

YVONNE STERK: A FEMALE BELGIAN FEDAYEE? GENDER, THE COLD WAR, AND THE PALESTINIAN CAUSE IN BELGIUM

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Holding a Kalashnikov and wearing a *keffiyeh* headscarf on the Jordan Bank in March 1970, Belgian Yvonne Sterk made headlines as the first European female freedom fighter fighting for the Palestinian Cause. After Jordan lost control of the West Bank to Israel in 1967, small groups of Palestinian resistance fighters known as fedayeen moved their bases to Jordan and stepped up their attacks on Israel and Israeli-occupied territories. Associated Press interviews of 3 and 4 March 1970 claimed that Sterk had become part of the fedayeen Palestinian freedom fighters and that she participated in the military operations against Israel.¹ Sterk, a journalist herself, reacted in *Brugsch Handelsblad*, a Belgian regional newspaper, that she was not a fedayee yet that her “intention was to study the Palestinian issue very closely as a free-lance journalist”.²

I. Introduction

Yvonne Sterk was a writer, journalist, and activist who co-founded *Comité National Palestine* (National Palestine Committee; CNP) which supported the Palestinian Cause from Belgium between 1969 and 1976. The CNP started out as a politically pluralistic organisation with ties with various organisations in support of Palestine. However, in the 1970s, it increasingly isolated itself from other solidarity organizations by adopting a China-oriented Maoist stance.³ Sterk only recently appeared in the historiography of the Arab-Israeli conflict and the Global Sixties.⁴ An acquaintance from the past, Lucas Catherine, who was also a member of the CNP, included her in his book which targeted a broader audience.⁵ More recently, Sterk was mentioned by historian John Nieuwenhuys, who discovered her through his research on the role of the CNP in Belgium.⁶ In a similar vein, this article sheds an additional light on the persona of Sterk and the study of leftist western support of the Palestinian Cause by presenting a more gendered and media-centered approach.

This article utilizes Sterk's previously unexamined archive to explore the perspective of a female Palestinian activist and what it can reveal about the ideas on gender and activism in Cold War-era Belgium. By examining Sterk's archive, we can gain valuable insights into how women's

experiences and contributions in activism were perceived and shaped during this time period. Sterk's personal archive was handed over by a friend to the Research Center for Women's History (*AVG-Carhif*) in Brussels. Sterk personally chose the documents that were included in the archive. As a result, the archive is a representation of how Sterk wanted to present herself, and can shed light on how she approached the narratives that aligned with her social status. It contains private documents such as letters and diaries, as well as her work as a journalist and a collection of press articles written about her.⁷ In addition to these untapped archival materials, this article draws on Sterk's private correspondence with the CNP, preserved in the archives of Université libre de Bruxelles (Free University of Brussels).⁸ This article also aims to introduce the wealth of sources available in Belgium to conduct research on the Arab-Israeli conflict. Sterk's case provides particular insight into what it meant to be a European female activist for the Palestinian Cause.

In addition, this article tries to understand the role of news media and images in constructing the Cold War in the early 1970s in Belgium. Scholars have established how circulating representations shape our understanding of the world, and how they reinforce existing power structures and gender roles.⁹ In the last two decades, a great deal of historical research has been done on how news

3. Associated Press: press release "Foreigners – Belgian – Guerrilla's – Amman", Jordan, 3 and 4 March 1970, (Archives Université Libre De Bruxelles, *CNP archives*, 064Z).

2. *Brugsch Handelsblad*, 18 July 1970, 7. Originally: "Mijn bedoeling was als free-lance journaliste het Palestijnse vraagstuk van heel nabij te bestuderen".

3. JOHN NIEUWENHUYS, *Belgitude après la Nakba: Une histoire de mouvements belges de solidarité avec le peuple Palestinien (1948-1982)*, PhD thesis, Université libre de Bruxelles, 2021, 297.

4. *Idem*, 297. John Nieuwenhuys' PhD dissertation contains more extensive information on the Belgian New Left and the position of Sterk in this network.

5. LUCAS CATHERINE, *Verre kusten van verlangen: Curieuze Reizen*, 2005, Antwerpen, 142.

6. *Idem*, 297.

7. Archive Yvonne Sterk (AVG-CARHIF, *Archive Yvonne Sterk*, STE/130).

8. The inventory process of the CNP archive is still ongoing. Therefore, I can only provide the main reference of the CNP archive to refer to its sources.

9. JOHN BERGER, "Ways of Seeing", London, 1972; JESSICA EVANS & STUART HALL, "Visual Culture: The Reader", London, 1999. BARBARA GURR, "Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Post-Apocalyptic TV and Film", London, 2015; LAURA MULVEY, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", *Screen*, 16/ 3, 1975, 6-18; NIVEDITA MENON, *Seeing Like a Feminist*, New Delhi, 2012. The history of science has paid attention to the ways in which visual materials construct meaning, knowledge, and shape cultural values and realities. LORRAINE DASTON & PETER GALISON, *Objectivity*, New York, 2007; GILLIAN ROSE, *Visual Methodologies*, London, 2001; GREGORY CURRIE, *Image and Mind*, Cambridge, 1995; GALISON PETER & CAROLINE A. JONES, *Picturing Science, Producing Art*, New York, 1998.

media approached female activists and terrorists. However, how Belgian media capitalised on the frame of the female revolutionary fighter has not yet been examined. This article aims to make tangible how circulating representations played a role for an individual, Yvonne Sterk, as well as how she responded to these depictions. The objective of this article is not to uncover the “truth” about Sterk or to determine the extent to which she can be regarded as a revolutionary fighter. Instead, the focus is on how Sterk’s captivating story was taken up and spread, and what this reveals about the media’s role in shaping perceptions of the Cold War and decolonization in Belgium, as well as how women who defied gender norms were portrayed.¹⁰

As Yvonne Sterk is barely known by historians, this article first provides a brief biography, primarily based on her personal archives. It then examines the reports that portray Sterk as a fedayeen and places them within the context of the Cold War. Lastly, it explores Sterk’s own approach to dealing with the representations of herself in the media.

II. Sterk’s multifaceted identity

Yvonne Sterk (1920-2012) was a Belgian writer and freelance journalist who lived in Eisden, a mining village in the Belgian province of Limburg, close to the border with the Netherlands. After joining her father in the armed resistance against Germany during WWII, she worked in the coal mining industry as an employee, devoting her spare time to writing poetry. She reminisces about her early interactions with workers of various nationalities in the mining region. According to

her, these experiences were instrumental in shaping her cross-cultural sense of belonging. In 1944, she married André Ambroes, a commissioner of the Belgian State, and they relocated to Brussels. For privacy reasons, the letters between Sterk and her husband are not examined. Nonetheless, although they remained legally married, it seemed that they no longer shared a romantic relationship during Sterk’s tenure as an activist, and he was not engaged with the Palestinian Cause.

Sterk was honored with an award for her debut poetry collection, *Les chemins de l’absence* in 1953.¹¹ This marked the beginning of a series of publications, including *Le bouleau noir* (1955), *Choix de poèmes* (1961), *Les désirs de fontaine* (1965), and *Pour un même réveil* (1965).¹² She became a member of the Belgian branch of the PEN Club, which promotes international friendship among writers and defends freedom of expression.¹³ Through her passion for poetry, she wrote to Emir Saqr bin Sultan Al Qasimi, who invited her to his principality of Sharjah on the Persian Gulf in 1965, marking the start of a series of travels into the Middle East.¹⁴ Sterk wrote in French, which facilitated connections with the Arab world. Syrian writer Saad Saeb translated Sterk’s poetry into Arabic, for which she received a great deal of attention in the Arabic press.¹⁵ As soon as her poetry became known, Sterk received invitations to a series of Arab cities, such as Mosul, where she was a guest of honor at a banquet of sheikhs. Sterk remembered she was given the *Abbay* or sheikh’s cloak so she could sit with the men. In 1967, she was invited to the University of Baghdad, which, next to Cairo, was the literary place par excellence. Sterk noticed that

10. LUISE WHITE, “Telling More: Lies, Secrets, and History”, *History and Theory*, 39/4, 2000, 11-22.

11. Sterk won the Prix Max Rose of the association des Jeunes littéraires de Belgique in 1953. YVONNE STERK, *Les chemins de l’absence*, Paris, 1954.

12. YVONNE STERK, *Le bouleau noir*, Bruxelles, 1955; *Idem*, *Choix de poèmes*, Bruxelles, 1961; *Idem*, *Les désirs de fontaine, poèmes*, Tournai, 1965; *Idem*, *Pour un même réveil*, Bruxelles, 1965.

13. MEGAN DOHERTY, “A Guardian to Literature and Its Cousins: The Early Politics of the Pen Club”, *Nederlandse Letterkunde*, 16/3, 2011, 132-51; Archive Yvonne Sterk (AVG-CARHIF, *Archive Yvonne Sterk*, STE/130).

