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Gender, War, and the State: The Military Management of Alda Pio Gambarara during the Italian Wars

Stephen Bowd

Abstract

During the Italian Wars (1494-1559) a significant number of women were entrusted with household and estate management in northern Italy in the absence of their husbands or other family members involved in warlike activities (primarily as mercenaries). Building on models of the household and estate as a site for war-related activities which involved men and women, this paper posits the development of the role of the female military manager who drew on her experience to contribute to war. This experience of household and estate management and its entanglement with the military sphere is reconstructed on the basis of a remarkable cache of letters written by Alda Pio Gambarara whose natal and conjugal families found themselves heavily involved in war. The letters reveal the extent of Alda's estate management and the ways in which she ensured her husband and his company were fitted for war, by providing supplies and equipment including armour. They also reveal the ways in which she managed the war in and around Brescia by raising troops and sappers and by working closely with the Venetian and then French authorities.

Keywords

Gambarara; Venice; Brescia; Gender; War; Military; Soldiers; Sappers; Artillery; France; Italian Wars

Introduction

On 19 February 1512 forces commanded by Gaston de Foix (1489-1512), the French royal lieutenant in Lombardy, entered the city of Brescia, attacked occupying Venetian troops led by Andrea Gritti (1455-1538), and inflicted a sack as punishment for the city's rebellion against French rule.¹ As one of the worst massacres of the Italian Wars (1494-1559) contemporary commentators scrambled to parse its meaning.² Marco Negro assigned blame for the catastrophe to all sides and highlighted local social and political fault lines destabilized by foreign intervention. Specifically, Negro claimed that he would need a month to describe the contribution of the Gambara family and their followers to the betrayal of the city and ensuing violence. He singled out Alda Pio Gambara (ca. 1455-ca. 1527) as chief culprit: she had held out in the castle with French troops until Foix arrived with reinforcements, and 'had made more war on Venice than if she had a thousand cavalry, and yet all she had done was write and plot'.³ Around the same time, the Venetian commissioner described her as a 'whore and cow' ('puttana et vacca'), while two decades later another local chronicler recalled how during the sack Alda's palace rang with the sounds of dancing and banqueting more suitable for a brothel, and described her as 'this great, large woman who

¹Unless otherwise noted: all archival citations are to Archivio di Stato, Brescia, Archivio Gambara, busta (b.), filza, and letter number if available; all references are to letters by Alda Pio Gambara in b. 277 in the same place, cited by number and date; and all letters are dated at Brescia.

Pasero, *Francia*, 222.

² Bowd, *Venice's Most Loyal City*, chap. 11; *Renaissance Mass Murder*.

³ 'Alda ha facto più guera a la Signori ache si havesse auto contra 1000 cavali; mai non feva altro che scriver e far pratiche, etc.' Summary of letter from Marco Negro to Piero and Lorenzo Capello, Brescia, 9 Aug. 1512 in Sanudo, 15: 287-93 (all references to vols. and cols.)

wore the trousers to such an extent that she was obeyed by the whole Gambara family which attended to all of her commands'.⁴

These images of Alda as a manly female and meretricious intriguer are typical characterizations of women of power.⁵ But just as historians of gender and politics have revealed more complex truths beneath contemporary slurs and modern exceptionalist models, so this chapter provides a fuller version of Alda and her shadow agency during war.⁶ This is a portrait largely based on hundreds of letters Alda wrote between 1497 and 1512 from her palace in Brescia – to which she moved from her native Carpi on marrying Count Gianfrancesco Gambara (d. 1511) in ca. 1485 – and which she addressed to her brother-in-law Count Niccolò Gambara at Verola Alghise (now Verolanuova); to his wife Lucrezia Gonzaga; and to their daughter Auriga.⁷ This largely unexplored female correspondence, which is far from unique in the Gambara archive or in Italian archives more generally,⁸

⁴ Polo Capello quoted in Pasero, *Francia*, 253 n. 55; Pandolfo Nassino quoted in Frati et al., *Sacco*, 1/1: 145 ('Costey era granda et grossa. Costey portava baraga talmente che tutta casa Gambaresca la obidiva et stasevano ad ogni sui comandamenti').

⁵ Dixon.

⁶ Tanner.

⁷ In addition to the letters in b. 277, see letters from Alda in b. 282, filza '1509', no. 546 (5 Dec. 1509); filza '1510', no. 604 (3 June 1510, autograph), and no. 605 (1 June 1510, autograph). No.100 (15 Mar. 1505) was signed jointly by Alda and her sister Gratosia Pio. Alda's letters are cited in Pasero, *Francia*, passim.

⁸ Principally, but not exhaustively, see b. 269, Auriga Gambara (84 letters dating to 1508-47), Emilia Gambara (108 letters, 1513-48); b. 271, Taddea Gambara (28 letters, 1499-1511); b. 272, Alessandra Gambara (25 letters, 1498-1508), Caterina Torelli Gonzaga di Novellara (70 letters, 1496-1517), Ippolita Gonzaga di Novellara (39 letters, 1496-1516), Lucrezia Gonzaga

suggests that Alda's household and estate management underpinned what might be called her 'military management' or war-related shadow agency and is therefore of direct relevance to the broad themes explored in this book.⁹

As noted in the Introduction, and by several other contributors to the volume, this period has been considered critical in the relationship between war and state development.¹⁰ In Venice, as in many other parts of Europe the provision of men and supplies for war entailed bureaucratic growth and specialization, but also relied on networks of noble families in the mainland empire.¹¹ These families were expected to train and provide companies of expensive heavy cavalry, organize regular musters and other warlike displays, and raise infantry or sappers from local society.¹² As all this suggests, war and state development may be understood in terms of bipolar (metropole-territory) and polycentric relationships. Accordingly, recent scholars have demonstrated how northern Italian communities worked with local noble or civic authorities, as well as with the metropolises of Milan or Venice, to organize for war.¹³ As these studies demonstrate, and as Alda's correspondence amply confirms, these networks were shaped by an array of feudal privileges or customs governing the work of peasants, military entrepreneurs, merchants, moneylenders, or estate and household managers.

di Novellara Gambarà (40 letters, 1496-1504); b. 274, Laura Maggi (15 letters, 1503-11); b. 278, Aloisa Scotti (74 letters, 1496-1517), and Maddalena Maggi Scotti (29 letters, 1506-11).

