


RESEARCH ARTICLE

Right-wing extremism and lone-actor violence in Italy: the case of the 2018 Macerata shooting

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Abstract

On 3 February 2018, in the town of Macerata, an Italian citizen with far-right sympathies deliberately fired several shots from his car at nine African immigrants, injuring six. The article argues that this shooting can be considered an act of lone-actor terrorism, an anomaly in the Italian context. Based on the social science literature on this subject, the paper analyses the profile of the shooter and the dynamics of the attack. Moreover, adopting a relational perspective to radicalisation, it examines the attacker's interactions: on the one hand, he was in contact with different political organisations that could represent 'echo chambers' for the tacit validation or even the justification and amplification of radical beliefs, including on the relation between immigration and security; on the other hand, he was not subject to their discipline and social control. This peripheral social position helps explain this case of lone-actor terrorism, in a national context where far-right mobilisation and violence have historically assumed collective forms.

Keywords: 2018 Macerata shooting; lone-actor terrorism; political violence; radicalisation; Italian far right

Introduction

On the morning of Saturday 3 February 2018, in the middle of the campaign for the Italian general elections, an Italian citizen with far-right sympathies, Luca Traini, deliberately fired tens of shots from his car at nine black people and against some buildings (three discos, three bars, two shops, and the local office of a political party) in different places in the town of Macerata, in the Marche region (central Italy). At the end of the shooting, six migrants of sub-Saharan origin aged between 20 and 32 were injured; fortunately, no one lost their lives.

The 2018 Macerata shooting soon raised the question whether it could be considered as an act of 'terrorism'. As Schmid (1992) noted, the controversial and elusive term 'terrorism' can be used in different 'arenas of discourse', in different ways. In the 'arena of the public debate on terrorism', to use Schmid's expression (Schmid 1992), the labelling of the 2018 Macerata shooting as a genuine act of 'terrorism' has not prevailed in Italy, as documented by some empirical analyses (Maneri and Quassoli 2020; Colombo and Quassoli 2022). By contrast, in the 'academic arena' (Schmid 1992), this racist drive-by shooting in Macerata can be interpreted as an interesting case of lone-actor terrorism.

In general, in scientific research, the concept of 'terrorism' is notoriously evasive and contested (e.g. Schmid 2011; Shanahan 2016). For the purposes of this article, an act of

terrorism can be interpreted as a deliberate act of violence against persons, committed by one or more individuals motivated by ideological motives, with the intention to coerce, intimidate, or convey some other message to an audience larger than that represented by the violence to the immediate victims (Vidino, Marone and Entenmann 2017, 38). The 2018 Macerata shooting falls within this definition: Luca Traini deliberately targeted people on the basis of extremist political motivations and, as also demonstrated by a short speech he improvised during his arrest (see below), the shooter intended to send a sort of message to the Italian people.

Similarly, there is no consensus among scholars on the concept of the 'lone actor'. As Kenyon, Baker-Beall and Binder (2021, 6) recently noted, 'there is currently no commonly accepted definition for lone-actor terrorism, with a wide variety of labels and terminology adding to the confusion on this issue. This reflects definitional issues within the literature on terrorism and radicalisation more generally.' Building on useful indications in the literature (Lindekinde, Malthaner and O'Connor 2019, 23), three criteria can be applied to define a lone actor: the individual operates as a single perpetrator in the preparation and execution of an attack; he/she is not formally affiliated with a *terrorist* organisation/group; and he/she does not act on direct orders from or under direct influence of a leader or a group. Based on these criteria, Luca Traini can be defined as a lone-actor terrorist.

The 2018 Macerata shooting was obviously not unprecedented in the West. In fact, in recent years, attacks by lone-actor terrorists have become a major concern in several Western countries. Furthermore, recent studies have shown that extremist right-wing individuals are overrepresented in lone-actor violence in the region (e.g. Bouhana et al. 2018). In the context of this extremist ideological sector, several lone actors are motivated by the doctrine of 'Leaderless Resistance' or similar strategies that promote the direct action of individuals or small cells united by common political goals but without any hierarchical command or coordination. The 'Leaderless Resistance' strategy was popularised in US white nationalist circles in the 1980s and 1990s (Kaplan 1997) and has been later adopted by several right-wing extremists in Europe as well. On the eastern side of the Atlantic, the massacre carried out by Anders Behring Breivik in Norway in 2011 (77 victims) represented a crucial turning point in this process of diffusion (Pantucci 2011b; Macklin and Bjørgø 2021; see also Castelli Gattinara, O'Connor and Lindekilde 2018). Moreover, the increasing relevance of this phenomenon in the West has facilitated a remarkable growth of the scientific literature on this subject in recent years.

Against this background, it is interesting to note that, unlike in other European countries, in Italy the 'Leaderless Resistance' strategy has remained marginal: this national case has been characterised by high levels of far-right mobilisation and violence but has thus far experienced a low incidence of lone-actor attacks. As has been argued (Castelli Gattinara, O'Connor and Lindekilde 2018), country-specific cultural and political opportunities, such as of the legacy of the neofascist movement (Ferraresi 1996; Cento Bull 2007; Panvini 2009; Mammone 2015; Panvini 2021) and its emphasis on collective discipline, can explain why lone-actor tactics have found little resonance in Italy. The lone-actor attack in Macerata is therefore an anomaly that requires an appropriate explanation.

The main aim of this article is precisely to interpret this anomaly. First of all, the paper shows that the profile of the perpetrator and the dynamics of the attack fit well with extant explanations for lone-actor terrorism in scholarly research. Based on this premise, the article places the 2018 Macerata shooting in the context of Italy's extreme right-wing scene, in which lone-actor attacks represent an exception. Adopting a relational perspective to radicalisation (Bosi, Demetriou and Malthaner 2014; Della Porta 2018) and building on recent studies on the Italian case (Castelli Gattinara, O'Connor and Lindekilde 2018), the paper argues that Traini's peripheral position with respect to different (non-terrorist) political organisations helps explain his solo operation: on the one hand, the shooter was

in contact with political groups that could represent ‘echo chambers’ for the amplification or at least the acceptance of radical beliefs, including on the relation between immigration and security; on the other hand, he was not subject to their social control and discipline. Ultimately, Traini’s marginal position vis-à-vis these political organisations, along with his individual traits and with trigger events, make it possible to explain the execution of this act of lone-actor terrorism, even in a national context where far-right violence typically has taken other, collective forms (see Castelli Gattinara, O’Connor and Lindekilde 2018).