14. Archive Yvonne Sterk (AVG-CARHIF, *Archive Yvonne Sterk*, STE/130).

15. Sterk’s archive contains 14 cutouts of Arabic articles about her poems published between 1965 and 1969. Of some of these articles, the exact day of publishing or in which newspaper they were published is not clear. Sterk’s career as a writer was noticed in *Al-Jumhur Al-Jadid Magazine*, Beirut, 11 May 1967; *Al-Musawar*, 27 May, 1966; *Al-Ba’ath*, June 1969; *Al-Anba*, 1969; *El Massa*, 1969; *Al-Joumhouriyah*, 11 May 1967; *Osiris*, 4 April, 1965.

the students not only posed literary questions, but they also inquired about her stance on the Palestinian issue, to which she acknowledged her lack of familiarity with the subject. That would change completely in the following years.¹⁶

Between 1965 and 1977, she reported from Yemen, Syria, Egypt, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, and Lebanon. Her news reports were published in Belgian, French, and Lebanese media.¹⁷ Sterk remembered how she became involved with the Palestinian Cause when she attended the Beirut conference of the Soviet-funded Afro-Asian Writers Association (AAWA) in March 1967, where support for the Palestinian Cause was articulated.¹⁸ Since political literature was of great importance in the Arab-Israeli conflict, as Hanan Ashrawi has shown, and of great importance in what Elizabeth M. Holt called the “global cultural Cold War”, it comes as no surprise that Palestinian activists were active in international groups of writers. Sterk befriended resistance poets like Ghassan Kanafani and Fadwa Tuqan at the 1967 conference.¹⁹ Her increasing news reports on the Arab-Israeli conflict reflect her growing investment in the Palestinian struggle. As a journalist, she witnessed the Six Day War from Egypt and made reports about the impact in occupied, attacked or destroyed Palestinian and Syrian cities like Qalqilya and Quneitra.²⁰

In 1969 in Belgium, Sterk co-founded Comité National Palestine (National Palestine Committee; CNP) which supported the Palestinian Cause from Belgium. At its founding, the CNP declared in a

published text that a post-war unilateral pro-Israeli perspective in Belgium had disregarded the Palestinian struggle. The CNP clarified that it did not aim to eradicate the Jewish population. Instead, it asserted that Zionism used the issue of persecuted Jews to establish a state with “racist and colonial” structures at the expense of another people, the Palestinians. The CNP supported the “people’s struggle” for the creation of a secular, democratic, and anti-imperialist Palestine, ensuring equal rights for all.²¹ The organization draws inspiration from Maoist principles of anti-imperialism, solidarity with the Third World and supporting grassroots mobilization to drive bottom-up changes.

Sterk witnessed the Six Day War in 1967 between Israel and Egypt, Jordan and Syria. The result of the war was Israel’s occupation of the Gaza Strip, the Sinai, the West Bank and the Golan Heights. The fedayeen, small groups of resistance fighters, established themselves on the Jordan Bank. In March 1970, Sterk found herself as the sole female member among the fedayeen. She lived with them in caves and closely observed their operations.²² Eventually, Anglosphere media and subsequently Belgian television and newspapers framed Sterk as the first European female fedayee who participated in military operations against Israel, as will be discussed further in this article.²³

In September 1970, the struggle for power in Jordan escalated, and Black September took place. The Jordanian army was ordered to fight the armed Palestinian groups, resulting in many Pal-

16. Autobiographical documents (AVG-CARHIF, *Archive Yvonne Sterk*, STE/130-1).

17. Sterk’s journalistic reports (AVG-CARHIF, *Archive Yvonne Sterk*, STE/130-81).

18. Autobiographical documents (AVG-CARHIF, *Archive Yvonne Sterk*, STE/130-1); ELIZABETH M. HOLT, “Resistance Literature and Occupied Palestine in Cold War Beirut”, *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 50/1, 2021, 3-18.

19. HANAN MIKHAIL ASHRAWI, “The Contemporary Palestinian Poetry of Occupation”, *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 7/3, 1978, 77-101; Letter of Ghassan Kanafani to Sterk, 17 May 1965 (AVG-CARHIF, *Archive Yvonne Sterk*, STE/130-70); Autobiographical documents (AVG-CARHIF, *Archive Yvonne Sterk*, STE/130-1).

20. Autobiographical documents (AVG-CARHIF, *Archive Yvonne Sterk*, STE/130-1).

21. JOHN NIEUWENHUIS, *Belgitude après la Nakba*, 271.

22. Autobiographical documents (AVG-CARHIF, *Archive Yvonne Sterk*, STE/130-1); JAMES L. GELVIN, *The Israel-Palestine Conflict: One Hundred Years of War*, New York, 2007, 166-200.

23. Associated Press: press release “Foreigners – Belgian – Guerrilla’s – Amman”, Jordan, 3 and 4 March 1970, (Archives Université Libre De Bruxelles, *CNP archives*, 064Z); *La Wallonie*, 6 March 1970; *La Dernière Heure*, 4 March 1970, 6; *Het Volk*, 5 March 1970, 7; *De Standaard*, 10 March 1970, 8; “Belgische Guerrilla bij fedayin” on News TV show *Journal* on 5 March 1970 (Vrt Archive, fn10p27w3h, Meemoo-identifier fn10p27w3h).

estinian casualties and the relocation of the Palestinian resistance to Beirut.²⁴ Sterk, who briefly returned to Belgium, also eventually moved to Beirut to be closer to the Cause. In Lebanon, Sterk was the link between the CNP in Belgium and the Palestinian resistance in Beirut. In Beirut, she sympathized with the Palestinian resistance and in particular with the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), which split from the Marxist-Leninist Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) in 1969.²⁵ The DFLP's pursuit for a socialist binational state with equal rights for both the Arab-Palestinian and Hebrew-Jewish communities enjoyed the support of western progressives such as Sterk.²⁶ In addition, the party was committed to recruiting women, since women in high positions were a symbol of modernity in the international community and important in securing international recognition.²⁷

In 1972 in Beirut, Sterk befriended Kamal Jumblatt, the leader of the Druze community and chairman of the Progressive Socialist Party in Lebanon. Sterk became his private secretary, stayed in his palace in Mukhtara until 1973 and worked for him until his assassination in 1977.²⁸ Jumblatt, who had studied in France and was considered a left-wing intellectual philosopher in Western Europe, travelled with Sterk to India, out of a shared interest in literature, philosophy and religion.²⁹ Under Jumblatt's leadership, a progressive alliance consisting of various parties of Lebanese socialists, known as the Lebanese National Movement, sprouted in support of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO).³⁰ In 1975, the Lebanese Civil War began

and Jumblatt's progressive front fought against the Christian Lebanese Front, which consisted predominantly of Maronite militias, phalangist groups and part of the Maronite-dominated central government. Jumblatt's goal to reform Lebanon's sectarian political system was never met since he failed to eliminate the Maronite and Syrian opposition. His assassination in 1977 marked the end of Sterk's five-year stay in the heart of the Palestinian resistance.³¹ Jumblatt adeptly played the tensions between the Soviet Union and China to his advantage. Judging from his frequent interactions with Sterk, it appears that the Maoist views Sterk espoused were intended to convey a broader message of anti-imperialism.

It was not until 2002 that Sterk, although not as a Palestinian, joined the ranks of the resistance poets when she published *Le rempart de sable*.³² This collection of poems was originally written in the 1960s and 1970s about the human tragedies she witnessed during her stay in the Middle East, but did not receive the great deal of attention her other poems did in the 1960s. After spending her last years in the mining village where she grew up, she died in Brussels in 2012.³³

III. "A Belgian woman among the fedayeen!"

On 10 September 1970, Belgians watching the News on BRT, the national public-service broadcaster for the Dutch-speaking Belgians, could see an interview with the young Palestinian Leila

24. JAMES L. GELVIN, *The Israel-Palestine Conflict*, 211; Autobiographical documents, (AVG-CARHIF, *Archive Yvonne Sterk*, STE/130-1).

25. Autobiographical documents (AVG-CARHIF, *Archive Yvonne Sterk*, STE/130-1).

26. FRANCES S. HASSO, "The 'Women's Front': Nationalism, Feminism, and Modernity in Palestine", *Gender & Society*, 12/4, 1998, 443-65; LUCAS CATHERINE, *Verre kusten van verlangen: Curieuze Reizen*, Antwerpen, 2005, 142.

27. FRANCES S. HASSO, "The 'Women's Front'", 455.

28. Autobiographical documents (AVG-CARHIF, *Archive Yvonne Sterk*, STE/130).

29. ROBERT FISK, *Pity the Nation: Lebanon at War*, Oxford and New York, 2001, 113; For travel pictures of Sterk and Jumblatt in India see travel pictures (AVG-CARHIF, *Archive Yvonne Sterk*, STE/130 - folder "varia").

30. ROBERT FISK, *Pity the Nation*, 80.

31. FARID AL-KHAZEN, "Kamal Jumblatt, the Uncrowned Druze Prince of the Left", *Middle Eastern Studies*, 24/ 2, 1988, 193-197; Autobiographical documents (AVG-CARHIF, *Archive Yvonne Sterk*, STE/130-1).