In general, see Plebani.

⁹ The term 'military management' is here adapted from Ongaro.

¹⁰ Above, with full bibliographic references, xx-xx.

¹¹ Hocquet.

¹² Mallett and Hale, 65-74, 314, 473 fig. 2.

¹³ Ongaro; Covini "'Alle spese'".

Recent studies have also shown how war-related labour was gendered. Women's work was vital to the early modern state and to the support of growing armies through the provision of food, accommodation, and a range of services by no means 'unskilled' or simply confined to the ancillary roles of the 'campaign community'.¹⁴ For example, the wives of soldiers were often expected to trade as means of supplementing military pay.¹⁵ This 'two-supporter' model of spousal contribution to the household has also been applied to the elite household and estate management model of military management.¹⁶ For example, Kristen B. Neuschel has argued that during the French Wars of Religion (1562-98) roles assumed in early modern aristocratic household management – whether acquiring goods and clothing, managing labour, or providing small arms for the defence of the château – were not sharply or rigidly gendered. Tasks like hospitality – which cemented bonds of mutual trust and promoted family honour – and the maintenance of cannon or the organization of peasants to meet local or small-scale threats were shared by both sexes and meant that women 'constituted and represented' the 'warrior class' in ways readily observable in Renaissance Italy.¹⁷ This changing picture of who exactly contributed to war invites us to rethink how we approach archival work on the history of war and how to expand our analyses of familiar histories.

Managing Estate and Household

¹⁴ Lynn.

¹⁵ Lennerstrand et al., 183-5, 190-91.

¹⁶ Ågren.

¹⁷ Neuschel, 126. See Sandberg; Arcangeli and Peyronel. See also Brian Sandberg's contribution to this volume.

In Renaissance Italy many aristocratic women wielded power in the absence of their husbands, as widows, or as regents for sons or nephews. For example, Alda's maternal aunt Maddalena del Carretto, widow of Pietro Guido Torelli, acted as regent in the duchy of Guastalla for lengthy periods and resorted to arms and poison in her determined efforts to retain power towards the end of the fifteenth century. In this respect she resembled a previous duchess of Guastalla, Orsina Visconti, who was famed for donning armour and taking to the battlefield against the Venetians in her husband's absence in 1426.¹⁸ In her turn, Alda's daughter Veronica Gambarà (1485-1550) married a *condottiero* (mercenary) and in 1518 assumed the rule of Correggio as widow and regent.¹⁹

During the Italian Wars the absence of lords from their territories while on military service threw more of the work of political leadership and estate and household management, including military or defensive expenditure, onto women.²⁰ The families of these *condottieri* were often closely connected and their wives or widows drew on the influence of their extended network of relations by birth and marriage, as well as on friends and servants, to maintain their local influence, preserve their dowry wealth, and ensure that their sons came into their inheritance.²¹ These women brokered marriages between clans to enhance dynastic clout, organized artistic, urban planning or architectural projects,²² maintained extensive epistolary networks, and produced literary works which sometimes reflected the experience

¹⁸ Affò, 2: 74, 79-80, 83, 99-101, 115-18. Compare Covini, 'Tra *patronage*', esp. 253;

Spagnoletti; Shaw. On Orsina Visconti see Milligan, 189-93.

¹⁹ McIver, 'The "Ladies"'.

²⁰ Arcangeli, 'Un'aristocrazia'; Folin, esp. 487-9.

²¹ Arcangeli, 'Un'aristocrazia'; Casanova. See also Chojnacki, 'At Home'.

²² Covini, 'Tra *patronage*'; Folin; McIver, 'An Invisible'; Ghirardo; Smith, 'Gender'.

of the disruption of war: it is no coincidence that the poetry of Veronica Gambara, daughter and widow of *condottieri*, is full of images of war and the parting or absence of loved ones.²³

Alda's life was shaped by war and military priorities as a consequence of the absence of her husband Gianfrancesco on military service for the Venetian state from the earliest years of their marriage. She managed household and estate with a combination of skill, knowledge and determination that may have been innate and could have been modelled on the example of a number of other women in the region, some of whom were female relations and acquaintances.²⁴ Alda may also have learned from the experience of her own family since the Pio da Carpi clan was riven with tensions due to the indivisibility of its territory and by the end of the century her brother Giberto was in violent dispute with their cousin Alberto for control of the lordship.²⁵ Despite the fraternal division of the Gambara feudatory inheritance in the latter part of the fifteenth century Alda was obliged to work with her brothers-in-law Pietro and Niccolò in a number of matters of shared jurisdiction and fiscal or military obligations.²⁶ Such shared fraternal arrangements posed enormous challenges to both household harmony and political stability, but Alda worked hard to navigate them to the benefit of the clan.

For Alda, the routine matters of estate management included making an investiture of land in 1496 while her husband was fighting on behalf of Venice in and around Pisa.²⁷ Three years later she took delivery of, and organized payment for almost two thousand pavement

²³ Gambara.

²⁴ McIver, *Women*.

²⁵ Sanudo, 1: 680-3. On Giberto's death see letter no. 21 (7 Oct. 1500).

²⁶ Archetti, 'Gambara'; Camerano, 'Gambara'; Archetti, 'Una famiglia'.