The article draws on the social science literature on radicalisation and terrorism, with special attention to relational perspectives. The analysis of the 2018 Macerata shooting is based on secondary sources (scientific publications, books,¹ and newspaper articles) and on available primary sources (court rulings, public letters from the perpetrator in prison).

The paper is organised into four sections. The first section examines the individual profile of the perpetrator, based on existing scholarship on lone-actor terrorism. Such literature is also used to analyse in detail the dynamics of the attack, in the second section. The discussion confirms that this drive-by shooting fits well with extant explanations for lone-actor terrorism. The third section aims to explain the anomaly of the 2018 Macerata shooting in the Italian context, by looking at Traini’s position with respect to radical political groups, adopting a relational perspective to radicalisation. The conclusion recapitulates the main findings of the paper.

The profile of the attacker

This section examines the individual profile of the perpetrator, Luca Traini, drawing upon the existing literature on lone-actor terrorism. In general, this area of research has shown that there is no single individual profile of lone actors, but at the same time it has highlighted some recurring traits (e.g. Gill, Horgan and Deckert 2014). In the West, typically lone actors are white males in their twenties or thirties with ‘dysfunctional’ adult lives, family problems, low levels of education, and a history of mental illness or at least psychological problems (Kenyon, Baker-Beall and Binder 2021, 10). The profile of the Macerata shooter presents most of these features.

Luca Traini was born in 1989 in Macerata and at the time of the attack he lived in the nearby town of Tolentino. His gender and age reflect the tendency for lone actors to be almost always male and typically in their twenties or thirties (Gill, Horgan and Deckert 2014; de Roy van Zuijdewijn and Bakker 2016; Hamm and Spaaij 2017; Kenyon, Baker-Beall and Binder 2021).

Traini was unmarried and had no children, but he had had heterosexual sentimental relationships. The man had a rather problematic past, like other far-right lone actors (Bouhana et al. 2018). Relations with the family of origin were complicated: his parents had soon separated in a conflictual way and had also clashed on custody of the children. Traini no longer had contact with his father and had a complex relationship with his older brother, while his mother had serious health problems, neglected care, and constantly needed help. Traini lived with his elderly grandmother.

In high school, Traini had problems with studying and was bullied (Adnkronos 2021), like other far-right lone actors (Bouhana et al. 2018). At the age of 18, he considered starting a career in the military, driven by an interest in order and discipline, but then abandoned this idea. Later, he did several temporary jobs, including employment as a bouncer. The Macerata shooter was a relatively lonely person, with few close social relationships, like most far-right lone actors (Bouhana et al. 2018, 154), and he felt socially marginalised; tellingly, he had the word ‘outcast’ (in English) tattooed on his knuckles. In addition, available information suggests that he was prone to outbursts of anger (Mauro 2018).

The literature on lone-actor terrorism has devoted increasing attention to ‘risk factors’, understood as individual characteristics that can predict an enhanced probability of outcomes like the onset of radicalisation towards violent behaviour (Desmarais et al. 2017; Corner, Bouhana and Gill 2021). According to available information, Traini had important risk factors. In particular, it can be argued that his case shows at least two important risk factors that are common among lone actors – problems controlling anger, and social withdrawal (Corner, Bouhana and Gill 2021; see also Bouhana et al. 2018).

A subject of particular importance in the scientific literature is the psychological profile of lone actors. At least in the past, during his adolescence, Traini manifested psychological distress, particularly in the form of self-harm behaviours. In fact he cut some symbols on his body with a sharp object: at the age of 14, during a school lesson, he cut a ‘1’ (one) on his left hand, presumably to express his sense of loneliness; at the age of 18, during the lunch break of his work in a factory, he cut a Spartan symbol, inspired by the famous action movie *300*, on his left shoulder; in the same period, alone at home, he deliberately pressed a red-hot metal pendant that belonged to a female friend onto his right arm (Mauro 2018, 43–46).

Furthermore, at the time of the shooting, according to available information, Traini had psychological problems, presumably personality disorders (however, we do not have verified, accurate information about specialist diagnoses on his mental health at that time). At the beginning of the trial in 2018, shortly after the shooting, Traini’s lawyer claimed that the man suffered from bipolar disorder, on the basis of an expert report commissioned by the defence. Later, Traini was treated in prison by some specialists who only detected the presence of personality disorders and emotional instability. In addition, a special psychiatric report ordered by the court identified ‘disharmonious personality traits’ but at the same time it concluded that Traini was competent to stand trial (see also Corte di Cassazione 2021).

In general, a number of empirical studies have found significantly higher prevalence rates of mental disorders among lone actors than among the general population (see Spaaij 2010; Corner, Gill and Mason 2016; De Roy van Zuijdewijn and Bakker 2016) and even compared to group-based terrorists (Spaaij 2010; Pantucci 2011a; Corner, Gill and Mason 2016). The information available on Luca Traini confirms the common assumption, based on the literature, that lone actors suffer from a certain degree of psychological problem or exhibit symptoms of personality disorders (Kenyon, Baker-Beall and Binder 2021, 8).