32. YVONNE STERK, *Le rempart de sable*, Amay, 2002.

33. Autobiographical documents (AVG-CARHIF, *Archive Yvonne Sterk*, STE/130-1).

Khaled on their television. Khaled had attracted the attention of the world media after hijacking a passenger plane between Rome and Athens to raise awareness for the Palestinian question.³⁴ The pictures of her holding a Kalashnikov and wearing a *keffiyeh* exploded in media coverage, while Khaled's male partner in the mission, Salim Issawi, received little coverage. An interview of Leila Khaled reached the TV news in Belgium and can be retrieved in the archives of the of BRT.³⁵ The interviewer asked Khaled: "You are continuing to fight for that cause and fight in that war? [...] How far ahead do you see the possibility of victory in your fight for Palestine? Khaled responded, "As long as we have our clear vision of the revolution, I can see that we will have victory in the end". The revolutionary words were reinforced by the prominent presence of iconic revolutionaries depicted on the posters positioned behind the interviewee. Among them, figures like Mao and Che Guevara, instantly recognizable to the Belgian audience, added to the potent visual narrative. The posters also featured an image resembling Fatima Bernawi, renowned as the first Palestinian woman to orchestrate a bombing attack in Israel, and alongside her, a representation of someone who looked like Emir Abdelkader, the Arab revolutionary and military leader who led the resistance against the French colonial invasion of Algiers in the early 19th century. Additionally, the presence of multiple Kalashnikovs in the posters served as a striking visual motif, further reinforcing Khaled's dedication to armed revolution in the interview.³⁶

Merely six months earlier, the news channel had aired an interview featuring Yvonne Sterk, on the Jordan River, where she stayed in the military camp of the DFLP from February to May 1970.³⁷

The report started with footage of young Palestinian male resistance fighters, carrying Kalashnikovs, wearing *keffiyeh* headscarves and reading Mao's red book. The reporter stated, "when they [the fedayeen] are not on operations [...] some of them read the thoughts of Mao to one another, [...] and others teach foreign friends a little basic weapon drill". Yvonne Sterk wearing a *keffiyeh* could be seen firing a Kalashnikov three times while a resistance fighter complimented her on her shooting.³⁸ Then Sterk expressed support for Palestinian cause: "I came to the Democratic Front because these people here are in the right way". The interviewer asked Sterk if she was a communist to which she replied: "I am a leftist socialist in Belgium". The interviewer finally asked if she participated in the fedayeen's actions, to which she replied "yes" and explained how she saw the resistance fighters carry out an attack on an Israeli car.³⁹

The media attention given to Sterk fits into a broader cultural industry that capitalized on the fear and fascination with female political activists who disrupted the order. In the late 1960s and 1970s, the image of the female terrorist was constructed in the popular western imagination because of the combined fear of feminist activists and far left terrorism. Women who played an important role in the armed activities of various leftist political organisations in the 1970s received considerable media attention, such as women of the Red Brigades in Italy, the Rote Armee Fraktion (RAF) in Germany, the Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA) and the Weathermen in the United States.⁴⁰ The popular photographs of these revolutionary women holding Kalashnikovs circulated in various media channels. These female fighters

34. SARAH IRVING, *Leila Khaled: Icon of Palestinian Liberation*, London, 1–9.

35. "Interview Leila Khaled" on News TV show *Journal* on 5 March 1970 (VRT Archive, AIM00234957, Meemoo identifier rx93788h3t).

36. *Idem*.

37. Autobiographical documents (AVG-CARHIF, *Archive Yvonne Sterk*, STE/130-1).

38. "Belgische Guerrilla bij fedayin" on News TV show *Journal* on 5 March 1970 (Vrt Archive, fn10p27w3h, Meemoo-identifier fn10p27w3h).

39. *Idem*.

40. BRIGITTE L. NACOS, "The Portrayal of Female Terrorists in the Media: Similar Framing Patterns in the News Coverage of Women in Politics and in Terrorism", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 28/5, 2005, 435-48.

represented a threat to the gendered social order, problematizing the boundaries of legitimate femininity characterised through elements such as passivity, nurturance, pacifism, non-political caretaking, etc., as they were promoted in western culture.⁴¹ In the last two decades, there has been a great deal of historical research on how American and German news media approached female activists and terrorists and how media such as film and pulp magazines capitalised on the image of the female fighter. These studies suggest that there is a motive in the cultural industry that manifested itself visually with revolutionary women carrying Kalashnikovs. In the study of news media, the term *frame* can be used to indicate persistent patterns of interpretation, presentation and selection used by news media to give meaning to images and news facts and to organize storylines.⁴²

The Dutch terrorism expert Beatrice de Graaf argued that the media in the Netherlands were less captivated by the left-wing revolutionary terrorist and less responsive to an image of armed feminist extremism than German and American media.⁴³ How the Belgian media adapted the frame of the leftist dangerous woman has not yet been examined. The case of Belgium's Yvonne Sterk offers particular insight into how the Belgian media capitalized on the frame of the leftist revolutionary fighter and the Belgian government's handling of dangerous women in the 1970s. The image of Sterk with AK-47 and *keffiyeh* fits into the popular frame of the female revolutionary resistance fighter and reminds spectators of the iconic image of Khaled with an AK-47 Kalashnikov and *keffiyeh* that joined Che Guevara on the bedroom walls of young revolutionaries at the time.⁴⁴

Beside Sterk being featured in the interview at the general Flemish TV-News, the Belgian newspapers from the Flemish and French-speaking community with socialist (*La Wallonie*), and Christian (*Het Volk*), and generalist (*La Dernière Heure*) backgrounds featured Sterk as a leftist female fighter. The reports portray a similar image of Sterk, suggesting she actively participated in the operations of the Marxist DFLP against Israeli forces and remaining silent about her career as a journalist. For example, Newspaper *La Dernière Heure* stated: "She [Sterk] was trained in the handling of Soviet-built Kalashnikov machine guns and claims to have taken part in a commando group that ambushed [...] an Israeli engineering team."⁴⁵ The news article was always accompanied with the striking photographs of Sterk with a Kalashnikov and a *keffiyeh*. The information above suggests that the frame of the female revolutionary fighter was captivating beyond the ideological and language-related schisms of the Belgian media channels.⁴⁶

The similarities between the newspapers convey insights regarding the manner in which the news media acquired and absorbed information. The Belgian news articles were based on the reports of the American news agency Associated Press (AP). On 3 and 4 March 1970, reporters from AP proclaimed that international sympathisers were participating in the operations of the Arab guerrillas, including Sterk who was photographed, filmed, and interviewed.⁴⁷ The Belgian newspapers and the TV-channel BRT, haphazardly copied the information from the reports of AP, including the spelling error 'Yvonne Stark'. Regarding the Belgian media's coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

41. AMANDA THIRD, *Gender and the Political: Deconstructing the Female Terrorist*, New York, 2014, 1-5.

42. ZHONGDANG PAN & GERALD M. KOSICKI, "Framing analysis", 65. Zie ook: LINDA KENIX, "A historical framing analysis of liberalism in American print media (1978-2002)", 82.

43. BEATRICE DE GRAAF, *Gevaarlijke Vrouwen: Tien militante vrouwen in het vizier*, Amsterdam, 2012, 113.

44. SARAH IRVING, *Leila Khaled*, 1-9.

45. *La Dernière Heure*, 7 March 1970, 6.

46. *Het Volk*, 5 March 1970, 7; *La Wallonie*, 6 March 1970, 6; *La Dernière Heure*, 7 March 1970, 3; Interview Leila Khaled" on News TV show *Journal* on 5 March 1970 (VRT Archive, AIM00234957, Meemoo identifier rx93788h3t); ELS DE BENS & KARIN RAEYMAECKERS, *De pers in België*, 336, 469, 493.

47. Associated Press: press release "Foreigners – Belgian – Guerrilla's – Amman", Jordan, 3 and 4 March 1970, (Archives Université Libre De Bruxelles, *CNP archives*, 064Z).



Yvonne Sterk holding a Kalashnikov, Jordan Bank March 1969. Source: AVG-CARHIF, Archive Yvonne Sterk, STE/130 - folder "varia".

in Belgium, the position of the newspapers was highly influenced by the source of information - the position of the local reporters or the news agency through which the news item originated - rather than the newspaper's ideological background. In this case, the source of information was an American news agency, that ensured a distinctly American interpretation of the event.⁴⁸

According to John Fenby the portrayal of Arab countries in Western media tended to have a negative bias, which can be attributed, in part, to the geographical positioning of Western news agencies and their correspondents: news agencies like United Press International and AP had a robust presence in Israel but were inadequately represented in Arab countries.⁴⁹ The original report read: "Sterk has been training in Jordan with Arab guerrillas from the Marxist Popular Democratic Front [...] she received instruction on Soviet-built kaleshnikov [...] and claims to have had joined a guerrilla group which last week ambushed Israeli engineers. [...] Mme. Stark [...] has lived and trained with the Palestinian partisans [...] She chose to join a band of fighters from the Democratic Popular Front, a Marxist group that divides its time between politics and making war on Israel. A leftwing socialist herself, Mme Stark found herself in sympathy with much of their political thought. [...] She joined a guerrilla band, living with them in their caves and sharing their lives. [...] She [...] was complimented on her target shooting." All Belgian newspapers that portrayed Sterk as a guerilla fighter decided to uncritically copy the news agency's information.

The presence of multiple international sympathizers on the front was acknowledged by the reporters of AP, yet they made a deliberate choice to specifically highlight and showcase only Sterk.