²⁷ No. 12 (22 Feb. 1496). On Gianfrancesco's military service ca. 1496-97 see Sanudo, 1: 194, 493, 543.

tiles and lime while her husband was involved in the wars in the Milanese.²⁸ She also oversaw disputes between local men about improvements to a mill, and indeed the management of lucrative waters and mills on Gambara lands occupies a significant proportion of her correspondence.²⁹ In 1503 she sent a servant down with her husband to help deal with the damage caused to a mill by certain toughs or ‘bravi’ on horseback.³⁰ Two years later another dispute revolved around the tussle for control of waters with neighbours, which required a survey by her staff.³¹ Alda kept a weather eye on those who might overstep their rightful bounds by breaking the stumps marking Gambara territory in 1501, for example, or five years later writing to ensure that the owner of a piece of land purchased from the Gambara did not overstep the mark, as was his wont, and dig up trees.³²

The marshaling of resources and the direction of male and female servants were key components of Alda’s household and estate management.³³ These servants often helped Alda to organize banquets and other entertainments to cement the family’s relationship with

²⁸ No. 20 (18 Nov. 1499); no. 24 (26 Nov. 1499). On Gianfrancesco’s military service ca. 1499 see Sanudo, 2: 1147-8, 1162, 1170, 1176, 1177, 1184; 3: 121, 141.

²⁹ No. 23 (16 Nov. 1498); no. 49 (22 Oct. 1503); no. 68 (2 May 1504); no. 102 (1 April 1505); no. 103 (6 April 1505); no. 105 (25 Nov. 1505); no. 118 (30 Oct. 1506); no. 212 (21 June 1511); no. 216 (14 Sept. 1511); no. 235 (Carpi, 25 Aug. 1517); no. 242 (Pralboino, 23 Nov. 1525).

³⁰ No. 49 (22 Oct. 1503).

³¹ No. 98 (1 March 1505); no. 101 (17 May 1505); no. 105 (25 Nov. 1505); no. 106 (30 Nov. 1505); no. 107 (30 Nov. 1505); no. 108 (30 Nov. 1505); no. 109 (10 Dec. 1505); no. 110 (17 Dec. 1505); no. 111 (18 Dec. 1505); no. 113 (24 Dec. 1505); no. 114 (21 Feb. 1506).

³² No. 34 (7 Oct. 1501); no. 116 (7 Oct. 1506); no. 117 (14 Oct. 1506); no. 118 (30 Oct. 1506).

Venice or France embodied by its ambassadors or commissioners, including Andrea Gritti, who were in need of horses, accommodation and refreshments as they travelled through the region.³⁴ Special care was taken to keep local Venetian rectors sweet with gifts, banquets and respectful visits. In 1505 Alda cannily advised her brother-in-law Niccolò that since the rectors were about to sit in judgment on a dispute about waterways he should go and honour them over the holidays.³⁵ On the occasion of the birth of a son to the wife of the Venetian captain in nearby Cremona in 1508 Alda suggested that Niccolò should take baked goods as a gift.³⁶ At Christmas 1509 the new French governors, including the castellan, were presented with fat capons, calves, cheese, and meats, which at Easter were supplemented with lambs and eggs, or adapted to chicken paste to suit the diet of Cardinal Carlo del Carretto, the French-appointed governor of Brescia (and possibly a relation of Alda's through her mother).³⁷

In sum, Alda's experiences of household and estate management – briefly sampled here – provided her with some of the experience and skills fundamental to military management: the organization of people and the transportation of goods; the survey and

³³ No. 31 (19 April 1501); no. 145 (24 April 1508); no. 198 (1 Oct. 1510); no. 228 (23 Jan. 1512); no. 214 (5 Sept. 1511); no. 215 (7 Sept. 1511).

³⁴ No. 36 (25 Oct. 1501); no. 94 (1 Feb. 1504); no. 115 (20 Sept. 1506); no. 149 (10 June 1508) (Gritti).

³⁵ No. 113 (24 Dec. 1505).

³⁶ No. 151 (30 July 1508).

³⁷ No. 164 (20 Dec. 1509); no. 165 (24 Dec. 1509); no. 166 (26 Dec. 1509); no. 170 (13 Jan. 1510); no. 177 (15 March 1510); no. 179 (17 March 1510); no. 185 (29 March 1510); no. 211 (19 April 1511). Alda's mother was Benedetta di Galeotto del Carretto, marquis of Finale: Litta, vol. 'P', tavola IV.

defence of lands; the protection of natural resources; animal management; the organization of banquets and other exhibitions of diplomacy; and the exchange of gifts as part of an economy of favours which helped to maintain family honour and political influence locally and farther afield. These were skills exercised in the context of an increasingly challenging social and political landscape as war periodically scarred the region and Alda grew disenchanted with Venice, with the pro-Venetian peasantry and with their political opponents in the city of Brescia.³⁸

Organizing for War

War in Lombardy following the French invasion in 1494 transformed the fortunes of families like the Gambara; it also elicited familiar strategies for survival. As experienced *condottiere* both Gianfrancesco Gambara and his brother Niccolò were in demand and they served in papal or Venetian forces from 1496 until 1509 when the French occupied the Bresciano.³⁹ Although it sometimes had adverse consequences for them, the family maintained contact with military men on all sides of the conflict including nobles of the Trivulzio, Sanseverino, and Pallavicini clans who were close to the ousted Sforza regime in Milan or served the French.⁴⁰ These families formed a network of alliances by marriage: Alda's sister, Margherita Pio was married to Antonio Maria Sanseverino and the couple were due to stay with Lucrezia

³⁸ Bowd, 'Alda'.

³⁹ For the terms of the *condotta* agreed between Niccolò Gambara and Pope Alexander VI (1431-1503) see b. 1, 95. See also Pecino Reffacani to Lucrezia Gambara, b. 277 (11 Nov. 1496); Lucrezia Gambara to Niccolò, b. 272 (Verola Alghise, 6 Mar. 1497).

⁴⁰ Arcangeli, *Gentiluomini*, 71-121; Gagné, 192-3.

