

**FEMININITY IN THE THROES OF FASCISM:  
SURVIVAL, LIBERATION, AND THE PURSUIT OF EQUALITY**

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

From 1928 to the conclusion of World War II in 1945, Benito Mussolini and his Fascist regime were instrumental in introducing Italy to the discomforts of constant instability, uncertainty and institutional oppression. With a struggling economy and a tired working class to keep it afloat, the country grasped Mussolini's charismatic affirmations in naive desperation. Throughout the 1930s, however, deepening socioeconomic conditions forced many to regard his deceitful ideology in a new light, and drove even more to try to change it. It was through time and the efforts of the citizens that Italy overcame the devastations of Fascism. Women in particular played a prominent role in reversing the effects of Fascism, specifically due to the multitudinous prohibitive legislations enacted to prevent them from leaving their places as acquiescent caregivers. In this paper, the story of Fascism is told: from its conception and the rise of Mussolini to the ways in which it affected the common Italian woman as she braced herself for the brunt of another World War.

## Chapter 1

### INTRODUCTION

Dominated by Mussolini and his regime in the early 1920s, Italy was thrust into a realm of fierce discipline, deafening oppression, and aching seclusion. Since its creation, Italian Fascism had “imposed itself not only as a political movement but as a party crossed by a sort of fideism, consecrated to the cult of the nation and to the mission of transforming the Italian people, forging and regulating them according to its own doctrine. [Il fascismo si era imposto non solo come un movimento politico ma come un partito attraversato da una sorta di fideismo, consacrato al culto della nazione e alla missione di trasformare il popolo italiano, forgiando e disciplinandolo secondo la propria dottrina.]”<sup>1</sup> With the Second World War on the horizon and the need for a nation to innovate itself in order to survive the imposing continental industrialization movement, Mussolini succeeded in uniting Italy, promising an era of protection and prosperity. Mussolini shrouded his policies in socioeconomic affirmations and assurances of supremacy. Italy was quickly humbled by its incapacity to keep up with Mussolini’s political impositions.

And women in all of this? Residing grumpily at the bottom of the social totem-pole. The last to be considered yet the first to have to clean up the mess, women proved themselves a force to be reckoned with in the face of tempestuous political volatility. It was exhausting having to fight to be regarded with equal concern within a nation that refused to acknowledge the worth of a woman outside of her ability to marry

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<sup>1</sup> Russo, p. 5.

and maintain a family; even in the wake of economic despair, the necessity for an increase in working numbers undeniable, women in the workforce were threatened with restrictions and exemptions that could only justify misogynistic excuses. Despite recurring promises of political and economic prosperity, Italy fell deeper into a state of virtual penury. Mussolini demanded hyperfixation upon the birth rate, which, at the time, was declining. Families of middle, working, and lower classes simply could not maintain a stable life for themselves, let alone a child; unhealthy and unhappy, prospective mothers had to search for surreptitious alternatives to prevent conception and birth as a means to protect themselves and their families. Women also took it upon themselves to demonstrate their right to socioeconomic autonomy: formally by means of organizing and participating in protests under collectives such as Gruppi di difesa della donna [Women's Defense Groups], and informally by means of more personal, quieter objection. Maneuvering a labyrinth of disingenuous and sanctimonious policies enacted during the time of Fascist Italy was indeed no easy task for the common woman; it is due to her contributions that Italy began its journey to free itself from the constraints of traditional expectation.

## **Chapter 2**

### **FASCISM: INTRODUCTION**

What is Fascism? In terms of Italian history, Fascism was an ideology developed in Italy by Giovanni Gentile, an Italian philosopher, educator, and politician, and Benito Mussolini between World War I (1914-1918) and World War II (1939-1945). Fascism was associated with two Italian political parties, both of which were led by Mussolini: the Partito nazionale fascista [National Fascist Party], which dominated Italy from 1922 until 1943, and the Partito fascista repubblicano [Republican Fascist Party], which then took over from 1943 to the end of the war in 1945. Fascism also influenced the Italian Social Movement [Movimento Sociale Italiano] and other neo-fascist movements plaguing Italy during its post-war years. Initially, Fascists did not agree with Nazism for its antisemitic behaviors and desire to create a ‘master race’. As the movement progressed, however, the presence of misogynistic, biologically racist, and previously Nordistic racial purification ideologies manifested into Italian law in 1938 and became staples of Fascist propaganda. Both Fascism and Nazism, in fact, were:

“opposed to a liberal and democratic regime, which was the best legacy of nineteenth-century civilization and which had found an adequate instrument in the system of multiplicity of political and of free parliamentary representations: they therefore, coming to power, destroyed something that already existed and that was

eminently positive, even if not entirely free of defects.