In doing so, they emphasized her unique position as a woman and her ability to adapt and integrate among the guerilla fighters: "When the guerillas had grown to accept her as one of them and to respect her fortitude, they took Mme. Stark with them on an operation against the Israelis." The Belgian journals followed a similar approach, emphasizing Sterk's distinctiveness as a woman on the frontlines. *La Dernière Heure* titled their article "A Belgian woman training with Palestinian commandos".⁵⁰ Similarly, *La Wallonie* featured the headline "A Belgian woman among the fed-ayeen!".⁵¹ In a mocking tone, the Flemish newspaper *Het Volk* referred to Sterk's presence on the front with the line "Miss Yvonne Stark [...] is apparently tired of quiet city life. She prefers to train for guerrilla warfare."⁵²

In addition to AP reporters, Sterk was also noticed by Marshall Frady as he was looking for sensational news. Frady was an acclaimed American journalist who published his visit to the Jordan Bank in Harper's Magazine in November 1970. He described Sterk as a radical Trotskyist who regularly used her weapons and convinced unarmed journalists to carry a Kalashnikov. An alleged quotation of Sterk that depicts her as an armed fighter followed: "I assure you, you would be better off with at least a side arm. I always take a Kalashnikov myself, and I have had to use it a number of times, believe me."⁵³

Some striking parallels can be drawn between how Sterk was depicted and the broader coverage of female political actors in the news media. To begin with, the images and video footage of Sterk holding a Kalashnikov, bear a striking resemblance to the iconic depictions of other armed leftist women of that era. This resemblance is particularly noticeable in comparison to the iconic

48. JOHN FENBY, *The international news services. A twentieth century fund report*. New York, 1986, 66-68. Study on the Belgian press; WIM VAN DE VOORDE, *Beeldvorming van de Arabisch-Israëliische oorlogen*, 24-25.

49. WIM VAN DE VOORDE, *Beeldvorming van de Arabisch-Israëliische oorlogen*, 24-25.

50. *La Dernière Heure*, 6 March 1970, 6.

51. *La Wallonie*, 6 March 1970, 6.

52. *Het Volk*, 5 March 1970, 7.

53. *Harper's Magazine*, November 1970, 113-15.

image of Leila Khaled, where the popular depiction of the revolutionary woman with a Kalashnikov converges with the archetype of the fedayeen armed with the same weapon and wearing the *keffiyeh*.⁵⁴ Furthermore, it is noteworthy that Belgian journalists described the 49-year-old Sterk as a 'girl'.⁵⁵ Calling a woman 'girl' fits into a sexist discourse where a patronizing attitude toward women is adopted.⁵⁶ In addition, it points to a broader media phenomenon in which dangerous women are stereotyped as naive 'girls' who were convinced by men to participate in a dangerous activity.⁵⁷ For example, the Dutch media and the court described Lidwina Janssens, a Dutch woman who was arrested in 1976 as a spy for the PFLP in Israel, as a sweet, naive, and impressionable girl who got carried away through the evil intentions of men.⁵⁸ Furthermore, it is noteworthy that Sterk's physical appearance was described in detail in Frady's travelogue. Her clothing, the shape of her body, her makeup, heavy combat boots and the way she moved were described extensively while such descriptions were absent in the portrayal of the other characters in the article, who were almost exclusively men.⁵⁹ Within the media frame of the female radical activist and terrorist, physical characteristics are always carefully considered. For example, the appearance of Palestinian Leila Khaled of the PFLP and German Ulrike Meinhof of RAF were described in detail in the media.⁶⁰ It is also striking that Frady, the AP reporters, as well as the Belgian newspapers found the career of Sterk's husband, André Ambroes, who was a commissioner of the Belgian State, newsworthy, while

her own career did not appear to be important. Female public actors tend to be described in the media more by their family status and affiliation to their partner than male actors.⁶¹

The Arab newspapers utilised Sterk for their own purposes as well, using her image to show that even Europeans were participating in the Palestinian resistance. Two Arabic articles, based on the AP press releases, stated that a famous Belgian woman was part a group of foreign intellectuals who came from all over the world to accompany the resistance fighters in their operations.⁶²

However, Sterk was not the first Belgian to be praised on the Arab side as a European resistance fighter for the Palestinian Cause. Two years earlier, in 1968, Roger Coudroy, a member of the far-right transnational movement *Jeune Europe* (Young Europe) which formed tactical alliances with Arab nationalists out of anti-American sentiments, died on the side of Fatah.⁶³ It is striking that the far-right Coudroy and the leftist Sterk both fiercely supported the Palestinian Cause. As Farouk Mardam-Bey argued, the line between left, right and far-right in Europe can be blurred regarding support of the Palestinian Cause.⁶⁴ The PLO Research Center published Coudroy's travelogue, titled *I lived the Palestinian Resistance* in 1969.⁶⁵ Although the Palestinian Research Center applauded him as the first European fedayee to die for the Palestinian Cause, he did not receive the amount of attention that Sterk did in the western media. No pictures of Coudroy with

54. See for example: AMANDA THIRD, *Gender and the Political*, 139-141. For example, women with weapons in the Symbiose Liberation Army and the Irish Republican Army were popular.

55. The 50-years old Sterk was called ["meisje"] or "girl" in: *Het Volk*, 5 March 1970, 7.

56. MARGARET DOYLE, « Introduction to the A-Z of non-sexist language », in DEBORAH CAMERON, SARA MILLS, LUCE IRIGARAY, (dir.), *The Feminist Critique of Language*, Oxfordshire, 1998, 149-54.

57. BRIGITTE L. NACOS, "The Portrayal of Female Terrorists in the Media", 445.

58. BEATRICE DE GRAAF, *Gevaarlijke Vrouwen*, 113.

59. *Harper's Magazine*, November 1970, 113-15.

60. BRIGITTE L. NACOS, "The Portrayal of Female Terrorists in the Media", 438-39.

61. *Idem*, 437.

62. Cut-outs from Arab newspapers about Sterk's poetry of which the name of the newspapers is unclear: (AVG-CARHIF, *Archive Yvonne Sterk*, STE/130-82), It is possible that more Arabic articles on Sterk as a resistance fighter exist.

63. FRANCIS BALACE, ALAIN COLIGNON & GASTON BRAIVE, *De l'avant à l'après-guerre*, 1994, 112-120.

64. FAROUK MARDAM-BEY, "French Intellectuals and the Palestine Question", *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 43/3, 2014, 26-39.

65. ROGER COUDROY, *J'ai vécu la résistance palestinienne*, Beirut, 1969.

weapons were published, while a filmed interview and a whole series of photos of Sterk with a *keffiyeh* and a gun were distributed.

Gender played a role in the war journalist's decision-making process in what to feature, knowing that a man holding a gun, like Coudroy did, was not so unusual and a woman holding a gun was considered sensational. For the same reason, only Sterk was in the spotlight, while the other internationals remained in the dark.⁶⁶

IV. A spectacular Cold War tale

Soviet-built Kalashnikovs

The newspapers articles *Het Volk*, *La Dernière Heure* and *La Wallonie* emphasize Sterk's use of soviet-made weapons: "The weapons she is trying to familiarize herself with are of Soviet manufacture".⁶⁷ In addition, the filmed interview and news articles highlighted the Marxist Leninist nature of the fedayeen that Yvonne Sterk sympathised with. The emphasis on Sterk's use of Soviet weapons and belonging to a communist group is indicative of how the western reports on the Arab-Israelian conflict adopted a polarised worldview at the time of the Cold War where Sterk was placed at the extreme of the USSR pole. This is striking when viewed in the context of the time, as it coincided with a fierce ideological rivalry between the USSR and the People's Republic China (PRC) since the Sino-Soviet split in 1961, marked by contrasting interpretations of Marxist-Leninism. The situation was further exacerbated by PRC's anti-imperialist stance during the Cultural Revolution (1962-1976) accusing the Soviet Union of embracing 'false,' imperialist socialism. As previous research indi-

cates, Belgian newspapers were heavily influenced by Cold War thinking, as they ascribed a far greater degree of power to the Soviet Union than it truly possessed. These newspapers depicted the Arab nations as either existing satellite states of the USSR or emerging ones, characterizing them as mere puppets controlled by Moscow.⁶⁸ The Belgian news media's reliance on the US news agency AP for coverage of Yvonne Sterk's presence among the fedayeen further reinforced the polarizing Cold War interpretation of the event.

In her press articles, private letters, and diaries, Sterk firmly took an anti-imperialist stance opposing the two Cold War superpowers, who in her view only interfered because of their own political and economic interests and argued that interference from outside only increased tensions.⁶⁹ In this context, Sterk aligns with the Maoist idea of anti-imperialism, opposing the imperialism of the Soviet Union, the United States, and the Israeli state.⁷⁰ Sterk embraced China's support for the Palestinian cause, attempting to break free from the Cold War's dichotomy of US versus USSR. She established friendly ties with the Chinese political representatives in Beirut, referring to them as hospitable and her "comrades".⁷¹

Regarding the Arab-Israeli conflict, the Chinese representatives in Lebanon emphasized China's rejection of superpower status and its firm stance against imperialism, positioning themselves as victims of imperialism, much like Palestine.⁷² Cultural Revolution Maoism was attractive for independence movements in the Third World because of the Maoist ideals of grassroots groups making a change through revolutionary spontaneity, self-reliance, and guerilla warfare.⁷³ The People's Republic of China's support for the Palestinian guerrillas

66. Associated Press: press release "Foreigners – Belgian – Guerrilla's – Amman", Jordan, 3 and 4 March 1970, (Archives Université Libre De Bruxelles, *CNP archives*, 064Z).

67. *Het Volk*, 5 March 1970, 7.