However, as some scholars have emphasised (e.g. Castelli Gattinara, O’Connor and Lindekilde 2018, 138), a higher rate of clinical and sub-clinical mental illness for lone-actor terrorists should not be regarded as a direct causal factor by itself. Instead, mental disorders may result in different interactional challenges for lone actors with their immediate social environment. A few details suggest that this consideration could also apply to the case of Luca Traini: according to available information, some of his behaviours caused a break in relations with friends and acquaintances (Mauro 2018). Moreover, several studies have shown that, despite a higher prevalence of mental disorder among lone-actor terrorists, those diagnosed with mental illness frequently display rational motives and are capable of engaging in rational and purposive attack planning and execution (Gill, Horgan and Deckert 2014; Kenyon, Baker-Beall and Binder 2021, 9). Moreover, mental health problems are not incompatible with – nor do they diminish – the *political* motivations of violence.

On the other hand, the literature on lone-actor terrorism has suggested that there are ‘protective factors’ that can strengthen individual resilience against violent extremism. Protective factors are more than just the absence of risk factors; they reflect a commitment to non-violent norms and practices and are part of the reason why the vast majority

of people who are experiencing certain stressors or risk factors never consider violent extremist trajectories. According to available information, Luca Traini lacked some relevant potential protective factors that have been identified by scholars. In particular, building on Lösel et al. (2020), the Traini case apparently shows the absence of 'individual' protective factors such as stable employment, 'family' factors such as an appreciative style and positive family ties, 'peer group' factors such as the availability of numerous social contacts, and arguably also 'community and society' factors such as a strong basic attachment to society.

Importantly, around the age of 15, Traini discovered an interest in right-wing extremism. He then participated in events and demonstrations of neofascist organisations such as Forza Nuova (FN) and CasaPound Italia (CPI). Traini even has a vertical *Wolfsangel* tattooed above his right temple. This ancient rune was used as a symbol by Nazism and was later adopted by various neo-Nazi organisations; moreover, in Italy it inspired the symbol of Terza Posizione ('Third Position'), a historic neofascist subversive organisation. *Lupo* ('wolf' in Italian) is also Traini's nickname. The shooter also has a Celtic cross tattooed on his right forearm. In addition, his car was full of fascist memorabilia and writings.

Traini's general interest in politics did not disappear over the years. Later in life, he approached the local chapter of the Lega Nord (Northern League) and in 2017 he unsuccessfully ran for the municipal elections in Corridonia, a town near Macerata, with this right-wing political party. As mentioned earlier, this political dimension and its evolution deserve attention and cannot be minimised but at the same ideology is not sufficient to explain Traini's act of violence.

Finally, at the time of the shooting, unlike several lone-actor terrorists (Gill, Horgan and Deckert 2014; Bouhana et al. 2018), Traini had no criminal record (Corte di Cassazione 2021) and was not known to the authorities. In addition, he had no problems with substance abuse.

Overall, Luca Traini's individual profile is close to that of several Western lone actors examined in the literature.

The dynamics of the attack

This section examines the drive-by shooting in Macerata, based on the literature on lone-actor terrorism. The existing literature on lone-actor terrorism shows that such attacks present recurrent features: they are not usually motivated and justified by sophisticated ideological reasons; may be instigated by a specific triggering event; imply a long process of attack planning and are increasingly encouraged by the use of the internet; are often associated with informational 'leakages'; tend to occur a short distance from the attacker's home location; often involve the use of firearms; typically hit 'soft' targets such as private citizens (especially in the case of far-right attacks); and are usually of a smaller scale compared to attacks organised by groups (Kenyon, Baker-Beall and Binder 2021).

On 3 February 2018, Luca Traini left his home in Tolentino shortly after 9a.m. to go by car to train at a bodybuilding gym in the nearby town of Corridonia. As a boy, Traini had weighed more than 110kg, but with constant practice he had sculpted a muscular body (Adnkronos 2021). Interestingly, he had previously attended another gym, but the owner reportedly had asked him to leave because of the protests from other gym users about his repeated neofascist references.

On the drive to the gym, Traini heard on the radio new details related to the murder of Pamela Mastropietro, at the time a well-known criminal case in Italy. A few days earlier, on 29 January 2018, this 18-year-old Roman woman, who lived in a drug rehabilitation centre in Corridonia, had been raped, killed and torn to pieces, near Macerata. At the time, the main suspect was a 29-year-old Nigerian drug dealer, Innocent Oseghale (one

year later, in May 2019, Oseghale was found guilty and sentenced to life imprisonment; this sentence was definitively confirmed in February 2022). This atrocious crime had great resonance throughout the country and was even mentioned in the hard-fought campaign during the Italian general election, which was held a few weeks later, on 4 March 2018. The tragic story of Pamela Mastropietro, in his own home area, upset Traini, even though he did not know the victim personally. Pamela reportedly reminded him of his first girlfriend; despite his efforts, he had not been able to help that woman with her drug addiction. Furthermore, his last girlfriend was a drug addict too (Mauro 2018, 16).

That morning, new macabre details on the radio about how Pamela Mastropietro's body was allegedly dismembered shocked Traini, who suddenly decided to return home to collect his gun. He got back in the car, with music at full volume, bringing his loaded 9X21 Glock 17 semi-automatic pistol, two magazines full of bullets, another box with fifty cartridges and a camouflage vest, determined to avenge Pamela's murder (Corte di Cassazione 2021). According to the available information, Traini had a gun licence, but he usually kept his pistol in the safe. He bought the firearm legally in 2014 (Tonacci 2018c; Mauro 2018, 12), when he reportedly thought of moving to a country house with his then girlfriend; according to him, the pistol was necessary for self-defence. He also trained with the gun at a shooting range near his home, acquiring rudimentary skills in its use (Mauro 2018, 12–13; Tonacci 2018c). In this respect, it is worth noting that, according to available analyses, firearms are the weapon of choice for lone-actor terrorists (Schuurman et al. 2018), not only in the United States (where access to firearms notoriously tends to be easy) (Becker 2014) but also in Europe (Ellis et al. 2016).