[si erano opposti ad un regime liberale e democratico, che era il retaggio migliore della civiltà ottocentesca e che aveva trovato uno strumento adeguato nel sistema della molteplicità dei partiti politici e delle libere rappresentanze parlamentari essi dunque, arrivando al potere, distrussero qualcosa che già esisteva e che era eminentemente positivo, anche se non del tutto privo di difetti.]”<sup>2</sup>

By the late 1930s, antisemitism was just as blatant throughout Italy as it was in Germany due to the growing political camaraderie between Mussolini and Hitler. Many women and minorities were persecuted under Fascist rule.

Fascism was founded upon fierce Italian nationalism and the desire to restore Italy to its former glory, primarily through colonization, which was asserted by Mussolini to be a necessary component in reestablishing international superiority. Italian nationalism “entailed a perception of power that could only be measured in comparison with other states of high international standing.”<sup>3</sup> Italy felt a wave of pressure to achieve with haste the same prestige as Britain and France, two European nations with extensive history of colonization and industrial development. Limited geographical and political elasticity offered little chance for an aspiring Italy to abbreviate the expansion and development procedures and adhere to the restrictive patterns set by their well-established competition.

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<sup>2</sup> Saitta, p. 7.

<sup>3</sup> Kallis, p. 13.

With an itch to command, Fascism proclaimed Modern Italy to be the rightful and natural successor to Ancient Rome; expanding Italian territories and reclaiming what was lost of the Mediterranean Sea was merely a prophecy, therefore, Italy had a right to achieve it.<sup>4</sup> Mussolini, the leader of Fascism by this point, proselytized an economic system in which government and employment were closely associated, in hopes of eliminating socioeconomic conflict and inspiring cooperation between the social classes. Class-wide happiness seemed too great a dream for Italy at the time, for Italians, picking themselves up after the Great War and watching socialism fuel the Russian Revolution of 1917, suffered a nationwide confusion as to which political and socioeconomic philosophies they should implement for themselves:

“all the activity of the working class in the most advanced countries, aimed at making the principle of a social revolution and the creation of a new society capable of overcoming the traditional struggle between capital and labor triumph, assumed a character of greater aggressiveness, and those who felt threatened by their privileges or rights thought of the need to oppose the socialist advance with a more solid barrier, or considered such, than the old liberal state.

[...tutta l'attività della classe operaia nei paesi piú progrediti, tesa a far trionfare il principio di una rivoluzione sociale e della creazione di una nuova società capace di superare la tradizionale lotta tra capitale e lavoro, assunse un carattere di maggiore aggressività, e quanti si sentirono minacciati nei loro privilegi o diritti

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 50.

pensarono alla necessità di opporre all'avanzata socialista un argine piú solido, o ritenuto tale, che non il vecchio stato liberale.]”<sup>5</sup>

Liberalism and other individualistic philosophies were despised by Fascism, for they posed a threat to the rather cult-like nationalism and close social cooperation the regime ceaselessly and unashamedly propagandized. Success for Italians, in the eyes of Mussolini, required a respect for traditional values while also promoting a modern Italy. Modernizing Italy involved industrialization and a modification of sexual beliefs, including those allowing women to exist among men in the workforce; notably, many of these concepts were condemned by the more faithful traditionalists and Roman Catholics.

Italian nationalism was forged from the *Risorgimento* [Unification of Italy], a movement of the 19th-century during which Italy, a land of different states, was unified as the Kingdom of Italy in 1861.<sup>6</sup> In 1921, Mussolini’s *Partito nazionale fascista* [National Fascist Party] established their political presence by asserting the necessity of a militia to discipline and service the nation, following the principles of order, discipline, and hierarchy.<sup>7</sup> At the time of its creation, political parties in general were not typically mass organizations; political parties did not “absorb elements of state sovereignty and perform functions of public law in ever greater quantities [..non tendono ad assorbire elementi di sovranità statale e a svolgere funzioni di diritto pubblico in quantità sempre

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<sup>5</sup> Saitta, p. 8.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., pp. 40-42.