68. WIM VAN DE VOORDE, *Beeldvorming van de Arabisch-Israëliëse oorlogen*, 207.

69. For example: *Brugsch Handelsblad*, 18 July 1970, 7.

70. REMCO ENSEL & EVELIEN GANS, *The Holocaust, Israel and "the Jew": Histories of Antisemitism in Postwar Dutch Society*, Amsterdam, 2016, 182-184.

71. Sterk to Dupire, Bierut, 5 April 1974 (ULB, *CNP Archive*, 064Z).

72. JOHN K. COOLEY, "China and the Palestinians", *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 1/2, 1972, 19-34, 20.

73. JULIA LOVELL, "The Cultural Revolution and Its Legacies in International Perspective", *The China Quarterly*, 227, 2016, 633.

resulted in Maoist influences infiltrating the ideas of the DFLP, a group with which Sterk sympathized.

The ideas of the Cultural Revolution Maoism also influenced a broad progressive movement within West-Europe, The US and North-America during the late 1960s and 1970s. It sparked student protest, feminist and gay rights activism, anti-racism civil rights activism, and bolstered Marxist-Leninist party-building.⁷⁴ In the international literature of Maoism and the Cold War, Cultural Revolution Maoism in Western Europe stands for youthful rebellion.⁷⁵ Academic research on the Maoism and Trotskyism of the 1960s-1970s and its influences remains limited in Belgium. Maoist ideas influenced the “New Left” in Belgium, rejecting both the Atlantic-oriented social democracy and the Soviet-aligned communism, along with established leftist parties of the ‘old’ generation.⁷⁶ However, it is worth noting that the New Left fiercely opposed the pre-war left generation to which Sterk belonged.

Sterk herself belonged to an ‘old’ generation of socialists and Marxists who actively participated in the resistance during World War II and subsequently joined anti-colonial organizations.⁷⁷ The Maoist CNP also needs to be seen in the light of this older generation: it was initiated by members of the ‘old’ Communist Party party (Kommunistische Partij België) and developed out of initiatives of the ‘older generation’ of socialists and communists.⁷⁸ Their effort aimed at decolonization, anti-racism, anti-imperialism, and fostering ties with the Third World to disrupt the prevailing Cold War equilibrium. The CNP’s members, including Sterk, also supported the Pan-African Congress, the Liberation Front of Eritrea, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Oman and the Arabian Gulf.⁷⁹ For example, co-founder of the CNP, Jean Luc Dupire,

was also a secretary of the Committee of Solidarity with the Congolese Resistance (Comité de Solidarité avec la Résistance Congolaise, CSRC), founded by prominent figures from the traditional left.⁸⁰ Sterk was a part of an ‘old’ progressive network in Belgium actively seeking decolonization and anti-racism, and she discovered a profound resonance with the anti-imperialist principles of Maoism. She pragmatically incorporated elements of Maoism, such as an “anti-imperialist” stance and resistance against the global and domestic power balance of the Cold War, within the remnants of her pre-war militancy.

The CNP had however ties with student’s organizations in Brussels and Leuven, including organizations of Arab students. It had no direct connection whatsoever with AMADA, the Marxist-Leninist student rebellion influenced by Maoism that recruited from young catholic rebellious students, and later developed into the Marxist-Leninist party PVDA/PTB, which meant a split of the ‘old’ left. At its foundation, the CNP was strongly networked with many pluralist organisations; later, because of its further rapprochement with China, the CNP would isolate itself, until its dissolution in 1976. Following its disbandment, PVDA/PTB became the primary representative of Arab interests and has continued to hold this role to the present day.⁸¹

With ideas of ‘grassroots mobilisation’ as a form of change, Maoist ideas made their way into different ‘splintered’ progressive groups in Belgium, influencing not just one generation or movement. A better understanding of Maoist influences in Belgium could complicate the overemphasised dichotomy between an old and a new left generation, that seemed to both be influenced by Maoist ideas, and could shed light on the extent to which Maoist prac-

74. *Idem*, 632-652.

75. *Idem*, 638.

76. KIM CHRISTIAENS, “Voorbij de 1968-historiografie”, *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis*, 128/3, 2015, 381.

77. LUCAS CATHERINE, *Verre kusten van verlangen*, 141.

78. Other CNP key members of the ‘old’ generation were Marcel Liebman and Luc Sommerhausen. See LUCAS CATHERINE, *Verre kusten van verlangen*, 141.

79. JOHN NIEUWENHUYNS, *Belgitude après la Nakba*, 414.

80. *Idem*, 288.

81. *Idem*, 285-300.

tices continue to persist in Belgian society. Regarding the articles covering Sterk's presence at the Jordan Bank, they propagated a simplistic Cold-War narrative, giving excessive emphasis to the power of the USSR while neglecting the China-USSR rivalry and Sterk's commitment to Maoist ideas.

New Anti-Semitism

The polarised worldview intrinsic to Cold War culture might have induced Belgian journalists to frame Sterk as a leftwing revolutionary fighter with strong communist leanings who opposed US-backed Israel. This made her prone to receiving accusations of anti-Semitism. In Sterk's own news articles, she criticized Israel's policies for human rights violations while shedding light on the challenging living conditions of Palestinians in refugee camps. In doing so, Sterk regularly clarified that she was not an anti-Semite, highlighting her friendships with Jewish individuals and her assistance to Jewish people during World War II. She emphasized the distinction between Jewish people and Zionists, holding the latter accountable for political actions rather than blaming the entire Jewish community. Similarly, the Arab student community in Belgium actively responded to accusations of racism and anti-Semitism leveled against them in newspaper articles.⁸²

In 1978, Sterk made a declaration in *Humo*, a weekly TV-magazine aimed at a wide audience within Flanders, stating that Zionism was a precursor to "the new gas chambers." She argued that the

Israeli regime, due to its racist nature, bore resemblance to Nazi Germany's regime.⁸³ Sterk's statement highlighted how pro-Palestinian advocates used references to the Holocaust as a counter-argument in a post-World War II Western European context, where any resistance to Zionism's colonial practices was often silenced with a reference to the Holocaust.⁸⁴ Notably, in 1975, the United Nations General Assembly passed Resolution 3379, equating political Zionism with racism. However, Belgium voted against this resolution, reflecting the country's struggles in grappling with the weight of guilt from World War II.⁸⁵ One of Sterk's readers accused her of inciting anti-Semitism and claimed that anti-Zionists were "heralds for new gas chambers", stating that Sterk's attitude was the same as that of "the Germans in 1940 who initiated the extermination of the Jews".⁸⁶ Sterk felt compelled to defend herself against the prevalent postwar notion that supporting the Palestinian Cause equated to anti-Semitism. Her situation demonstrated the sensitivity of Belgian memory regarding the historical exclusion of Jewish people.

Similar to the US and to other neighboring countries in Europe, the Belgian left and social democrats were more reserved and divided over the Palestinian-Israeli conflict than over other causes in the Third World, and the New Left that was critical of the Zionist state was immediately accused of "New Anti-Semitism" in the 1970s.⁸⁷ Within Belgium, opponents of communism depicted the conflict as an offensive by Arab totalitarian states invading democratic Israel, drawing parallels between the Arab regimes and the totalitar-

82. See for example: *Brugsch Handelsblad*, 18 July 1970, 7. Sterk's husband also defended Sterk against accusations of antisemitism: *De Standaard*, 10 March, 1970, 8; *La Dernière Heure*, 7 March 1970, 3. On the Arab students in Belgium: YOAV DI-CAPUA, "Palestine Comes to Paris", 41.

83. *Humo*, March 1978, 14.

84. Scholars like Israel Shahak and Boaz Evron pointed out before that the "Holocaust consciousness" and the history of anti-Semitism is used as propaganda to justify the contemporary Zionist politics of Israel. ISRAEL SHAHAK, "The 'Historical Right' and the Other Holocaust", *Journal of Palestine Studies* 10/3, 1981, 27-34. BOAZ EVRON, "The Holocaust: Learning the Wrong Lessons", *Journal of Palestine Studies* 10/3, 1981, 16-26. These studies are a contribution to the map the great debate regarding racism, political Zionism and anti-Semitism and what Rashid Khalidi has called "the contrasting narratives regarding Palestine": RASHID KHALIDI, *Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness*, New York, 1997, 14.

85. JOS SMETS, "België en het Israëliësch-Palestijns Conflict", *Studia Diplomatica*, 45/6, 1992, 35-74.

86. Published in: *Humo*, March 1978, 14. Originally "dat mensen zoals zij de wegbereiders zijn naar de nieuwe gaskamers"; "ongeveer dezelfde redenering als de Duitsers in 1940".

87. REMCO ENSEL & EVELIEN GANS, *The Holocaust, Israel and 'the Jew'*, 182; JOHN NIEUWENHUYNS, "Belgium's Wider Peace Front", 289; MICHAEL R. FISCHBACH, "The New Left and the Arab-Israeli Conflict in the United States", 7-21.

ianism of the USSR and the fallen Third Reich. This portrayal contributed to the creation of a notion that figures like Gamal Abdel Nasser and Ahmad Shukeiri, the PLO representative advocating for the destruction of Israeli Jews, embodied new Nazis threatening the existence of the Jewish people.⁸⁸ As previous research suggests, Belgian newspapers such as *Le Soir*, a newspaper with the intention of maintaining political independence, described Arab states and leaders with Nazi-inspired imagery and frequently reported the presence of former Nazi officers in Arab armies.⁸⁹ Significantly, Belgian newspapers of that era failed to distinguish between the potential destruction of the state of Israel and the possible extermination of its Jewish inhabitants. This distinction became particularly blurred during the coverage of the 1967 conflict, where Israelis were portrayed as Holocaust victims, fueling fears of another genocide targeting the Jewish people. The prevalence of references to the Holocaust in newspapers regarding the Arab Israeli testify that the memory of the Holocaust had already nestled itself in the Belgian collective memory by then.⁹⁰

Sterk was forced into a spectacular postwar and Cold War narrative in which anti-Zionism, anti-Semitism, anti-capitalism, and the USSR were synonymous. Sterk, in her response, demonstrated a nuanced perspective and resisted being marginalized, a concern that Maoist groups showed little regard for.

