't set store by formality and how we did not go into mourning (to respect her ideas) so I do not see why the union of Vero and Marisa should be postponed. All the more so, because, even regardless of the painful circumstances in which we find ourselves, we would not have done anything special. Neither an invitation nor a lunch. She will marry in London and will accept this formality in order to have British citizenship.<sup>15</sup>

In October 1937 the couple married, and Maria Luisa obtained British citizenship. From London she actively devoted herself to the republican cause, both in raising funds for Spanish orphans—her group in the spring of 1937 raised the considerable sum of a thou-

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<sup>14</sup> Claudia Baldoli, *Introduzione*, in Maria Luisa Berneri, Vera Brittain, *Il seme del caos. Scritti sui bombardamenti di massa (1939-1945)*, Santa Maria Capua Vetere, Spartaco, 2004, p. 9.

<sup>15</sup> Giovanna Caleffi to Maria Caleffi, Parigi, 1 June 1937, in Giovanna Caleffi Berneri, *cit.*, p. 7.

paper, leaflets, etc. [and that] in a short time the publications of F [reedom] P [ress] took their place in 300 bookstores.<sup>26</sup>

In December 1944, the British political police searched the headquarters of Freedom Press and the private homes of some of its adherents, including that of Richards and Maria Luisa. At 7.30 a.m. on 22 February 1945, the British authorities arrested her, along with her husband and John Hewetson, who were both writers for "War Commentary", on charges of "direct incitement to members of the armed forces not to do their duty". Another writer, Philip Sansom, who was already in prison, was a co-defendant. Following these arrests, a Freedom Defense Committee was formed, chaired by the anarchist-oriented poet and intellectual Herbert Read, with the participation of writers such as George Orwell, T.S. Eliot, Dylan Thomas, musicians such as Benjamin Britten, Michael Trippler and Clifford Curzon, of parliamentarians such as Aneurin Bevan, of artists such as Henry Moore and Augustus John, of the pacifist Vera Brittain and of other prominent personalities such as the philosopher Bertrand Russell. The Committee launched a fundraising press campaign that was remarkably successful, managing to put together for the defence of the arrested 1500 to 2000 pounds in just a few months.<sup>27</sup> Unlike her companions, who were sentenced to nine months in prison, Maria Luisa was released; under British law, a wife could not be accused or convicted of conspiracy together with her husband.<sup>28</sup> "She was furious!", Philip Sansom recalled.

Once free, she immediately resumed the publication of "War Commentary" with George Woodcock, who left this account of the

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<sup>26</sup> G. Berneri, *Anarchici all'opera*, *cit.*, pp. 369-378.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 375; Pietro Di Paola, Maria Luisa Berneri e il gruppo di Freedom Press, in C. De Maria (ed.), *Maria Luisa Berneri e l'anarchismo inglese*, *cit.*, pp. 133-157, 145-146.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Clarissa Honeywell, *Anarchism and the British Warfare State. The Prosecution of the "War Commentary" Anarchists, 1945*, in C. De Maria (ed.), *Maria Luisa Berneri e l'anarchismo inglese*, *cit.*, pp. 107-131.

for a few months, experiencing great physical and psychological suffering.<sup>24</sup>

In her view, totalitarian regimes were the most invasive manifestation of the continual attempt of governments to bend the individual to their will through ideology; the entire extent of domination consisted in the abolition of individual autonomy and freedom.

This does not mean that her aversion to Western democracies was not clear. Maria Luisa denied the validity of an interpretation of the world war as a decisive struggle between opposing political systems, with freedom, democracy, international collaboration on the one hand and the barbarism of fascism and Nazism on the other. For her, American war democracy, like that of Britain, was a mask behind which was hidden a blatantly imperialist policy. The world war, she wrote, had strengthened the principle of leadership and the tendency of the exploited to obey authority, and in this she was influenced by the fact that the Allies fought Nazi-fascism with its own tools, primarily indiscriminate terror through carpet bombing.<sup>25</sup>

The work of the Freedom group, Giovanna Caleffi recalled after World War II, took place in the certainly not easy conditions of war-time London. In 1941, a bombing raid destroyed the bookshop: and the stock of books saved was put safely in a bookshop set up in Bristol, while the reprint was being prepared in London. In 1942 the necessary funds were gathered for the purchase of the printing house (Freedom Press is the company that manages it officially): and it is on that basis that in 5 years more than 25,000 copies of books and brochures were printed, as well as the news-

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., pp. XXXIX-XL.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Maria Luisa Berneri, *Neither East nor West. Selected Writings*, London, Freedom Press, 1952, pp. 53-56, 86-91; M.L. Berneri, V. Brittain, *Il seme del caos*, cit.; Claudia Baldoli, *Maria Luisa Berneri e i bombardamenti di massa nella Seconda guerra mondiale*, in C. De Maria (ed.), *Maria Luisa Berneri e l'anarchismo inglese*, cit., pp. 93-106.

sand pounds for war orphans housed in a colony near Girona.<sup>16</sup>—and by writing for the periodical "Spain and the World", of which 47 issues were released between December 1936 and December 1938, as well as a special issue dedicated to the events of May 1937 in Barcelona.<sup>17</sup>