<sup>7</sup> Ball, p. 133.

maggiore.]”<sup>8</sup> Rather, political parties were composed of volunteers with a personal connection to and passion for the group with which they affiliated. With its unusually populated party Fascism announced its grand plan to institute a Third Rome (Ancient Rome being the First and Renaissance Italy the Second). Mussolini modeled his empire after Caesar and Augustus and continued to promote imperial expansion, as seen in Gentile and Mussolini’s *La dottrina del fascismo* [Doctrine of Fascism].<sup>9</sup>

Italian feminism, though often accredited for emerging in the Sixties, has roots dating back to the Great War, during and after which women were needed to fill male vacancies. With the diminishing of necessity came the disparaging of the female employee; women were expected to withdraw themselves from ‘otherwise designated’ male activities and resume their feminine responsibilities, which encompassed and dared not stray beyond the house and family. Women, who during the war took an active role by working as men, who collected money and materials to be donated to the troops, whose medical expertise and willingness to assist the wounded was an undeniable necessity to keeping the Italian army afloat, were stripped of their credibility and labeled a threat to Italy’s prosperity.

When contemplating Fascism, we must keep in mind that, at that time, many Italians were in denial of the pressures they faced. It was hidden with good reasons, too:

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<sup>8</sup> Saitta, p. 9.

<sup>9</sup> Gentile is given credit for composing the first part, *Idee fondamentali* [Fundamental ideas], as a ghostwriter on behalf of Mussolini. Mussolini is credited as the sole contributor to second part *Dottrina politica e sociale* [Political and social doctrine].

Italy emerged from the fresh devastations of the Great War and then had to pick itself up from a failing economy, while also having to reconstruct their social status, reestablish themselves as an integral voice of international politics, and become formidable in the race towards industrial modernity, all while under the threats of an impending second World War. Fascism had a handful of concepts that, in time, could have benefitted the people: accessible welfare programs, economic restoration, and a means of balancing work and family life. These promises, however theoretically helpful, were implemented too early and too frequently; Italy was simply unprepared for the bombardment of meticulous changes that ensued once Mussolini rose to power.

Fascism offered a hypocritical, destabilizing, and uniquely despotic social and political structure for Italian women under the pretense of ‘cultural necessity’. Let us explore the rise and fall of Mussolini’s empire and the women who lived through it.

## **2.1 Mussolini and the Formation of His Empire**

Benito Mussolini rose to power as the appointed Prime Minister of Italy in late October of 1922 following a successful *Marcia su roma* [March on Rome] and coercion of King Vittorio Emanuele III to surrender his power in favor of a more modernized administration. Albeit quite controversial, the decision was one of frightened delusion; Mussolini had within his grasp the support of both the public and a considerable number of formidable investors and elites, which instilled into the current administration a fear of the eruption of political and social unrest. Mussolini was the hope, the ‘savior’ for Italy, so to speak, serving as the embodiment of peace and authoritative restoration, the bearer

of reason, and a friend of the people. In reality, Mussolini was a charismatic and well-spoken individual, certainly a master at telling others what they wished to hear. Italy, following the Great War, could only be characterized as living in utter political disarray:

“Six governments (led by Nitti, Giolitti, Bonomi and Facta) succeeded each other in just over three years, between the summer of 1919 and the autumn of 1922.

They were weak and unstable executives that led to the formation of the Mussolini government. On April 10th, 1922, an international conference opened in Genoa to examine the main problems of the post-war period, in particular the reconstruction of the Russian and German economies. On April 16th, the Treaty of Rapallo was signed with which the USSR, in exchange for the waiver of any request for compensation, obtained recognition from Germany, thus breaking the diplomatic isolation.

[La politica italiana del primo dopoguerra si caratterizzò per una grande instabilità. Ben sei governi (guidati da Nitti, Giolitti, Bonomi e Facta) si succedettero in poco più di tre anni, tra l'estate del 1919 e l'autunno del 1922. Si trattò di esecutivi deboli e instabili che condussero alla formazione del governo Mussolini. Il 10 aprile 1922 si aprì a Genova una conferenza internazionale per esaminare i principali problemi del dopoguerra, in particolare la ricostruzione delle economie russa e tedesca. Il 16 aprile venne firmato il Trattato di Rapallo con cui l'Urss, in cambio della rinuncia a qualsiasi richiesta di risarcimenti,

ottenne il riconoscimento da parte della Germania, rompendo così l'isolamento diplomatico.]”<sup>10</sup>

It seems that Mussolini established himself at the perfect time. Unforeseen was the totalitarianism that was to doom the nation.