Radical internationalism

The captivating narrative of Sterk's as a guerrilla fighter overshadowed how well networked, and

organized Sterk's activism was. Sterk's contribution to the Palestinian resistance was conducted not through guerrilla warfare, but through a broad network that reached beyond small radical left-wing groups. These left-wing groups in Belgium, including CNP, the *Liga tegen Imperialisme* (League Against Imperialism) and the Workers' Party, turned away from older leftist factions and previous political parties that were deeply divided when it came to issues concerning Israel.⁹¹ Until the recent research of John Nieuwenhuys, the history of the international solidarity of small radical left-wing solidarity was written separately from the history of the emerging Belgian NGOs focusing on peace, development, and human rights, primarily centered around humanitarian campaigns for victims.⁹²

From Sterk's archive can be gathered that she relied on an extensive network in Beirut and ensured that the CNP in Belgium was not isolated. She maintained close relationships with prominent figures such as Anis Sayigh from the Palestine Research Center, Soraya Antonius from the Fifth of June society and Ghassan Kanafani of DFLP.⁹³ Sterk's private correspondence with the CNP revealed the organization's success in delivering humanitarian aid to war victims, mirroring the efforts of the burgeoning NGOs dedicated to peace and development. She facilitated the CNP in sending medicine to Palestinian refugee camps, communicated resource requests from organizations like the DFLP, Fatah, and the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), ensuring that the medications or funds reached the intended refugee camps or organisations, while regularly providing information from these organizations back to Belgium.

88. JOHN NIEUWENHUYS, "Belgium's Wider Peace Front", 289.

89. WIM VAN DE VOORDE, *Beeldvorming van de Arabisch-Israëliëse oorlogen*, 186-187.

90. *Idem*, 186-187.

91. KIM CHRISTIAENS, "Voorbij de 1968-historiografie", 380; JOHN NIEUWENHUYS, "La cause palestinienne en Belgique: enjeu d'une histoire par le bas", *Contemporanea*, 39/2, 2017, 4.

92. These leftist organisations rejected state socialism in Eastern Europe, sought alternative models to Marxism such as Trotskyism and Maoism, and focused on the Third World. KIM CHRISTIAENS, "Voorbij de 1968-historiografie", 380.

John Nieuwenhuys has already pointed out that Sterk bridged the Palestinian resistance in Beirut with the CNP in Belgium. JOHN NIEUWENHUYS, *Belgitude après la Nakba*, 259-271.

93. Correspondence between Sterk and Dupire (ULB, *CNP Archive*, 064Z); Autobiographical documents (AVG-CARHIF, *Archive Yvonne Sterk*, STE/130-1). Documents of Sterk regarding her commitment to the Palestinian Cause, 1969-1976, (AVG-CARHIF, *Archive Yvonne Sterk*, STE/130-68).

Other organizations involved in Sterk's network included the DFLP, PFLP, Fatah, the Fifth of June Society, ELF, and the General Union of Palestinian Women (UGFP), which she frequently visited.⁹⁴

Moreover, Sterk's correspondence shows that she was not isolated in Belgium either. She was part of a broad Belgian network of Christian, socialist and Marxist peace activists. For example, she befriended the well-known Belgian pacifist Jean Van Lierde, a progressive Catholic who fought for the abolition of military service and supported the Congolese struggle for independence.⁹⁵ Sterk was also in touch with Ernest Glinne, the social democratic pioneer in pushing for Belgian legislation against anti-Semitism, racism, and xenophobia in the 1960s and who worked with Sterk on the project of sending medicine to the Palestinian organisations.⁹⁶ In short, Sterk was part of a Belgian network with progressive values of peace, decolonisation and anti-racism.⁹⁷ More broadly speaking, she belonged to a pluralistic ecosystem of pacifists and anti-colonial activists contrary to the oversimplified dichotomy between radical leftist groups and individuals who were seen as isolated and the broader movement of Belgian solidarity toward the Third World.

The Belgium news reports disseminated the images of Sterk as a leftist guerilla fighter for the Palestinian Cause fit the discourse of isolated "radical internationalism", a discourse that, until recently, was also persistent in the historiography on the solidarity toward the Third World.

V. "I had to weigh the words"

"I was the only woman in the camp. [...] Friendship of men fighting and dying for the same ideal is overwhelming. Women can never come to such a degree of like-mindedness and solidarity, I believe. [...] But eventually I became <Rafika Yvonne >. Which means as much as comrade. [...] I can't help having wild blood running through my veins, can I?"⁹⁸ Sterk was well aware that her being the only female person at the front in 1970 would sell. One month after the news of Sterk as a fedayee reached Belgium, Sterk also sold her's as an extraordinary dangerous story. Sterk stated in a local Dutch newspaper *Telstar*, emphasizing the dangers of being a war journalist: "I know reporters, who lusted after unique action footage, returned injured. [...] I was so close to drowning in the Jordan River. [...] From Irbid, the bullets whistle around your ears. [...] It was a hard, difficult, dangerous time."⁹⁹ The reporter from *Telstar* also noted that her position as a woman was exceptional: "You may ask yourself why she [Sterk] was the only European woman who dared to live among foreign resistance fighters and risked being shot on the Palestinian front [...]. A woman doesn't die at the front!" The reporter continued: "Yvonne experienced numerous expeditions and patrols in enemy territory. For a woman, more than even for a man, a huge dare."¹⁰⁰ While in control of her media representation herself, she capitalized on her distinctive position as a woman at the front, but from the perspective of a neutral war journalist. In a letter to *Harper's Magazine*, Sterk

94. Correspondence between Sterk and the representative of the CNP in Belgium Luc Dupire (ULB, *CNP Archive*, 064Z).

95. RIK HEMMERIJCKX, "Jean Van Lierde (1926-2006): De Kracht Van Een Overtuiging", *Brood & Rozen*, 12/1, 2007, 50-55.

96. JOHN NIEUWENHUYNS, "Belgium's Wider Peace Front? Isabelle Blume, the Peace Movement and the Issue of the Middle East (1950s - 1970s)", in KIM CHRISTIAENS, JOHN NIEUWENHUYNS, & CHAREL ROEMER, (dir.), *International Solidarity in the Low Countries during the Twentieth Century: New Perspectives and Themes*, Berlin, 2020, 275-311. For Sterk's cooperation with Glinne, see Sterk to Dupire, Beirut, 29 March 1973 (ULB, *CNP Archive*, 064Z).

97. See Sterk to Dupire, Beirut, 29 March 1973 (ULB, *CNP Archive*, 064Z).

98. *Telstar*, 11 April 1970, 26.

99. *Idem*, 26.

100. *Idem*, 26.

responded to the Frady's depiction of Sterk as a guerilla fighter in which she declared that she is "not a 'Trotskyist'" and does "not belong to any far-left political party". She stated she was described as a fighter but has "never fired a Kalashnikov during operations on the Jordan River". She accusingly points at Frady, who was "looking for a sensational story".¹⁰¹ According to Sterk's own articles, she stayed among the fedayeen as a neutral journalist, reporting about the situation at the front. Carrying a weapon was mandatory for one's safety: "Me fighting? Are you crazy? [...] In the front line, journalists should always be armed."¹⁰²

Sterk's husband, was quick to respond to Sterk portrayal as a fedayee. Despite not having received any letters from his wife for several weeks and learning from the press about Sterk's presence among the fedayeen, he initiated to defend her against the armed fighter image that the Belgian press had propagated earlier that week in Flemish Nationalist and Catholic newspaper *De Standaard* and the generalist Walloon newspaper *La Dernière Heure*.¹⁰³ While lacking specific knowledge about Sterk's exact circumstances, he emphasized that her visit to Jordan was driven by journalistic and humanitarian purposes: "she visits refugee camps, hospitals, villages, familiarizes herself with the miserable existence where these people [the Palestinians] were thrown into".¹⁰⁴ He denounced the framing of Sterk as a fedayeen, attributing it

to a group of sensationalist journalists seeking to spread a sensational story, stating "it's spectacular isn't it, an armed European woman among guerillas?"¹⁰⁵ The article focused extensively on her career as a writer and poet, while her affiliation with the Democratic Front and her active role in the CNP were conveniently omitted. Ambroes stated: "She is over there as an objective freelance journalist [...] Journalists, who want to follow a military action, have to be armed".¹⁰⁶ The fact that *La Dernière Heure* published articles from both the Associated Press and Ambroes containing a different stance affirms the previous argument that newspapers aligned their tone with the source of information and the ideas of the individual contributors.