The news on the case of Pamela Mastropietro represented a crucial trigger for Traini. In general, the existing literature has shown how triggering events, including personal crises, can be crucial for the action of lone actors, especially if they are right-wing extremists (Bouhana et al. 2018). These events result in the lone actor viewing an act of violence as meaningful, justified, necessary, and inevitable (Kenyon, Baker-Beall and Binder 2021, 18). They also generate a combination of personal reasons and political motivation and therefore a sort of 'moral' obligation to act (Moskalenko and McCauley 2011). In particular, a personal crisis like Traini's dramatic change can be interpreted as a 'moral shock' that occurs when an event raises such outrage in people that they 'become inclined toward political action, even in the absence of a network of contacts' (Jasper and Poulsen 1995, 498, quoted in Lindekinde, Malthaner and O'Connor 2019, 31). These events can transform fear or apathy into anger, which serves as an emotional bridge between grievance and action (Lindekinde, Malthaner and O'Connor 2019).

On his way, Traini stopped at a café to have a coffee and buy cigarettes and at a gas station to refuel. Interestingly, on both occasions he quickly told strangers that he was going to kill Pamela Mastropietro's murderer, but he was not taken seriously (Corte di Cassazione 2021). This behaviour might seem surprising, but it is by no means uncommon among lone actors (Rose and Morrison 2021). In fact, the literature shows that several lone actors disregard operational security measures, or execute them poorly (Schuurman et al. 2018), due to a desire to share their convictions and sometimes even to reveal their violent plans. In particular, informational 'leakages' are common. Furthermore, some empirical analyses (Gill and Corner 2016) found that lone actor terrorists who target members of the general public, like Traini, are more likely to leak information in the build-up to the plot compared to high-value target attackers.

There is, however, an important aspect that clearly differentiates Traini from several lone-actor terrorists. Traditionally, the literature has shown that most lone actors were engaged in lengthy planning prior to conducting their attack (Gill, Horgan and Deckert 2014; Schuurman et al. 2018). Depending on circumstances, planning consisted of weapons stockpiling or building, target selection, target surveillance, etc. (Kenyon, Baker-Beall and

Binder 2021, 15). On the contrary, Traini did not devote much time and attention to the preparation of his attack. According to all available information, he decided not only to take action suddenly (Meloy and Pollard 2017), but also without a previous strong interest in the identification of the target, surveillance of the site of the attack, preparation of the act of violence and of the escape plan.

At first, Traini considered going to the Court of Macerata, where an interrogation of Innocent Oseghale was reportedly scheduled for that morning, but he quickly changed his mind because he thought it would be difficult to actually get close to the Nigerian suspect. Traini then opted to hit 'soft' civilian targets. This type of victim selection is typical of lone actors, who usually prefer to avoid 'hard' government or military targets (Becker 2014; Gill, Horgan and Deckert 2014), especially when lone actors adhere to far-right ideologies (Bouhana et al. 2018). Presumably, this preference is mainly due to their relative operational weakness compared to terrorist organisations (Kenyon, Baker-Beall and Binder 2021, 15).

Thus, the actual target of Traini's fury was no longer Oseghale, due to his (at the time, alleged) behaviour against Pamela Mastropietro, but someone *like* Oseghale (see also Corte di Cassazione 2021). Traini began randomly looking for young male black immigrants on the street – *negri* ('niggers') in his words (Mauro 2019). He drove to some nightclubs and drug dealing spots in the area, but that Saturday morning they were deserted. So he decided to drive towards the centre of Macerata. Traini began to shoot directly from the car in various areas of the town, aiming at young black men, whom he did not know personally. He eventually shot nine people and wounded six: Omar Fadera, 23 years old, from Gambia; Wilson Kofi, 20, from Ghana; Jennifer Otioio (the only woman), 25; Gideon Azeke, 25, and Festus Omagbon, 32, both from Nigeria; and Mahamadou Toure, 28, from Mali. Fortunately, no one lost their lives.

Traini also deliberately fired two shots at the local headquarters of the centre-left Partito Democratico (Democratic Party), at the time the largest ruling party in Italy; no one was hurt. The attacker then stopped at the place where the dismembered body of Pamela Mastropietro had been found, near Macerata; he laid a candle with an image of Mussolini and an empty box of bullets on the ground and prayed for a few seconds. Traini got back in the car and, after firing other shots at a bar, he headed for a family country house near Tolentino; knowing that he was now being chased by the police, at first he considered taking refuge in that house and waiting for his death at the hands of the police (Mauro 2018, 77–78; 2019). In a similar vein, some scholars have noted a propensity for lone actors to intend to be killed or, in particular, to commit 'suicide by cop' (Hamm and Spaaij 2017; Turner, Chermak and Freilich 2021, 8).

However, Traini changed his mind again: he decided that he could turn himself in, without repenting. He drove home, personally informed his mother and grandmother of what he had done, and greeted them. He also took an Italian flag from his room, tied it on the rear window of the car and headed back to Macerata. He deliberately passed in front of the house where he was born. Along the way, he happened to see a black young girl and shot into the air, without aiming at this passer-by, presumably to scare her (Mauro 2018, 80). Eventually, around 12:30, Traini arrived in front of the Monumento ai Caduti (Monument to the Fallen) in Macerata, in a sort of final scene of his performance. Here he got out of the car, leaving the gun in the cockpit, took off his jacket and shirt, tied the Italian flag around his neck (Leone 2021) and climbed the steps of the war memorial, erected in 1933 during Fascism. Shortly after, the police arrived; Traini did not offer resistance, raised his arm to make the Fascist *saluto romano* (Roman salute) and shouted 'Viva l'Italia' ('Long live Italy'). Once handcuffed, he reportedly tried to make a little final proclamation; he said that he did not want to unleash more hatred against people he judged as parasites in a now sick system, but that he hoped that his act could stir

consciences and bolster the pride of a people who created a nation and who see it every day ruined and consigned to oblivion (Mauro 2018, 105–106).

During Traini's expedition, the mayor of Macerata issued an alert about the shooting, advised citizens to stay at home, stopped public transport, and asked schools to keep children inside. In the end, as mentioned earlier, Traini's drive-by shooting resulted in six injuries and fortunately no deaths. This outcome is in line with the social science scholarship on lone actor terrorism: this body of literature has found that in the West lone actors are unlikely to carry out attacks leading to mass civilian casualties and that they typically engage in smaller scale attacks compared to group actors (Phillips 2017).