From early action up to his appointment, Mussolini was well-revered by industrialists, whose contributions made up sixty-four per cent of his financing<sup>11</sup>; their benefactions were eagerly accessible due to the willingness and capability of the fascists to conduct and execute physical attacks on the Left.<sup>12</sup> A well-known, earlier example of action was the attack on *Avanti!*, the official paper of the Left-wing *Partito socialista italiano* [Italian Socialist Party] in Milan on 15 April 1919.<sup>13</sup> In reality, Mussolini made a series of hefty promises that he had no intention of keeping, primarily his assurance that his movements were not in fact catalysts for the implementation of radical economic and social measures. Perhaps the initial expeditious and rather welcoming acceptance of Fascism was due to the notion that Fascism had “no ideological substance”, which corroborated a “notion that offered so many pragmatic, mobilizational, and propaganda advantages, that any effort to resist the claim was almost certain to be dismissed as either special pleasing or apologetics.”<sup>14</sup> In Mussolini’s favor, wisdom spanning generations proved to be considerably troublesome to squander.

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<sup>10</sup> Russo, p. 65.

<sup>11</sup> Behan, p. 9.

<sup>12</sup> Hitler, p. 681.

<sup>13</sup> Behan, p. 10.

<sup>14</sup> Gregor, p. 96.

This generational wisdom to which I refer is derived from the allusion of a revolutionary syndicalism thought to have nourished the Fascism movement. Mussolini spoke of Fascism “as that ‘national syndicalism’ that had grown out of the revolutionary Marxism of the prewar period”,<sup>15</sup> which in essence held fast; Fascism is a clear successor to Marxist syndicalism, an ideology whose hereditary idiosyncrasies rendered it formidable against any flame that sought to blacken it to ash. Mussolini repeatedly referenced Marx to further his ambitious programs for economic and social modernization, asserting that the requirements for such mobilizations could only take place under the “stimulation of an animating sentiment and an articulated ‘faith’”, a process that could only be characterized as “‘heroic’ and ‘idealistic’.”<sup>16</sup> Indubiously inspired by the teachings of Karl Marx and molded from the hands of socialism, Mussolini intimately aligned himself with syndicalists that gravitated towards his charismatic, *pragmatic* disposition. Mussolini maintained one foot in his ideals for the nation and the other in his dedication to develop an industrially modernized Italy, with promises to preserve a level of humanity often lost in the sea of commercial evolution.

The Left had grown considerably following World War I due to the rise in radicalization from widespread hardship, which, with the help of the Russian Revolution of 1917, fueled the idea of a nationwide revolution to solve their problems.<sup>17</sup> The Partito

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 97.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 98.; Gregor’s citation for “faith”: Friedrich Engels, introduction to "The Class Struggles in France 1848-1850," in Marx and Engels, Selected Works, I, 122f. 125; “‘heroic’ and ‘idealistic’”: Ibid., pp. 126f., 128f., 130.

<sup>17</sup> Davidson, pp. 355–370.

Socialista Italiano was quickly obtaining the upper hand in parliament and its presence in conversation could not be more apparent. Strikes were violent and frequent among factory workers with owners struggling to obtain enough force to subdue them, furthering the fierce commitment of fascists to eliminate the ever-resurging working class. Although members of the Partito Socialista Italiano were masterful propagandists, they proved themselves to be insufferably incompetent when it came to mass tactical preparation for an actual revolution, demonstrating a preference for scare tactics in lieu of furthering actual change. The great international strike to occur on the 20th and 21st of July 1919, for example, was “treated as a holiday rather than the prelude of a revolution,”<sup>18</sup> as the majority of participants felt deflated after the dim outcomes of previous riots earlier that season.

Mussolini and the coalition were sworn in on 30 October 1922. As a gesture of solidarity, the *Partito Popolare Italiano* [Italian Popular Party] was given three cabinet seats and the Liberals one, given that their leaders, Alcide De Gasperi and Ivanoe Bonomi respectively, voted for Mussolini to become the prime minister.<sup>19</sup> The Italian Popular Party had considerable influence, and because of this, Mussolini was unable to pass legislation without their consent. Mussolini assumed his leadership position with great haste following his inauguration, having engaged parliament in a series of “highly reactionary policies”<sup>20</sup> within six months of power. His budding hubris was quickly

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 359.