Gambara at Verola Alghise for eight days in 1504.⁴¹ In turn, Antonio Maria's sister Ginevra was married to Lucio Malvezzi, and he and his brother Giulio – both Milanese *condottieri* who fought for Venice in the war with Pisa during 1496-99 – were frequent visitors to Verola Alghise.⁴²

The fortunes of the Gambara were closely tied to France in the period after 1509.⁴³ In that year, Gianfrancesco transferred his services to the French after they defeated Venetian forces at the Battle of Agnadello.⁴⁴ He supported the subsequent capitulation of Brescia to the French and together with Niccolò and Alda led the pro-French faction in the city.⁴⁵ Like others, the family capitalized on its long experience as *condottieri* and leaders of mounted men-at-arms and helped to supply men recruited from their lands as militia troops or as sappers, and provided weaponry and armour.⁴⁶ In return for this service the Gambara expected France, like Venice (and before it, Milan), to honour their status, respect their local power, and protect their fiscal exemptions. In fact, the French crown granted Niccolò membership of the prestigious Order of St Michael and helped the family seize Quinzano,

⁴¹ No. 76 (30 May 1504); no. 77 (1 June 1504); Sanudo, 3: 202.

⁴² No. 43 (16 July 1502); no. 60 (8 April 1504); no. 100 (15 March 1505). See also Alessandra Gonzaga to Giulio Malvezzi, in b. 272 (n.p., 10 Oct. 1503).

⁴³ Pasero, *Francia*, esp. 112-18, 162-8; Pasero, 'Il dominio'.

⁴⁴ For records of Gianfrancesco's service with the Venetians see Sanudo, 7: 320, 706; 8: 218; and with the French, see *ibid.*, 8: 512, 518, 544; 9: 72, 346, 348, 471, 479; 10: 881; 11: 130, 185, 193. On Gianfrancesco's capture or defection and transfer to France see Sanudo, 8: 285, 290, 294.

⁴⁵ Sanudo, 8: 339, 375.

⁴⁶ Generally, see Mallett and Hale, 74-81.

Manerbio, Gottolengo and Gambara from Brescian control – new feudal lands which the family battled hard to retain.⁴⁷

Billeting Troops

These territorial struggles were complicated and exacerbated by the extended presence of disruptive companies of soldiers. The transit and lodging of troops posed a chronic problem in Venetian territory, especially in the countryside and in garrison towns as these troops rarely paid for their lodgings, food or fodder. Instead, rural communities were forced to provide troops with billets, to hand over valuable fodder for horses, and to pay extraordinary taxes in compensation to those whose property was damaged.⁴⁸ The burden of lodging troops in peacetime and during campaigns fell especially heavily on the Bresciano which lay on the western frontier of Venetian territory. For example, in 1517 one-fifth of all Venetian cavalry was accommodated in Brescia which was a transit point for forces heading between Venice, Mantua, Cremona and Milan.⁴⁹

The Gambara occasionally provided billets for these troops but such accommodation was often resisted, granted as a token of good will rather than in fulfilment of any formal obligation, or used as ammunition for internal feuds.⁵⁰ For example, in 1497 Giovanni Gradenigo, a Venetian patrician at the head of a company of a hundred cavalry, wrote to Lucrezia Gambara to apologize for the fact that the Brescian deputies in charge of the matter

⁴⁷ Pasero, *Francia*, 113-17; Bowd, 'Alda'.

⁴⁸ Mallett and Hale, 131-6.

⁴⁹ Ongaro, 23. On the uneven distribution of billeted troops in fifteenth-century Lombardy see Covini, "Alle spese".

⁵⁰ Archetti, 'Una famiglia', 68 (on lodging troops in 1468, 1472, 1477, 1487-89, and 1495).

had arranged lodgings for troops at Verola Alghise. He had sent his herald to the Venetian captain of Brescia, who had overall control of military matters, to beg for the transfer of the lodgings to another place but the captain declined to go against the deputies, pointed out that the whole territory was full of soldiers, that a further thousand cavalry led by the captain of the stradiots (light cavalry) were expected, and that some would be forced into an inn with those who were already badly lodged there.⁵¹

In fact, Alda had strongly advised Lucrezia and her husband against going along with the offer made by Count Piero (Gambara) to the Brescian rectors to accommodate twenty-eight horsemen at Verola Alghise. She warned Lucrezia not to place any trust ('fede') in the letters of Count Piero because he did everything for several effects: first, to ingratiate himself with the countryside ('contado'), second, to land a blow on them and, third, to demonstrate to the rectors that he wished to be one who does everything. Rather, Alda wrote, when the need arose to please the Lordship of Venice it should be for their account and not for his. In the meantime, Alda suggested that the troops be lodged at an inn at somebody else's expense, and she sought an opportunity to plead their case with the rectors who sent their deputies to expedite the matter. Once the rectors heard the arguments made by advocates on both sides Alda reported that they gave clear signs that they favoured the Gambara to the extent that representations were made to Venice by the countryside and city to obtain a letter to hold matters up and cause some trouble. Alda then urged Lucrezia to persuade her brothers-in-law, Maffeo and Marsilio, to spend some money and send a family servant to Venice to counter such actions.⁵²

⁵¹ '[M]e e forza non gli alogiando vadino al hostaria, achosto de chi haverà male alogiato'.

Giovanni Gradenigo '[m]illes [sic] armorum' to Lucrezia Gambara: b. 282, filza '1497', no. 34 (Quinzano, 23 Feb. 1497).

⁵² No. 14 (21 Feb. 1497); no. 15 (22 Feb. 1497); no. 16 (3 March 1497); Lucrezia Gambara to Niccolò Gambara, b. 272 (Verola Alghise, 6 Mar. 1497).