With reference to target location, Traini's act took place in several adjacent places, located a short distance from his usual residence. This aspect is consistent with the findings from the scientific literature on the subject. In fact, available empirical analyses have documented that distance from home locations is a constraining factor that governs target selection for lone-actor terrorists, in much the same way as for traditional criminals (Marchment, Bouhana and Gill 2020; see also Hasisi et al. 2019). In particular, target location is generally at the intersection of the lone actors' daily routines, except when their 'familiar territory' contains no ideologically appropriate targets (Becker 2014, 963 ff). In the case of the 2018 Macerata shooting, Traini knew well the places of his expedition; it is worth mentioning that, according to the available information, after visiting the place where Pamela Mastropietro's body was found and before returning home for the second time, the attacker found himself, for no reason, taking the road he travelled to visit his ex-girlfriend, almost as if he was on auto-pilot (Mauro 2018, 77). In general, as Kenyon, Baker-Beall and Binder (2021, 17) recently emphasised, lone attackers compensate for their lack of resources by choosing easily accessible locations frequented by members of the public for their attack; the sites selected are usually familiar, located in close proximity to where attackers live or conduct their daily lives.²

When it comes to victim selection, Traini's violence was directed primarily against those who some scholars (e.g. Juergensmeyer 2000, 176–177) call the 'primary enemy' – in this case, black immigrants, who constituted hostile out-of-group members according to Traini. However, the deliberate shooting at the local headquarters of the Partito Democratico is associated with the 'secondary enemy' – the alleged traitor within the in-group. At first, Traini had in mind a selective use of violence, to specifically punish Innocent Oseghale, with purposes that are reminiscent of vigilante violence (i.e. unauthorised violence professedly used to control crime) (Bjørge and Mareš 2019), but in the end, for logistical reasons, he opted for a non-selective violence that appears genuinely terrorist. Black victims were actually chosen, but not due to their specific behaviours (which would have been unknown to the attacker). Instead, they were selected based on exterior characteristics they shared: in Traini's eyes, they had to be young immigrants, of the male gender (the shooting of the Nigerian woman was not intentional; see Tonacci 2018b), and of sub-Saharan origin, just like Oseghale. In this case, there is therefore a process of de-individualisation in victim selection, which is typical of terrorist violence (Marone 2013, 234–235). On the other hand, during the drive-by shooting on the streets of the Macerata area, Traini not only took care not to unintentionally hit Italians by birth, but also spared a family of Pakistanis (Mauro 2018, 105).

After Traini's arrest, police found various extremist right-wing objects and symbols in his house, including a copy of Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf* and a flag with a Celtic cross. Actually, as for most lone actors, Traini's act of violence combined personal motivations and political reasons. On the one hand, on a personal level, Traini's aversion to drugs, partly attributable to the experience of some of his girlfriends, converged with his hostility to African migrants. By taking to the extreme the emphasis on the connection between security and immigration that is typical of the far right (Mudde 2019), Traini

came to see all migrants as delinquents (Mauro 2019). On the other hand, these personal feelings were interpreted in political terms, with ultranationalist and explicitly neofascist references, especially in the final scene in front of the Monumento ai Caduti. According to the available information, as in many other cases of lone actors examined in the literature, Traini's extremist belief system was apparently not sophisticated and articulated. This relative weakness of the genuine ideological dimension leaves room for personal motivations, including a vengeful spirit (Spaaij 2010).

It is important to note that in Traini's radicalisation process, including its violent climax, the internet did not play a salient role. This is another relevant aspect that differentiates Traini from several lone-actor terrorists in our times. In fact, many recent works have highlighted an increasingly prominent role of the internet for lone actors, in relation to different functions and mechanisms (Mølmen and Ravndal 2021). Finally, unlike other recent far-right lone actors, Traini did not engage in the preparation and dissemination of manifestos or other extremist documents (Ware 2020).

The shooting in Macerata immediately became a notorious case in Italy and also entered the 2018 national electoral campaign. On the political level, the Lega totally distanced itself from Traini and his act of violence, CasaPound Italia condemned his action 'without hesitation', while Forza Nuova claimed that the attacker should not 'be left alone' and offered to pay his legal expenses.

At the trial, Traini was charged with (attempted) 'massacre' (*strage*) aggravated by 'racist hatred', and with other criminal offences. On 3 October 2018, the defendant was sentenced to 12 years in prison, with an abbreviated procedure (*rito abbreviato*). This sentence was confirmed by the Court of Assizes of Appeal of Ancona on 2 October 2019 and, definitively, by the Court of Cassation on 24 March 2021 (Corte di Cassazione 2021).

At the time of writing this article, Traini is still in prison. During the first months of his detention, he had nervous crises. Subsequently, he stated that he preferred prison to the outside world because it is better ordered and more stable. The prisoner followed, almost obsessively, the judicial case of Pamela Mastropietro, that eventually led to the conviction of Oseghel; he also reacted angrily to the acquittal of two Nigerian alleged accomplices to the murder. Traini also made statements in which he said he regretted what he did, apologised, and, in general, attempted to offer a positive image of himself (Mauro 2018; 2019; Adnkronos 2021). Unlike other lone-actor terrorists, such as Breivik in Norway, after the attack he never used his appearances at the trial or on other occasions – original interviews (Mauro 2019), detailed accounts via his lawyer (Mauro 2018), public letters (Adnkronos 2021), etc. – to openly celebrate extremist causes.