<sup>19</sup> Galli, p. 10.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

noticed by those of the Popular Party, and demands for loyal collaboration within government rose. Nonetheless, Mussolini, despite a popular vote to stay within government, ejected any of whom were audaciously outspoken<sup>21</sup> and proceeded to lay the foundation for a totalitarian regime.

Mussolini's rule was more or less constitutional throughout the first three years or so of practice. Rather, his regime managed a quiet and swift diminishing of civil rights, such as the suppression of press publications. During this time, the demands from the Fascist movement to pursue revolutionary action boiled over into the kidnapping and vicious assassination of socialist politician Giacomo Matteotti, this controversy only further exemplifying their insatiable desire to rid themselves of the Left.<sup>22</sup> The cries for acknowledgement of Mussolini's involvement were growing insistent, only to be answered with acceptance and a rather instantaneous commencement of his dictatorship in January 1925; Mussolini effectively prohibited all opposition and diminished any opportunity for his persecution as a result of the Matteotti affair. His dream of leading a totalitarian state was at last a success.

Violent Fascist squads spread rapidly throughout the nation by the end of 1920: "[Fascist squads were hitting people's homes, labor chambers, workers' and laborers' leagues, cooperatives and anti-fascist newspaper offices. There were killings, beatings, bans against communists, socialists, anarchists, republicans,

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<sup>21</sup> Davidson, pp. 360.; Gracci, p. 169.; Franzinelli, p. 313.

<sup>22</sup> Behan, p. 11.

popular and even dissident fascists, with fires and devastation of party offices and local administrations often forced to resign. On 1 September 1921, there were 726 destroyed socialist and trade union offices, 166 socialist militants killed and 500 wounded. Fascists guilty of violence were arrested or subjected to criminal penalties. The fascist violence continued, reaching its peak in December 1922, when in Turin, following the wounding of two fascists, the squadristi attacked the labor chambers and workers' circles, causing twenty-two deaths.

[“L’offensiva delle squadre fasciste dilagò in tutto il paese, colpendo case del popolo, camere del lavoro, leghe operaie e bracciantili, cooperative e sedi di giornali antifascisti. Vi furono uccisioni, bastonature, bandi contro comunisti, socialisti, anarchici, repubblicani, popolari e anche fascisti dissidenti, con incendi e devastazioni di sedi di partiti e amministrazioni locali spesso costrette a dimettersi. Il 1° settembre 1921 si potevano contare 726 sedi socialiste e sindacali devastate, 166 militanti socialisti uccisi e 500 feriti. Pochi furono i fascisti colpevoli di violenze arrestati o sottoposti a provvedimenti penali. La violenza fascista continuò, raggiungendo il culmine nel dicembre del 1922, quando a Torino, in seguito al ferimento di due fascisti, gli squadristi si scatenarono contro le camere del lavoro e i circoli operai, provocando 22 morti.]”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Russo, p. 69.

The creation and implementation of the Fascist Special Tribunal in 1927 sentenced 4,000 communists, 323 'generic antifascists', 24 anarchists and 12 socialists to prison between the year of its formation and its eradication in 1943. 4,596 anti-fascists were sentenced to a total of 28,196 years of imprisonment because of their opposing beliefs.<sup>24</sup> Interestingly, of the anti-fascists, eighty-five percent of them were artisans or of the working class.<sup>25</sup> Another 12,000 anti-fascists were internally exiled to outer Italian islands, forced to sign into a policing station twice a day, or were generally followed or spied upon by the government.<sup>26</sup> Other anti-fascists faced exile, many opting to settle in France. Distinctively, the antipathy of fascist policies did not hail from feelings of moral superiority, but rather from their direct impacts on the working class, such as the imposition of massive wage cuts, once in October 1927, and twice again in December 1930 and May 1934.<sup>27</sup> It was therefore no surprise that the higher classes were less averse to the new regime while the lower classes were the most affected; Mussolini strived to keep afloat the facade of a working class, with the realities of starvation well hidden behind the guises of promised prosperity and salvation.

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<sup>24</sup> Kesselring, p. 271. 13.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 272.