Similarly, in her news reports, Sterk adopted an identity of a humanitarian and pacifist journalist who addressed the suffering of children, destroyed cities, and the inhumane conditions in numerous refugee camps.¹⁰⁷ She stated in her news reports that only peaceful dialogue between Israel and the Palestinians could solve the Palestinian question and publicly disapproved of violence on any side of the Arab-Israeli conflict.¹⁰⁸ Sterk's pacifist and humanitarian stance resonated with that of Belgian postwar peace activists and the burgeoning NGOs for peace, development cooperation and human rights.¹⁰⁹ For example, a photograph (illustration 2) in which Sterk nursed a war victim accompanied

101. Originally: "Le journaliste belge [Sterk] [...] n'est pas 'trotskyiste' et n'appartient à aucun parti politique d'extrême gauche. [...] Cette femme décrite comme combattante n'a jamais tiré au Kalachnikov lors d'opérations sur le Jourdain. [...] ce journaliste [Frady] était à recherche de papier sensationnel", Sterk to Harper's Magazine (AVG-CARHIF, *Archive Yvonne Sterk*, STE/130-82).

102. Originally: "Zelf vechten? Ben je gek?" in: *Telstar*, 11 April 1970, 26; Originally: "In de frontlijn moeten journalisten steeds gewapend zijn" in: *Brugsch Handelsblad*, 18 July 1970, 7.

103. *La Dernière Heure*, 7 March 1970, 3; *De Standaard*, 10 March 1970, 8.

104. *De Standaard*, 10 March 1970, 8. Pacifism in this article is defined as the unconditional rejection of war, without distinguishing between just and unjust wars. Humanitarianism refers to helping victims of war and disaster, as well as publicly addressing the living conditions of these victims: CHEYNEY RYAN, « War, Hostilities, Terrorism: A Pacifist Perspective: Ethos, History, Politics », in JORG KÜSTERMANS, TOM SAUER, DOMINIEK LOOTENS et al., (eds.), *Pacifism's Appeal: Ethos, History, Politics*, New York, 2019, 11-40; For debates concerning the definition of humanitarianism, see: JOANNE LAYCOCK, FRANCESCA PIANA & BERTRAND TAITHE, *Aid to Armenia: Humanitarianism and Intervention from the 1890s to the Present*, Manchester, 2020, 3-5.

105. *De Standaard*, 10 March 1970, 8.

106. *Idem*, 8.

107. *Brugsch Handelsblad*, 18 July 1970, 7.

108. *Brugsch Handelsblad*, 18 July 1970, 7; *Telstar*, 11 April 1970, 26.

109. On NGOs, see: KIM CHRISTIAENS, "Voorbij de 1968-historiografie", 380. On Belgian postwar pacifism, see RIK HEMMERJICKX, "Jean Van Lierde", 51-53.

an article in the Pro-Palestinian magazine “Les-Deux-Rives” in which she covered the conditions of Palestinians in Israeli territories.¹¹⁰

Sterk utilized the discourse of the white savior in her public self-representation, a narrative that was familiar to Western spectators. The frame of the white humanitarian hero is a legacy of Western colonial and imperial white savior discourse. Edward Saïd pointed out that the West developed an Orientalist discourse in which the Middle East is constructed as lagging behind the West in order to strengthen Western imperialist hegemony.¹¹¹ The White Man’s Burden, Rudyard Kipling’s famous 1899 poem, belongs to this same discourse in which Western ‘heroes’, are convinced to have a moral duty to civilize the rest of the world.¹¹² A well-known example of the white savior in the Arab world is the case of Thomas Edward Lawrence, a British officer commonly known as Lawrence of Arabia. He was revered as a heroic figure for his role in uniting Arab groups against the Ottoman Empire during World War I. This heroic narrative gained widespread popularity mainly through cinema, where Lawrence is often portrayed wearing a *keffiyeh*.¹¹³ In Sterk’s own articles, Sterk fitted herself into a broader discourse of Western humanitarians in the Third World, Orientalism and the phenomenon of the white savior. Sterk, a woman of her time often defined the Middle East through her “progressive” and secular intellectual thoughts. This is a Eurocentric reflex, that historian Farouk Mardam-Bey diagnosed among other French-speaking Intellectual Europeans at the time. This kind of Eurocentrism is, as Mardam-Bey argued, a manner to re-estab-

lish the moral superiority of the West, not only in comparison to the East but also to an “Orient” that was more imaginary than real.¹¹⁴ Sterk for example stated that when she first visited the Persian Gulf, she was shocked by how well women were treated, proving that she reasoned from a sense of moral European superiority, with Europe being central to her assessment.¹¹⁵

The neutral and peaceful self-representation of Sterk is in contrast with her private letters to the CNP where she supported the idea of a broad armed social revolution centered on anti-capitalist reform.¹¹⁶ Sterk seemed to be in line with the DFLP and the PFLP who emphasised an anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist mobilisation of the masses and considered direct confrontation as necessary.¹¹⁷ In the same way, Sterk considered a mobilisation of “the masses” necessary for a revolutionary victory in which the Palestinian territories were liberated from Zionism, capitalism and international imperialism.¹¹⁸ Furthermore, Sterk’s private correspondence unveils that Sterk, who presented herself publicly as a humanitarian white savior, harbored significant skepticism towards ‘white saviors’ since she maintained a critical stance towards international aid and expressed disapproval of foreign intervention in local conflicts. For instance, she saw the Lebanese civil war as a “struggle in which foreign interests prevailed”.¹¹⁹ Although Sterk can be seen a white savior, she rejected the “big, capitalist and imperialist” white saviors, the US and the Soviet Union. She also had little faith in Red Cross humanitarian aid, which she says is subject to a ‘capitalist conspiracy’ in which “supplies were chased from

110. *Les Deux Rives*, 1969, 16.

111. Edward SAÏD, *Orientalism*, 1-27.

112. Ella SHOCHAT en Robert STAM, *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, 100.

113. ANDREW LONG, “The Hidden and the Visible in British Orientalism”, *Middle East Critique*, 18/1, 35.

114. FAROUK MARDAM-BEY, “French Intellectuals and the Palestine Question”, *Journal of Palestine Studies* 43/3, 2014, 26-39.

115. Autobiographical documents (AVG-CARHIF, *Archive Yvonne Sterk*, STE/130-1).

116. On political actors that belonged to the “traditional left” in Belgium and supported the Palestinian Cause, see: JOHN NIEUWENHUYNS, *Belgitude après la Nakba*, 259-271.

117. SUNE HAUGBOLLE, “The New Arab Left and 1967”, *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 44/4, 2017, 497-512.

118. For example, Sterk to Dupire, Beirut, 26 December 1973 (ULB, *CNP Archive*, 064Z).

119. Autobiographical documents: Eisdens profiel 1991 (AVG-CARHIF, *Archive Yvonne Sterk*, STE/130-1).



Yvonne Sterk in a military hospital in Meadi, Cairo, treating a victim of napalm in June 1969. For the sake of this article, the photograph is cropped to not unnecessarily show the victim and his injuries. Source: Yvonne Sterk, "La Résistance Palestinienne dans les territoires occupés par Israël", Les Deux Rives, 1969, 16.

one sector to another for big money".¹²⁰ She also rejected the UN, which she saw as a plaything of "les super grands": the US and the Soviet Union.¹²¹ Later, in 1991, she also disapproves of foreign interference in Iraq and accuses Europe of indiscriminately following the orders of its "big brother", the US.¹²² In addition, a private letter to the Fifth of June Society, a Palestinian resistance organisation in Lebanon, Sterk stated that she tried to come across as a neutral journalist: "I had to weigh the words, the terms, to give it [Sterk's reports] an objective and neutral appearance".¹²³

The contrast between Sterk's private and public self-representation emphasizes the deliberate and constructed nature of her self-portrayal. The divergence between the western media's depiction of Sterk as a guerrilla fighter and her own public representation as a white savior is a significant value for study, since these contrasting narratives surrounding the same events reveal the shaping and tailoring of stories to suit specific audiences, thus unveiling a social imaginary.¹²⁴ Sterk tailored her story to the audience by adapting the white savior story. This was accomplished by the careful selection of vocabulary and images, which would resonate with readers in Belgium. Similarly, when the Belgian journalists decided which news to showcase in Belgium, they presumed that the theme of a revolutionary female fighter would be appealing to the Belgian public.¹²⁵

The Belgian perception of Arab guerrillas after the Six Day War and the sensitive memory of the Holocaust can explain Sterk's self-promotion

as a neutral journalist. The Belgian activists for the Palestinian Cause knew they did not benefit from a positive presentation of the fedayeen, who could not be seen as peaceful. Therefore, they found themselves in an uncomfortable position, supporting the Palestinian movement but unable to enthusiastically embrace the guerrillas.¹²⁶ Sterk, who was financially dependent on every article she sold, emphasised the human rights issue of the Palestinians, rather than the armed struggle of guerrilla forces.¹²⁷ Moreover, there seemed to be little demand for Sterk's Israel-critical articles after 1970 in Belgium, since they were sold almost exclusively to the Lebanese media.¹²⁸ When taking a glance at the archives of the TV channel BRT, a clear shift can be observed between 1970 and 1972. In 1970, the fedayeen were frequently featured, not only in reports about their armed struggle and warfare, but also portrayed as freedom fighters who garnered applause from local Palestinian communities, guarded Palestinian refugee camps, participating in funerals for fellow freedom fighters, as well as taking part in protests and memorial services for the victims of the conflict. However, in 1972, there was another surge of media attention given to the fedayeen by Flemish TV. This time, however, they were prominently featured as terrorists, with a specific focus on the attack on the Israeli athletes in Munich in 1972.¹²⁹ The War on Terror in the Seventies was a western construct in which media plays an important role.¹³⁰ Scholars such as Ilan Pappé, Edmund Ghareeb, Jaennette Greven and Lisa Hajjar have demonstrated, among many others, that since 1967, Palestinians have been framed as terrorists

120. Autobiographical documents: Eisdens profil 1991 (AVG-CARHIF, *Archive Yvonne Sterk*, STE/130-1).

121. See Dupire to Sterk, 7 January 1974 (ULB, *CNP Archive*, 064Z).

122. Autobiographical documents: Eisdens profil 1991 (AVG-CARHIF, *Archive Yvonne Sterk*, STE/130-1).

123. Originally "Il a fallu peser les mots, les termes pour lui donner une allure objective et neutre", Sterk to Mirelle Bigorie, Beirut, 26 February 1975 (AVG-CARHIF, *Archive Yvonne Sterk*, STE/130-68).