Nevertheless, after the 2018 shooting, Luca Traini became a role model for Italy's militant extreme right; for example, some Italian right-wing extremists hailed him as a sort of hero (Marone 2021; Savelli 2021). His sad fame has even crossed national borders. In particular, Brenton Harrison Tarrant, the far-right perpetrator of the notorious 2019 Christchurch, New Zealand attacks (51 deaths) emblazoned Traini's name on one of his ammunition clips (Macklin 2019); moreover, in the 74-page extremist manifesto he circulated online just before that shooting spree, Tarrant wrote that he 'support[ed] many of those that take a stand against ethnic and cultural genocide' and then explicitly mentioned Luca Traini, together with other Western far-right terrorists. Additionally, this claim was repeated, verbatim, in the 180-page extreme right-wing manifesto allegedly written and published on the web by Payton S. Gendron, the 18-year-old man who, at the time of writing, is charged with the racist mass shooting in Buffalo, United States, on 14 May 2022 (ten deaths). For his part, soon after Tarrant's terrible attacks in New Zealand in 2019, Traini publicly stated via his lawyer that he did not want to be 'brought up' and that he did not want to represent a model and a symbol for anyone.

The 2018 Macerata shooting in the Italian context: a relational perspective

As mentioned earlier, the 2018 Macerata shooting is a 'deviant' case in the Italian context. In fact, in this country, far-right mobilisation and violence have historically manifested themselves in the form of collective behaviour. The US-based doctrine of 'Leadership Resistance' or similar strategies have not had much traction in Italy, unlike in other Western countries. As has been noted (Castelli Gattinara, O'Connor and Lindekilde 2018), this is mainly due to political and cultural factors related to the nature and legacy of right-wing extremism in Italy: in particular, the Leaderless Resistance strategy of violence by self-directed individuals or small cells does not coincide with some tenets of the subcultural neofascist ideology that has dominated vast parts of Italian extremist right-wing milieux (Castelli Gattinara, O'Connor and Lindekilde 2018; see also Caiani, Della Porta and Wagemann 2012). Even the short season of so-called *Spontaneismo armato* ('Armed spontaneity') in the late 1970s and early 1980s, based on small autonomous groups (Ferraresi 1996, chapter 7), did not go so far as to promote genuine lone-actor terrorism (Castelli Gattinara, O'Connor and Lindkilde 2018, 139–140). In contrast, the Italian neofascist ideological orientation tends to incentivise collective understandings of political participation and regulated collective practices, even in the use of violence.

In fact, apart from the 2018 shooting in Macerata, in the twenty-first century, despite relatively intense extremist mobilisation, Italy has so far suffered only two other episodes that can be associated with far-right lone-actor terrorism: on 22 December 2000, a rudimentary bomb attack outside the office of the left-wing newspaper *Il Manifesto*, in downtown Rome, carried out by a far-right activist with a history of violent and subversive activities in violent neofascist organisations; and, on 13 December 2011, a lethal shooting spree targeting Senegalese street vendors in Florence (two dead and three injured), perpetrated by a far-right sympathiser who was active in the milieu of CasaPound Italia (Castelli Gattinara, O'Connor and Lindekilde 2018; Forgacs 2021, 303, 313–315).

Furthermore, the two neofascist-inspired shooting attacks in Florence in 2011 and in Macerata in 2018 can also be interpreted as particularly dramatic cases in a sequence of episodes of racist violence against migrants in Italy (OSCE 2022; Lunaria 2022), often perpetrated by far-right militants or sympathisers (Panvini 2021, 107–109; Forgacs 2021, chapter 12).

This article intends to outline the causes of the far-right solo shooting in Macerata, in a national context where the far right has been dominated by a neofascist ideology that favoured collective action. In doing so, it draws on promising analytical frameworks and hypotheses that have recently emerged in the scientific literature and that have already been used to examine precisely the 2011 Florence shooting spree (Castelli Gattinara, O'Connor and Lindekilde 2018; Castelli Gattinara and O'Connor 2018). In particular, this section argues that lone actor attacks such as the 2018 Macerata shooting depend on the degree and forms of social embeddedness of the perpetrator in the larger radical milieu, and on the nature of the radical movement itself. This social science interpretation is based on a relational perspective that understands radicalisation as a process of social interactions among individuals, groups, and institutional actors (in particular, Bosi, Demetriou and Malthaner 2014; Della Porta 2018), overcoming traditional approaches that focus on the individual traits of perpetrators of violence or on ideology per se. Along these lines, in recent years, the social science literature has shown that, in opposition to conventional wisdom, even most lone actors – and particularly far-right perpetrators (Ellis et al. 2016, 36–37) – are not politically and socially isolated, although by definition their acts of violence are planned and executed in total autonomy (Gill, Horgan and Deekert 2014; Schuurman et al. 2018; Schuurman et al. 2019; Hofman 2020). As Lindekilde, Malthaner and O'Connor (2019) recently summarised, 'so-called lone actors

are embedded in varying social and political environments, albeit often remaining on their margins, and their isolation is always relative rather than absolute’.

In a similar vein, Luca Traini can be considered as a marginal actor, but not isolated from radical political circles. On the one hand, Traini personally participated in events organised by neofascist fringe movements and parties such as Forza Nuova and CasaPound Italia. His first political rally, with Forza Nuova, dates back to 2007, in Ascoli Piceno, not far from Macerata (Mauro 2018, 50–51). Only a few weeks before the attack, the Macerata shooter reportedly took part in a demonstration organised by CasaPound in Rome to commemorate the fortieth anniversary of the so-called Acca Larentia massacre (a lethal ambush against neofascist teenagers that occurred in Rome on 7 January 1978) (Caccia 2018).

For Traini, Forza Nuova and CasaPound Italia were ‘echo chambers’ (Castelli Gattinara, O’Connor and Lindekilde 2018; Castelli Gattinara and O’Connor 2018), in which extremist themes and issues could be justified or amplified. As is well known, opposition to immigration is a crucial topic for the far right (Mudde 2019), especially after the so-called European migrant crisis in 2015, and Italy is not exempt from this phenomenon (e.g. Bialasiewicz and Stallone 2020; Dennison and Geddes 2021).