The consequences of the clashes between communists loyal to the USSR on the one hand and anarchists and Trotskyists on the other were grafted onto a clear vision of the counter-revolutionary role of Russian Sovietism, which in her eyes had for the last fifteen years taken on the characteristics of totalitarianism. Certainly she had made her own the vision of her father, who, at first fascinated by October 1917, had been one of those libertarians who had believed most in the possibilities of the revolution, only to become—after the repression of the Kronstadt insurrection in March 1921—an unyielding critic of Bolshevism. The critique of Bolshevism became a staple of Maria Luisa's ideas, thanks also to relations with various libertarians in exile. In Paris she met the Russian Volin (or Vsevolod Michajlovic Eichenbaum), twice imprisoned by the Bolsheviks and given shelter first in Berlin and then in the French capital, from where he continued to denounce the "red fascism" of the Bolsheviks; in a small apartment, he regularly gave lectures on anarchism, which Maria Luisa also attended.<sup>18</sup>

Besides Volin, in Paris she made the acquaintance of Senya Fleschin and Mollie Steimer, two Russian anarchists who had settled in the French capital in 1924, contributing to various assistance activities for anarchists exiled not only from Russia,

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<sup>16</sup> Enrico Acciai, *L'esperienza della rivista "Spain and the World". La guerra civile spagnola, l'antifascismo europeo e l'anarchismo*, in C. De Maria (ed.), *Maria Luisa Berneri e l'anarchismo inglese*, cit., p. 77.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., pp. 69-91.

<sup>18</sup> Paul Avrich, *Anarchist Portraits*, Princeton (NJ), Princeton University Press, 1988, p. 132. Volin's work, written in 1934, was published in Italy after World War II: cf. Volin, *Il fascismo rosso*, Reggio Calabria, Edizioni anarchiche, 1953.

but also from Italy, Spain, Portugal and Bulgaria or in difficulty over documents. She became very close to Mollie. She had been born in Southeast Russia to a modest family of Jewish origin; she emigrated with her family to the United States in 1913, only to be arrested and forcibly returned to Russia in 1921 following the Red Scare. In revolutionary Russia she was the target of Bolshevik repression, and so took shelter first in Berlin and then in Paris.<sup>19</sup>

In London, however, she became acquainted in particular with Emma Goldman, who further refined her criticisms of Bolshevism—already made public in the first half of the 1920s in the periodical press and in her book *My Disillusionment in Russia*—in the autobiography which had appeared in New York in the early 1930s.<sup>20</sup> In 1938 Maria Luisa and Emma were living in the same house in Soho, at 21 Greek Street, and it was Goldman who in that year wrote the introduction to the first anthology of Camillo's writings, edited by Luisa's mother and published in Paris.<sup>21</sup>

Maria Luisa busied herself with analysing the character of Soviet totalitarianism in various articles, some of which were collected in a special study on the condition of workers in the Soviet Union, or *Workers in Stalin's Russia*.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> On the figure of Mollie Steimer, the pseudonym of Marthe Alperine, cf. Lorenzo Pezzica, *Le magnifiche ribelli 1917-1921*, Milan, Elèuthera, 2017, pp. 131-153; Paul Avrich, *Mollie Steimer: an Anarchist Life*, in Id., *Anarchist Portraits*, cit., pp. 214-226.

<sup>20</sup> Emma Goldman, *My Disillusionment in Russia*, New York, Doubleday-Page & Company, 1923; Ead., *Living My Life*, New York, Knopf, 1931.

<sup>21</sup> Camillo Berneri, *Pensieri e battaglie*, Paris, Comitato Camillo Berneri, 1938.

<sup>22</sup> Maria Luisa Berneri, *Workers in Stalin's Russia*, London, Freedom, 1944. The book sold about ten thousand copies after World War II: cf. Marie Louise Berneri 1918-1949. A tribute, London, Marie Louise Berneri Memorial Committee, 1949, p. 29.

## *The war years*

During the Second World War she was the editor of "War Commentary", a periodical which was heir to "Spain and the World" and its fleeting successor "Revolt!", appearing first monthly then fortnightly, which printed about six thousand copies per issue; she contributed to the founding of Freedom Press publications and in August 1945 she became editor of "Freedom". She was also the driving force in the Union of Anarchist Groups, a liaison organization between the various British anarchist groups, with no statutes, membership cards or officials. Together with Vero she was the protagonist in the rebirth of British anarchism, becoming the emotional and intellectual catalyst of the "Freedom" group, which brought together a dozen militants. In her mother's words, "she was the driving force in the group, the creature everyone loved, the yeast that brought to life and sustained the best possible cooperation, while being the first to make a really significant contribution to the common work."<sup>23</sup>

"Freedom" was very active in an anti-militarist campaign with publicity both oral, through rallies, and written, with the newspaper "War Commentary", manifestoes, pamphlets and books.

From London she witnessed the strengthening of the Nazi regime, following the shifting fortunes, or in some cases the tragic end, of German-speaking libertarian militants dear to her (including Rudolf Rocker, Milly Witkop, Augustin Souchy, Erich Mühsam and Max Nettlau).

In March 1940 she first went to Paris and then to Rennes to visit her mother and sister. When the German army occupied France a few months later, she received news of the arrest of her mother, who was then deported to Germany, where she remained a prisoner

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<sup>23</sup> Giovanna Berneri, *Anarchici all'opera. Il movimento britannico, "Volontà"*, V, 11, 31 August 1951, pp. 584-591, now in G. Caleffi Berneri, *Un seme sotto la neve*, cit., p. 376.