Supplying Troops

The most direct and practical aid or military management exercised by Alda took the form of providing vital supplies and equipment for war, and raising troops or sappers from the family's lands – all tasks for which estate and household management was a good training ground. In August 1499 Alda asked Niccolò to arrange for one of their bailiffs to escort four loads of spelt to her husband's camp with the Venetian forces at Soncino on the Mantuan border, and she later advised Niccolò, who was expecting to depart from Brescia for a military engagement in Padua, to arrange for supplies for the camp through one of their tenants.⁵³ In 1508 Alda's husband asked her to put his tents in order and send them on for use in the campaign since he had already lent one to the captain of the infantry. Therefore, she asked Niccolò to have the tents stretched and pulled to see if anything was missing from them, and to make every provision in the matter.⁵⁴

Most notably, Alda was closely involved in the production of the arms for which Brescia was famed.⁵⁵ In February 1508 she advised Niccolò about the provision of armour required for the troops:

Having had notice that your brother-in-law the magnificent Count Giovanni Pietro [Gonzaga of Novellara] wishes to make a certain quantity of armour and that by your good offices the business has been given to [the armourer] Piero Iacomo da Castello I have wished to make these few words about it and beg that your magnificence might

⁵³ No. 28 (27 Aug. 1499); no. 213 (20 July 1511).

⁵⁴ No. 145 (24 April 1508). Compare Cockram, 130.

⁵⁵ See Catherine Fletcher's contribution to this volume.

be content not to make another contract with that Piero Iacomo because I have a way of serving in this [business] rather better than he can, at the same price as him, and with that convenience of time, because with very little respect he says rather insolent words about the house [of Gambarara]. In addition, he has not wished to transfer from the Count [Giovanni Pietro?] the measurements for a cuirass [and] notwithstanding the fact that under the favour of the house [of Gambarara] this [?] has earned five hundred ducats he has turned his back to its needs. I have proceeded without him because he says he can live without the house of Gambarara. And that house has brought his shops to the [prosperous] end to which they can now be found! And similarly, those men of Verola [Alghise] not being in [your] service your magnificence ought not to deign to do anything else without me, because I will bring it about quickly and well.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ ‘Havendo havuto noticia el Magnifico Co. Zo. Pietro cognato vostro voler far fare certa quantità d’armatura quali per mezzo vostro de essere dato tal impresa a Piero Iacomo da Castello: pertanto ho voluto farne queste poche parole in pregare la M. V. sia contento non far altro contratto cum esso Piero Iacomo perche io havuto modo farne servire assai melio che non fara lui, cum quello medesimo precio le fara lui, et cum quella comodit[à] de tempo sapera abocha a dimandare, perche dice parole della casa assai insolente, cum pochissimo rispetto: ultra che non ha voluto mai transferirse dell[o] Conte particolari la misura de una coraza non considerando che sotto el favore della casa, questo ? ha guadagnato mezzo miliaro di ducati, et alli bisogni ne volta le spalle. Son usita senza lui perche dice che senza casa Gambaresca gli basta lanimo de vivere. Et la casa essa quella gli ha posto la botege sue nel termine la trova havere. Siche prego la M. V. per amor mio a non exequire altro in beneficio suo. Et semelmente quelli homeni da Virole non essendo servito la M. V. se dignara de fare non exequisca altro senza me, perche le faro ? presto e bene.’ No. 138 (23 Feb. 1508).

Pietro Iacomo had indeed done well out of the family and its Gonzaga connections as can be seen from a note of payments of 867 *lire a grossi* in money of account made to him up to 1496 and a detailed list of further payments made between 26 April 1499 and 13 October 1504 amounting to 645 *lire a grossi* and 5 *soldi*. The accoutrements ordered by the Gambara included dozens of cuirasses, sallets and bevors (helmets and neck-chin protectors) for Alda's brother-in-law Count Giovanni Pietro Gonzaga; a similar range of armour for another relation Count Giovanni Maria Scotti; a corselet with shoulder pads, doublet, restraints and curbs for one Zorzi Albanese (likely a stradiot); sallets, including one in the French style with a bevor of mail, for Lucio Malvezzi, as well as a mail doublet for his brother Giulio; repairs to a piece of armour for Pietro Antonio Malvezzi; and two bombards at four gold ducats a piece.⁵⁷ But if Alda also had a hand in these orders no trace of her intervention survives in the household account books.

Raising Troops and Sappers

The greatest challenge of military management faced by Alda was raising troops as well as the sappers ('guastadori') vital for the provision of temporary earthwork defences, bridges, and roads. On the eve of Agnadello the Venetian commissioners and rectors had struggled to raise experienced infantry in the prosperous and settled territories on its western frontier.⁵⁸

Nevertheless, around one-third of the Venetian army at that time was composed of militia

⁵⁷ See the volume inscribed 'Maestro 2.o' and (at a later date) 'del Con. Nicolò Gambara / Dal 1489 fino 1495' in b. 571, fols. 134v, 135r. Inserted between these folios is a booklet: 'Credito de M[aest]ro Piero de Castello armarolo de bressa' (ca. 1496-98). The gold ducat stabilized at 6 *lire a grossi* 4 *soldi* until 1510. There were 20 *soldi* in a *lira a grosso*: Lane and Mueller, 362.

⁵⁸ Mallett and Hale, 315.

(*cernide*) exempted from labour service and paid two ducats every 36 days in war (one ducat less than infantrymen), raised and equipped by rural communities including the Bresciano which sent no less than 1,200 men to the muster at Pontevico.⁵⁹ Alda and the rest of the Gambara family took a leading role in the organization of these musters for the Venetians.⁶⁰ Following the French conquest of the Bresciano and the transfer of Gambara services, the family was expected to furnish a company to serve in the armies of Louis XII and to provide sappers. However, like the aforementioned billeting of troops the family was quick to assert its privileges and exemptions with respect to such wartime exigencies, but also to leverage its capacity to raise troops for its own local advantage.

In the spring of 1510 Alda sent her copy of a French order for sappers to Pietro Giacomo, a member of the staff of Cardinal Carlo del Carretto, the French-appointed governor of Brescia, who issued a letter of revocation and reprimanded the auditor for making such an error against his wishes. Nevertheless, Pietro Giacomo wanted the family to help the French meet this need. Alda therefore noted that Niccolò should put things in order at the feudatory of Gambara, send around ten men from Milzano, Pralboino and Verola Alghise, and pay two *marcelli* to the men raised from their new lands.⁶¹ Alda then wrote to Niccolò suggesting that he provide a chief for the sappers and that they all go down to Calvisano, while he also moved to ensure that Quinzano made its due provision or pay a fine

⁵⁹ Pezzolo, 'La "rivoluzione"', 38. On raising troops, the performance of the rural militia in war, and pay before ca. 1550 see Mallett and Hale, 78-81, 350-8, 383, 494-5; Pezzolo, 'L' Archibugio'.