In particular, immigration was notoriously a key issue for Forza Nuova, at least until the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic (Frazzetta 2022; Marone 2022); for this neofascist political party, migration to Italy represents a serious threat because, in its view, migration jeopardises Italy’s presumed national and religious (i.e. Roman Catholic) identity and also poses serious security issues, nourishes the supposed *business dell’accoglienza* ([migrant] reception business’) to the benefit of people and organisations in Italy that would gain from migratory flows, and undermines the Italian labour market (Frazzetta 2022, chapters 2 and 3). Furthermore, Forza Nuova organised so-called *Passegiate della sicurezza* (‘Security walks’) as one of its main activities, claiming that it took responsibility for patrolling local areas that were considered dangerous due to immigration, thus serving a vigilante function that the supposedly decaying Italian state was unable or unwilling to fulfil (Castelli Gattinara 2019, 200).

With a few differences, around 2014 immigration became an important political issue for CasaPound Italia, too (Froio et al. 2020, 99): from the perspective of this extreme right-wing organisation, migratory flows have the effect of causing cheap labour and of harming workers’ conditions and rights, fuel the supposed *business dell’accoglienza*, and also jeopardise Italy’s national culture (Frazzetta 2022, chapters 2 and 3; see also Froio et al. 2020). CasaPound members were also involved in vigilante activities against irregular migrants.

These two legally existing extremist right-wing organisations can represent ‘echo chambers’ where neofascist sympathies and animosity towards migrants can be articulated, amplified, and justified. Furthermore, available research shows that among far-right lone actors there is ‘a strong emphasis on immigration issues’ (Ellis et al. 2016, 36).

In addition, Traini was a member, albeit peripheral, of the Lega in his area of residence, in a period when the party’s support was growing.³ It is worth repeating that the man was also a candidate for the Lega in the 2017 municipal elections in Corridonia (not his home town). He was reportedly included in the party’s electoral list at the last moment to make up the numbers (Tonacci 2018a, 2018b); it is therefore not surprising that in the end he did not receive any preference vote. As is well known, especially since the 2015 migrant crisis, the Lega Nord has devoted much attention to the issue of irregular migration to Italy (see, among others, Dennison and Geddes 2021). In this context, the local chapter of the Lega in the Macerata area could represent an ‘echo chamber’ in which even radical views on irregular migrants could be tolerated (rather than inhibited or questioned). For example, Italian media reported that Traini participated in a political dinner for local

members and sympathisers of the Lega in Corridonia on 20 January 2018, two weeks before the shooting in Macerata; on that occasion, Traini proudly showed the Nazi-inspired rune tattooed above his temple and spoke against immigrants in informal conversations with other guests, but his tattoos and speeches were tolerated and considered as mere ‘extravagance’, and he was deemed ‘harmless’ (Tonacci 2018a).

Overall, Traini’s sporadic involvement in these three different political organisations in the Macerata area had the effect of fostering and amplifying or at least implicitly validating his radical views, including on the relation between immigration and security. It is also worth mentioning that, unlike ‘formerly embedded’ lone actors (Lindekilde, Malthaner and O’Connor 2019), Traini did not openly break with these political milieux prior to his act of violence (Tonacci 2018a; 2018b).

On the other hand, Traini’s peripheral social position in these different political organisations and circles implied that he was not subject to their discipline and social control and that he might not fully internalise their opposition to the use of lone-actor violence and terrorism. Actually, Forza Nuova advocates a variety of forms of action, including violent practices; furthermore, its use of physical violence increased in 2017–8 (Frazzetta 2022, 138–140) and culminated in the storming of the national headquarters of the CGIL (Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro, i.e. Italy’s largest trade union) on 9 October 2021, during a large-scale and diverse anti-government demonstration in the centre of Rome (Marone 2022). Similarly, CasaPound Italia is a hybrid ‘movement-party organisation’ (Froio et al. 2020) that notoriously organises a wide range of political and social activities. Nevertheless, despite such potential opportunities, the Macerata shooter was not a real militant of these neofascist organisations and never engaged in collective violence in their ranks. Moreover, Traini supported the Lega and occasionally carried out practical tasks for local events of this political party, but he was never a committed party activist and had no salient political role or responsibility.

Furthermore, while being involved in violent actions over time, both Forza Nuova and CasaPound Italia never actively promoted genuine terrorism, much less in independent lone-actor forms. For its part, the Lega is, of course, a large mainstream political party that does not practice violence. However, ultimately none of these different political organisations exercised real social control and discipline over Traini’s behaviours.

Following a definition proposed by Lindekilde and colleagues (Lindekilde, Malthaner and O’Connor 2019; see also Malthaner and Lindekilde 2017), Traini can be defined as an ‘autonomous’ lone actor who was not socially or politically isolated and who combined a non-violent activist career with his violent action. Ultimately, Traini’s social position of marginality with respect to radical groups helps explain the act of lone-actor terrorism in Macerata, even in a national context in which mobilisation and far-right violence typically take collective forms.

In conclusion, on 3 February 2018, new macabre details on Pamela Mastropietro’s atrocious and highly mediatised murder by a Nigerian drug dealer, right near Macerata, upset Luca Traini, for personal reasons, and suddenly triggered an impulsive response of hate and revenge. At first the Macerata shooter thought to immediately⁴ avenge Pamela in a furious act of *vigilante* violence against her alleged killer, before changing his plan due to logistical issues. This highly emotional action was combined with pre-existing extremist political attitudes, that had been tolerated and sometimes even validated and amplified, but not regulated and disciplined, in the context of Traini’s marginal face-to-face involvement in different right-wing or far-right political organisations. The final result was an act of lone-actor *terrorism* against innocent civilians. This peculiar combination of factors can explain why, unlike most lone actors, Traini did not engage in an elaborate process of attack planning, let alone on the internet.