124. LUISE WHITE, "Telling More: Lies, Secrets, and History", 11-22.

125. *Idem*, 11-22.

126. JOHN NIEUWENHUIS, "Belgium's Wider Peace Front", 299. KIM CHRISTIAENS, "Voorbij de 1968-historiografie", 394-97.

127. Sterk's journalistic reports (AVG-CARHIF, *Archive Yvonne Sterk*, STE/130-81).

128. Sterk's journalistic reports (AVG-CARHIF, *Archive Yvonne Sterk*, STE/130-81).

129. VRT Archive via "Het Archief" of Meemoo, Flemish Institute for Archive, and search term "fedayin".

130. YOSEFA LOSHITZKY, "The Post-Holocaust Jew in the Age of 'the War on Terror': Steven Spielberg's Munich", *Journal of Palestine Studies* 40/2, 2011, 77-87.

and as a threat in an Arab conspiracy to annihilate the Jewish state of Israel.¹³¹

Despite her self-promotion as a neutral journalist, Sterk's private correspondence with her closest friend in Beirut suggests the Belgian security service (VSSE) considered Sterk a danger because of her affiliation with the DFLP. According to Sterk's private letters and diaries, the Belgian state marked her as a threat after she denounced the murder of Ghassan Kanafani, who was executed by the Israeli intelligence service in July 1972 in Beirut.¹³² Kanafani, the Palestinian writer, PFLP spokesman and Sterk's literary friend, is present in the Palestinian memory for his literary work and his significance within the Palestinian struggle.¹³³ After Sterk addressed his murder publicly in a radio interview, she had to deal with the VSSE who perceived her friendship with the DFLP leader as a red flag.¹³⁴ In February 1973, Sterk wrote to a friend in Beirut that she had "burned her bridges with Belgium" when she had discussed her "personal situation" with the state security, stating that this made it difficult for her to work in Belgium and was forced to live in Lebanon.¹³⁵ According to Sterk, her potential employers in Belgium would be informed that she was considered a danger to the State.¹³⁶ In addition, Sterk claimed in her correspondence with the CNP that the Belgian police had raided her husband's home in Belgium looking for evidence for planning terrorist attacks in name of the

Palestinian Cause. Sterk stated in the private letter that she was not part of a complot against the Belgian State: "We [Sterk and her husband] have nothing to hide, [...] we are not plotting against the Belgian state [...] in any terrorist activity."¹³⁷

It is likely that Sterk, as a DFLP member, received attention from the Belgian security services, who considered communism as a big threat and who were consistently on the lookout for left-wing revolutionary groups and individuals.¹³⁸ Following the arrival of NATO in Belgium in 1967, the Belgian security budget experienced a gradual increase due to pressure from the British and the US. The primary focus was on espionage activities and supporting resistance efforts in anticipation of a potential Soviet invasion. Moreover, the Belgian State Security, like that of other European states, perceived Palestinian groups like the PFLP and DFLP as a threat that amplified after the attack in Munich in 1972.¹³⁹ In addition, during the 1970s, a strong internationalisation of terrorism occurred which made it possible for a western activist like Sterk to collaborate with Palestinian resistance groups. For example, core members from the German left-wing extremist terror group of RAF, in which notable women were active, worked closely with Palestinian groups.¹⁴⁰ Likewise, through a collaboration of Dutch and Israeli security services, the Dutch Lidwina Janssens was arrested in 1976 as a spy for the PFLP.¹⁴¹ Since a government's consideration of

131. JEANNETTE GREVEN, "U.S. Security Coordination and the "Global War on Terror"", *Journal of Palestine Studies* 49/1, 2019, 25-46; LISA HAJJAR, "International Humanitarian Law and "Wars on Terror": A Comparative Analysis of Israeli and American Doctrines and Policies"", *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 36/1, 2006, 21-42. ILAN PAPPÉ, "Post-Zionist Critique on Israel and the Palestinians Part II: The Media"", *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 26/3, 1997, 37-43; EDMUND GHAREEB, PETER JENNINGS, RONALD KOVEN et al., "The American Media and the Palestine Problem", *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 5/1, 1975, 127-149.

132. Sterk to Mirelle Bigorie [a French friend of Sterk], Beirut, March 21/1973, (AVG-CARHIF, *Archive Yvonne Sterk*, STE/130-68); Autobiographical documents (AVG-CARHIF, *Archive Yvonne Sterk*, STE/130-1).

133. ELIAS KHOURY, "Remembering Ghassan Kanafani, or How a Nation Was Born of Story Telling", *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 42/3, 2013, 85-91.

134. Autobiographical documents (AVG-CARHIF, *Archive Yvonne Sterk*, STE/130-1).

135. Sterk to Mirelle Bigorie, Beirut, 21/1973 (AVG-CARHIF, *Archive Yvonne Sterk*, STE/130-68).

136. Autobiographical documents (AVG-CARHIF, *Archive Yvonne Sterk*, STE/130-1).

137. Originally "Nous [Sterk and her husband] n'avons rien à cacher, [...] nous ne complotons pas contre l'Etat Belge [...] dans aucune activité terroriste". See Sterk to Dupire, Beirut, 31/1973, (ULB, *CNP Archive*, 064Z).

138. WOUTER SPIESSCHAERT, « "Van Koude Oorlog naar Partnership" », in MARC COOLS, (dir.), *De Staatsveiligheid: essays over 175 jaar Veiligheid van de Staat*, Brussel, 2005, 116-117.

139. PHILIPPE DE BAETS, « "Terrorisme en Inlichtingendiensten" », in: in MARC COOLS, (dir.), *De Staatsveiligheid: essays over 175 jaar Veiligheid van de Staat*, Brussel, 2005, 116-117, 243-264.

140. *Idem*, 246.

141. BEATRICE DE GRAAF, *Gevaarlijke Vrouwen*, 105.

threat is entwined with prevailing cultural and normative assumptions, it is reasonable to argue that the combined fear of communism, women problematizing the imagined boundaries of femininity and Palestinian “terrorist” attacks led Belgian state security to perceive Sterk as a legitimate threat.¹⁴² This suggests the prevalence of the revolutionary female fighter trope was entwined with the actions of the Belgian state, thereby shaping a tangible reality in Belgium that was grounded in visual representations and ideas of gender and the Cold War.

VI. Conclusion

The Anglosphere and Belgian news media played a significant role in framing Sterk within the prevalent narrative of the female revolutionary armed resistance fighter. These media outlets capitalized on the allure of female terrorists and political activists who disrupted societal norms, exploiting both fear and fascination. Consequently, Sterk found herself entangled in a captivating Cold War narrative that amalgamated anti-Zionism, anti-Semitism, anti-capitalism, and associations with the USSR. However, she actively engaged in navigating the frameworks that aligned with her position as a European activist in the Third World. She avoided the trope of the far-left female fighter and instead adopted the narrative of the white saviour.

The construction of ideas surrounding the Cold War in Belgium depended on media news prioritising spectacle and fear, and the tone of the reports depended heavily on the location and

nationality of the journalists. This implies that prevalent perceptions and fears, such as the stereotype of Palestinians as potential terrorists, were ingrained in the Belgian reality of the Cold War, where conflicts in the Third world were viewed through a Cold War paradigm rather than as multifaceted conflicts involving diverse groups. To this day, a significant media battle surrounds the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. What appears in Belgian media evokes popular imaginations and fears, shaping the perceptions of the conflict and the people directly affected by the conflict. News reports often highlight terrorism fears, fuelling popular anxieties. The memory of the Holocaust continues to be invoked, tapping into Belgium’s lingering post-war guilt associated with it. After half a century, the same narratives and selling tactics are still present in media reporting on the Palestine-Israel conflict in Belgium.

This article raises more questions. Further research is needed into the role of the Belgian media –such as news media, film, magazines - in shaping the perception of the revolutionary armed woman beyond Sterk’s specific case. An intriguing avenue for study involves examining the archival sources of Belgian state security, now that the state documents have reached the 50-year mark, to assess the extent to which the revolutionary woman was perceived as a tangible threat to which the state reacted. Based on experience, it appears that accessing the sources might not be achievable in the near future. Finally, the case study prompts additional questions about the complexity and impact of Maoism and Trotskyism in Belgium.

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142. *Idem*, 105.