⁶⁰ Bowd, 'Alda'.

⁶¹ No. 186 (7 May 1510); Sanudo, 10: 32. On sappers in the service of Venice during the fifteenth century see Mallett and Hale, 87-96. Two *marcelli* were silver coins amounting to one *lira di piccolo* or very roughly an agricultural worker's weekly wage.

of 10 *lire planete*. She concluded by noting that she had already been in touch with the vicar at Verola Alghise on the matter of enrolment so that Niccolò would lose no time.⁶²

The peasants, who probably did not welcome the distraction from their agricultural labours, proved less than tractable and Alda was forced to return to this topic with some insistence a month later.⁶³ The cardinal had reminded Alda of the king's need for sappers and so in a lengthy and repetitive autograph letter she directed Niccolò to make every immediate effort to raise from their lands more sappers who would be paid and would return before the time of 'the frenzy of harvest' ('*la furia del medere*'). Honour also demanded action: their rivals the Martinengo had made great provision of sappers and the Gambara therefore ought to write to the king and the royal governor to let them both know about their concern for this need and to send them men by force or of their own volition. Worse, some peasants had joined the Venetians without Gambara permission and with little fear of the king. Truly, Alda wrote with some exasperation, these were peasants whom one had to persuade with menaces rather than good words and they should be ordered to this in the name of the king.⁶⁴ In a rather less agitated letter the following day Alda noted that the cardinal had informed her that his superior, the governor in Milan, had sent a courier requesting a thousand sappers and so she once again begged Niccolò to send more men if he could and added that they would be well paid.⁶⁵

⁶² No. 187 (8 May 1510). The *lira planeta* was the Brescian money of account and in this case the fine was set at a fairly standard rate.

⁶³ On the scarcity of volunteer sappers later in the century and the need to raise wages see Ongaro, 45.

⁶⁴ B. 282, no. 605 (1 June 1510).

⁶⁵ No. 188 (2 June 1510).

Alda returned to the topic again the following day in yet another lengthy autograph letter. She noted that a certain Messer Cesare had promised to send one hundred at the rate of pay of six *marchetti* per day, and she once again noted if they did not wish to go by love then they would go by force. Some, like the rustics ('rustigi') of Pralboino and Milzano, had gone into the Venetian camp against the proclamations of the king, and each commune faced a fine of 200 ducats if it failed to supply sufficient manpower although those in the new lands had applied to the royal chamber in Milan (presumably for an exemption).⁶⁶ The royal governor subsequently sent a list of the total required to Alda who forwarded a copy to Niccolò and advised him that they were needed in Brescia the following day and would perhaps be paid more than the sum listed, which would be to their 'honour and utility'.⁶⁷

Alda's final letter to Niccolò on the matter of raising sappers and infantry troops is an excellent distillation of her whole approach to military management. The letter is detailed, crisp and commanding and demonstrates clearly how the family's established household could be used to funnel ready men drawn from their feudal territories to the military headquarters at Cremona:

I believe that yesterday your lordship had a letter from my consort the count by way of Pontevico from which [it is known that] with the agreement of the nephew of the castellan of Cremona troops are raised to go to camp but since your lordship has not provided a company you must set about finding a captain, or true market cat [sc. cunning or watchful person], or some other suitable person from our territories to be sent with your letters through the said lands and raise a company of fifty or one

⁶⁶ B. 282, no. 604 (3 June 1510). Alda is likely referring to her son-in-law Cesare Martinengo di Cesaresco, lord of Orzivecchi. The *marchetto* was the equivalent of the *soldo a grosso*, 124 of which made up a gold ducat at this time: Lane and Mueller, 362.

⁶⁷ No. 189 (19 June 1510), endorsed 'cito cito'. See also no. 194 (18 Aug. 1510).

hundred with good fare to meet this need. These men should be found in Cremona on Thursday and from them a selection made of twenty-five or thirty who will be well paid. The captain will make three advances to them, amounting to twelve ducats each. And so your lordship should get on with this matter with all haste and the greatest diligence. But the one who sent the sappers down has sent them back again because they cannot work and I wonder that you have been asked not to send them at present and that no order is issued to them. Your Lordship should not let them come without a word from the castellan. ... [Postscript:] And because it seems that at Gottolengo may be found better men skilled in carrying arms one can send there for them, and thus your lordship can let the priest of Breda know that he ought to send those who shall be good by the nephews of Rizo de Gabianeda. In this [manner] he may [also] send to Calvisano by Ravello, and so those from among all of these [men] will bring about this [desired] result.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ '[C]redo la S. V. heri habia ha[v]uto una lettera dil signor mio consorte per via de Pontevicho. Dil che ad complacentia dil nepote dil castelano da Cremona quale fa fanti per andare al campo et per non havere fornita la compagnia la signoria vostra voglia vedere di cercare uno capo: o vero mercato gato aut uno altro di le terre nostre che sia al proposito: et mandarlo cum vostre lettere per le dicte terre et fare compagnia 50 aut 100: che habino bona ciera al dicto bisogno quali per tuto zobia si vogliono trovarsi ad Cremona de li quali fanti se ne fara eletione de 25 aut 30 et serano ben paghati, el capo li sera fato carere 3 paghe morte, donde tochara ducati 12 per acaduna paga, et cosi V. S. voglia cum ogni optima diligentia et expeditione spagare questa cosa: et perche quella a facto venire suso li guastatori li havemo rimandati perche mi si po laborare et mi maraveglia che e commiso che ve sia scritto che non se mandaseno al presente et che non li sia dato aviso: siche V. S. non ne lassa per venire senza parola dil castelano ... [Postscript:] Et perche ad Gotholengo ne pare se atrovarseno migliori homini pratici ad portare arme ge si pora mandare li: et cosi V. S. pora fare