Conclusion

The article has offered a social science interpretation of the 2018 Macerata shooting, a case of lone-actor terrorism of primary importance in recent Italian history. The paper has documented that, while the public debate in Italy has so far failed to recognise this attack as an episode of genuine ‘terrorism’, the profile of the perpetrator and the dynamics of the attack fit well with extant explanations for lone-actor terrorism in scholarly research. At the individual level, scholars have pointed out that there is no single profile of lone actors, but there are relevant recurrent traits. Available information suggests that the Macerata shooter, Luca Traini, possessed several of these recurring traits, including socio-demographic characteristics (gender, age, etc.), biographical paths (family and school issues), and psychological characteristics (psychological distress, problems controlling anger). With regard to the dynamics of this drive-by shooting, based on the relevant literature, there are numerous characteristics that are typically found in lone-actor attacks, especially at the hands of right-wing extremists, in terms of triggering events, leakage and warning indicators, choice of weapon, target location, victim selection, and the actual impact of violence.

This politically motivated lone-actor attack appears to be an anomaly in a country that has thus far been characterised by high levels of collective far-right mobilisation and violence. The article has therefore attempted to explain the ‘deviant case’ of the 2018 Macerata shooting. Drawing on relational perspectives that have recently emerged in the literature (in particular, Castelli Gattinara, O’Connor and Lindekilde 2018; see also Castelli Gattinara and O’Connor 2018), it has argued that the 2018 Macerata shooting was facilitated by the peculiar marginal social position of its perpetrator. On the one hand, Traini was a sympathiser of neofascist organisations such as Forza Nuova and CasaPound Italia and a peripheral member of the Lega’s local chapter; these political circles with which he was in contact could function as ‘echo chambers’ in which even radical ideas, especially about the supposed connection between immigration and security, may have been justified, amplified, or at least tolerated. On the other hand, Traini’s marginal position vis-à-vis these different political organisations meant that he was not subject to their discipline and social control.

In conclusion, in addition to radical ideologies and belief systems, the combination of personal dispositions, salient triggering events, and peripheral social interactions with political organisations and circles helps explain the act of lone-actor terrorism in Macerata, even in a national context where right-wing mobilisation and violence have historically taken collective and regulated forms.

Competing interests. the author declares none.

Notes

1. In particular, despite not being an academic work, the detailed book *L'uomo bianco (The White Man)* by Italian journalist Ezio Mauro, published in October 2018, is particularly useful for this analysis because it is based on exclusive exchanges with Traini in prison, via his lawyer (Mauro 2018, 137).
2. It is worth recalling that in the small, relatively quiet Italian region of Marche, several acts of violence motivated by right-wing extremist beliefs and/or against migrants took place shortly before the 2018 Macerata shooting. In particular, in Fermo, a town near Macerata, between January and May 2016, six rudimentary explosive devices were placed in front of Catholic churches that hosted migrants, and four of these devices exploded at night, without harming anyone; two Italian members of the local football *ultra* group were later arrested and convicted of committing these acts. On 5 July 2016, in the same town, another Italian football *ultra* hooligan with far-right sympathies killed Emmanuel Chidi Nnamdi, a 36-year-old Nigerian migrant, in a brawl that erupted after the man suddenly shouted racist insults against Chidi Nnamdi’s Nigerian fiancée while the couple was walking in the street with a friend. On 23 November 2017, in Ascoli Piceno, a local leader of CasaPound’s

youth wing assaulted a 17-year-old leftist student for political reasons outside his school. On 2 January 2018, in the small town of Spinetoli, in the province of Ascoli Piceno, a building that was alleged to house a group of unaccompanied foreign minors was set on fire at night. More recently, on 29 July 2022, Alika Ogorchukwu, a 39-year-old Nigerian street trader, was chased and beaten to death in broad daylight by a 32-year-old Italian citizen in the centre of Civitanova Marche, a seaside town in the province of Macerata, after the trader's alleged 'insistent' requests to the assailant and his partner to buy handkerchiefs or for small change; while at the time of writing the exact motive of this brutal attack is still under investigation, it provoked new debate over racism in Italy.

3. It may be useful to add that, while, on the whole, the Marche region was considered for decades as one of the so-called *regioni rosse* ('red regions'), associated with strong electoral and political support for major left-wing political parties (among others, Bracalente, Pellegrino and Forcina 2020), actually the southern provinces of the region, such as Macerata, were traditionally characterised by a significant presence of centrist and even right-wing political parties (Boldrini 2021). Furthermore, some scholars recently hypothesised that geographical trajectories of recent expansion of the Lega Nord in the central regions of Italy might be associated with the prevalence of a neofascist minority present in this 'red belt' during the so-called First Republic (Mancosu and Ladini 2020). The author thanks an anonymous reviewer for raising this point.

4. As Jon Elster (1999, 286, emphasis in the original) noted in his insightful analysis of emotions, 'any strong emotion creates a tendency to act immediately, even if nothing would be lost and something might be gained by pausing to find out more about the situation.'

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Italian summary

Il 3 febbraio 2018, a Macerata, un cittadino italiano con simpatie di estrema destra sparò deliberatamente diversi colpi d'arma da fuoco dalla sua automobile contro nove immigrati di origine africana, ferendone sei. Questo articolo argomenta che la sparatoria di Macerata può essere considerata un atto di terrorismo 'solitario' (*lone-actor*) e costituisce un'anomalia nel contesto italiano. Sulla base della letteratura disponibile nel campo delle scienze sociali su questo tema, l'articolo analizza il profilo dell'attentatore e le dinamiche dell'attacco. Inoltre, adottando una prospettiva relazionale allo studio della radicalizzazione, esamina le interazioni sociali dell'autore della violenza: da una parte, l'uomo era in contatto con diverse organizzazioni politiche che potevano rappresentare una sorta di 'cassa di risonanza' per la validazione tacita o addirittura per la giustificazione e l'amplificazione di credenze radicali, anche sulla relazione tra immigrazione e sicurezza; dall'altra parte, egli non era soggetto alla disciplina e al controllo sociale di tali organizzazioni. Questa posizione sociale periferica dell'attentatore contribuisce a spiegare le cause di questo caso di terrorismo 'solitario', in un contesto nazionale in cui la mobilitazione e la violenza di estrema destra hanno storicamente assunto forme collettive.

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