The seriousness with which Alda's military authority was treated is demonstrated by the fact that on the same day Pietro Sacchi, the French-appointed vicar of Manerbio, wrote to Niccolò affirming that he had just received a letter from her with an immediate wish for 'good troops' to be paid by Niccolò. Sacchi promised to search out the best men and asked for advice on amount and means of payment to be made to them and to their head.⁶⁹

The Crisis of 1512

The climax of these efforts, and the supreme test of Alda's military management, came early in 1512 when the family's great enemy Count Alvisè Avogadro attempted to oust their patrons the French from Brescia in an unsuccessful uprising on 18 January, and then on 2 February with Venetian reinforcements managed to take the city.⁷⁰ Alda's loyalty to France never wavered and just a few days after Avogadro's first assault she was writing with hope that everything would come out well for Louis XII.⁷¹

In her letters to her niece Auriga, Alda traced the advance of the Venetians, including Count Alvisè, and she offered advice on how to fortify the castle at Verola Alghise – and

intendere al Prete de la Breda che voglia mandare per quelli nepoti de Rizo de Gabianeda qualli seriano boni: In questa poria mandare ad Calvisano per Ravello: qualli tra tuti questi tum vogliano fare questo effecto.' No. 205 (27 Jan. 1511). Pontevico was a fortified outpost: Mallett and Hale, 90, 150.

⁶⁹ Pietro Sacchi to Niccolò Gambara, b. 278 (Gottolengo, 27 Jan. 1511). See also same to same, b. 278 (Gottolengo, 29 Jan. 1511).

⁷⁰ Merici.

⁷¹ No. 227 (22 Jan. 1512, 'hora 19').

most importantly protect her own grain there – by making sure good guards and men with brains were at the gates so that the enemy could not appear unexpectedly, and by advising her to send a ‘secret man’ to Mantua to understand what was happening on that key front. Above all, she counseled secrecy since the enemy, like the French, sent out spies – those ‘quintessential shadow agents of war’ as Ioanna Iordanou has put it in her contribution to this volume.⁷²

Meanwhile, Alda holed up in the castle at Brescia with her daughter Veronica and the remaining French forces.⁷³ In her final surviving letter before the Venetian assault Alda’s thoughts, as ever, turned towards questions of loyalty and obedience: that the men of their feudal lands of Verola Alghise had made a great – presumably favourable – demonstration was not news to her because they knew they could not have a better master (‘patrono’), and for this reason they – presumably the family – ought not to impose any more of a burden on them than they can bear, take matters with love and not with pain, and consequently all would turn out well (literally, ‘they will all eat’).⁷⁴

The Venetian occupation lasted a little over two weeks but caused considerable damage to Alda and her family – their erstwhile guest Andrea Gritti and noble rival Count Alvise plundered Alda’s palace in the city and sold her grain at a low price in the market.⁷⁵ But in the end, Gaston de Foix made his rapid march to Brescia and allowed the French

⁷² No. 220 (18 Dec. 1511); no. 225 (19 Jan. 1512); no. 226 (22 Jan. 1512); no. 227 (22 Jan. 1512, ‘hora 19’); no. 228 (23 Jan. 1512). On anti-Venetian spies see Francesco Trenta to Auriga Gambara, b. 283, no. 75 (Verola Alghise, 26 Jan. 1512). See above, XX-XX (Iordanou).

⁷³ Sanudo, 13: 438, 445, 469.

⁷⁴ ‘Le quale vano tute in mangiare’. No. 229 (24 Jan. 1512).

⁷⁵ Sanudo, 14: 9.

garrison to retake the city and exact a just revenge, including the decapitation of the rebellious count. In June 1512 the indefatigable Alda, having organized the payment of ransoms for key supporters,⁷⁶ was reported at the head of one hundred horsemen proceeding out of Brescia and her subsequent correspondence, which concludes in 1527, indicates that she worked hard to rebuild family fortunes.⁷⁷

Conclusion

Thanks to effective household, estate, and military management on the part of Alda and her successors the Gambara consolidation of feudal power in the Bresciano continued for at least another century. By 1610 it was estimated that the Gambara owned almost three thousand hectares of land, which has been likened to ‘a small state within a state’.⁷⁸ As noted, Venice was obliged for the sake of its security to tolerate a high degree of autonomy on the part of Brescian noble families, many of whom continued to provide soldiers and comprise a hereditary officer class with close links to other such families across northern Italy. In this respect it is significant that within a year of the Brescian ‘revolution’ of 1644 caused by local protests against fiscal inequities the Venetians chose to reverse their reforms to the local council and to reintroduce the old order which favoured established landed and military families including the Avogadro, Martinengo, and the Gambara.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Archivio di Stato, Brescia, Notarile, 2146 (Pietro Giacomo Bellecatti), 22, 23 Feb., 5 March 1512. I am grateful to Marco Pakas for this reference.

⁷⁷ Sanudo, 14: 288.

⁷⁸ Ferraro, 40.

⁷⁹ Ferraro, 56. See also Pezzolo, ‘Nobiltà’.

This toleration had important consequences for the power of women. It has sometimes been suggested that female agency based on procreative and dynastic priorities flourished more strongly in the Italian courts than in the homosocial public and political spaces of republican states like Venice.⁸⁰ In the recently conquered and weakly centralized environment of much of the Venetian mainland empire entrenched feudal powers might flourish at some distance from republican patriarchal priorities, or even in contempt for Venetian mercantile priorities, and feudatories like the Gambara could absorb and embody elite political and social life as ‘small princes’ in the absence of a local court.⁸¹ In this way, the women of these families were able to move between the private and public spaces of household and city in pursuit of dynastic power and the preservation of patrimony. They sometimes did this on their own account, as mothers-in-law or, as in Alda’s case, as wives, widows and mothers.⁸²

It is not by chance therefore that in her letters to her brother and sister-in-law, and her niece, Alda insistently presented herself as ‘sister’ and ‘mother’ and articulated a close link between the protection of family and household, the honour and survival of the clan (*casa*) and local power which helped to circumvent misogynistic claims and legal restrictions on the female role.⁸³ In this way, Alda’s agency as an informal regent in the absence of her husband was far from independent or individualistic and involved some ‘limitation of personhood’.⁸⁴ It was an agency underpinned by a strongly articulated sense of agnatic and cognatic connections quite typical of elite families until the latter part of the sixteenth century: honour was tied by Alda to her husband’s clan and its posterity in the shape of their sons and

⁸⁰ But note Hurlburt, 10-11.

⁸¹ Arcangeli, *Gentiluomini*; Smith, ‘Revisiting’.

⁸² McIver, ‘An Invisible’; Ghirardo; Crabb.

⁸³ Kuehn, *Law*; idem, *Family*, esp. chaps 1-2, 7. See also Couchman and Crabb.

⁸⁴ Kuehn, *Family*, 66. See also James.

daughters, and by the careful exploitation of the natal and conjugal kinship network in which she was embedded.⁸⁵

In return, Alda was perhaps trusted by her husband to preserve his interests within the family more effectively than his brothers, given how fraught sibling relations usually were among Italian aristocrats of the period, and especially in a family like the Gambara whose territories had so recently been shared out fraternally. In 1506 she penned a letter about estate matters to Niccolò Gambara in her own hand but sent it in her husband's name.⁸⁶ Tellingly, in 1510 Gianfrancesco excused the fact that he had not written to his brother for two months in the following terms: 'I have written well to Alda since I know that the letters are common to you [both] and from which you ought to have understood all that has come to pass for us.'⁸⁷ But Alda also issued her own commands and requests, and in her letters to Lucrezia and Auriga developed an effective female channel for household and estate management.⁸⁸

⁸⁵ Pomata; McIver, *Women*, 31; Chojnacki, "'The Most Serious Duty'"; Kuehn, 'Daughters'. Alda makes explicit reference to efforts to preserve for her son disputed patrimony in no. 132 (10 June 1507).

⁸⁶ B. 270 (27 April 1506). Compare Cockram, 138-42.

⁸⁷ '[B]en scritto a lalda che so le lettere ve sono state comune, et doveri haver inteso tutti i successi nostri'. Gianfrancesco Gambara to Niccolò Gambara, b. 270 (Blois, 1 Aug. 1510). Note also his comment in a letter of the previous year: 'Domane Io me parto con la Compagnia andar ad Pischiera & poy In Veronese dove secondo li partiti pigliaremo il Camino scrivendo drizate le littere a lalda mia consorte alaquale ho Comesso. non manchi in cosa alchuna de quanto scriverete.' Same to same, b. 270 (9 Oct. 1509).

⁸⁸ For example, see no. 16 (3 March 1497); no. 32 (10 May 1501); no. 54 (13 Jun. 1504); no. 78 (4 June 1504); no. 79 (15 June 1504); no. 160 (10 Jan. 1509); no. 214 (5 Sept. 1511); no. 219 (2 Dec. 1511); no. 222 (29 Dec. 1511); no. 223 (2 Jan. 1512).

As the disparaging remarks about the ‘whore and cow’ Alda and her frivolous, disordered and ‘brothel’-like household quoted at the beginning of this chapter suggest, the exercise of female agency nevertheless challenged assumptions about social or natural hierarchies and the role of patriarchy or ‘hegemonic masculinity’ as a legitimation of power relations.⁸⁹ The moral force of such gendered discourse is especially clear in relation to women and war. As recent work by Frédérique Verrier and Gerry Milligan has shown, the Renaissance presentation of female involvement in the supposedly masculine domain of warfare was a matter for considerable philosophical debate, historical comment, and chivalric literary fantasy. The presence of women warriors in literature – including lists of illustrious women modelled on those of Giovanni Boccaccio – underscored the pusillanimity and effeminacy of Italian men or reflected a yearning for a return to peaceful order and traditional gender roles.⁹⁰

These literary concerns may also have reflected a heightened consciousness of contemporary militant women like Orsina Visconti, commanding and supposedly sexually dangerous regents like Caterina Sforza, or of the women of all ranks pressed into service to defend hearth and home under siege conditions during the Italian Wars.⁹¹ They may even have echoed knowledge of quasi-regents or military managers like Alda Pio Gambara and other women who formed part of an extended ‘campaign community’ moving between camp and home.⁹² In sum, as noted in the Introduction to this book, scholars have placed women in

⁸⁹ Connell and Messerschmidt; Lynch.

⁹⁰ Milligan; Verrier. See also Gerry Milligan’s contribution to this volume.

⁹¹ Bowd, *Renaissance*, 99-111.

⁹² Lynn. Alda was in Mantua in April 1507 around the time the Gambara mustered troops close to the Mantuan border: No. 125, Alda to Aurelia Maggi (Mantua, 21 April 1507); Sanudo, 7: 70.

the midst of the battlefield as warriors, but they have also sought to show how the nature of war itself is gendered and in this way to open up a space for the conceptualization of military management and shadow agency with which this chapter has been concerned.⁹³

Alda's letters provide some insight into matters of war and peace from a female perspective and show how war-related work can be understood in a gendered way, and how it can or should be integrated within the political framework of the French and Venetian states and their organization for war. The accounts of Alda threatening to fire artillery upon enemy emissaries demanding surrender in 1512,⁹⁴ or of her subsequent departure from the city at the head of a hundred cavalry need not be dismissed as the fantasies and exaggerations of her enemies and indeed they would seem to be perfectly in keeping with the character and agency explored here. In fact, the concise and commanding language of Alda's letters fully reveals how she worked to provide a vital service to her family and to the state by writing and plotting – as Marco Negro observed – but also by a lot more besides.

⁹³ Above, xx-xx.

⁹⁴ Spini, 291.

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