<sup>26</sup> Behan, p. 11.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 11.; Kesselring, p. 272

Naturally, this behavior inculcated senses of panic and terror among the Italian people. Public condemning of Fascism yielded beatings, capturings, and murders without proper court proceedings. If the courts were involved, any fascist activity was sure to end in extensive prison sentences. Suspicions and tensions were high among citizens, treading ever so cautiously with whomever they encountered, for there was always the looming possibility of an encounter with an undercover spy. Adults refrained from professing their enmity towards fascism at home in fear of their children hearing and accidentally repeating it outside of the home. Any suspicions of acquiescence were reported to the police and immediately followed with harsh repercussions. Freedom of speech was ripped from the citizens; their lives officially overrun by a strict oppressive system that continued to adopt increasingly vicious behavior as time went on.

It should also be noted that organizations proclaiming strikes against rampant Fascist violence tended to achieve opposing effects; armed with the intentions to strengthen the positions of the Left, the *sciopero legalitario* [legal strike] by the *L'Alleanza del lavoro* [Labor Alliance] in 1922 “achieved the opposite effect, pushing members of the popular party and democrats to abandon any hypothesis of collaboration with the forces of the Left. [...raggiunse invece l'effetto contrario, spingendo popolari e democratici ad abbandonare ogni ipotesi di collaborazione con le forze di sinistra].”<sup>28</sup> In an attempt to mask its failure, *L'Alleanza del lavoro* announced the termination of the strike on 2 August 1922.

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<sup>28</sup> Russo, p. 66.

## 2.2 Budding Racism and an Impending World War

Mussolini was irrefutably imperialist in nature, openly supporting a nationalist ideology and committing a series of war crimes during his fascist reign of terror. The first was the massacre of a hundred people in a mosque in Merca, Somalia shortly after his inauguration as prime minister in October 1926. In northern parts of Somalia, an area outside of Italian jurisdiction, a massive number of Italian troops enforced a “scorched earth policy”<sup>29</sup> while under the direction of Governor Cesare Maria De Vecchi in order to subdue potential rebellions.<sup>30</sup> In Libya in 1928 and again in 1930, Italian troops implemented the use of mustard gas as ordered by the governor general of Libya, Pietro Badoglio, effectively displacing massive populations throughout Italy’s African colonies. Over 100,000 people were forced into displacement camps, with 60,000 remaining after their closing three years later. Badoglio blamed the struggles of the people on the selfishness of Libyan Jews.<sup>31</sup>

The Mussolini administration continued to commit a wave of violent atrocities, including the use of mustard gas bombs during the invasion of Abyssinia/Ethiopia from 1935 to 1939 and the scorching massacre of Addis Abeba after an attempted assassination of Viceroy Rodolfo Graziani in February of 1937.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Behan, p. 13.; Gentile, “Un Patriota Della Cirenaica.”

<sup>30</sup> Pappé, *The Modern Middle East*.

<sup>31</sup> Behan, pp. 12-14.

<sup>32</sup> Mack Smith, pp. 70-85.

Both Fascism and Nazism abhorred democratic and liberal jurisprudence, a momentous commonality and perhaps the leading legacy of their cooperation during the twentieth century. Finding liberal and democratic methods to lack distinguishing political apparatuses within their systems of free representation, Fascism and Nazism sought to destroy something that “already existed and that was eminently positive, even if not entirely free of defects. [che già esisteva e che era eminentemente positivo, anche se non del tutto privo di difetti.]”<sup>33</sup>

It is from this shared ideology that Mussolini and Hitler forged a frightening comaraderie. The two dictators shared a myriad of propaganda strategies, one of which was the promise of reclamation. Some good did come out of Mussolini’s vision, however. In Italy, the theme of *le bonifiche* [the reclamation(s)] was one of the greatest of Fascist propaganda, and through massive multimedia marketing, Mussolini managed to make it one of the most impressive propaganda to have ever been released. The reclamation project was built upon rudimentary Fascist policy, such as ruralization, *sbracciantizzazione* (the Fascist version of sharecropping), and *La battaglia del grano* [Battle for Grain].<sup>34</sup> *Sbracciantizzazione* was an agricultural Fascist policy pursued in favor of sharecropping with the intention of reducing the number of workers. *Sbracciantizzazione* helped settlers to establish a modest farm in order to drastically reduce or eliminate rural wage work and motivate Italian citizens to cultivate strong and

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<sup>33</sup> Saitta, p. 7.

<sup>34</sup> Russo, p. 85.

cooperative societies and reclaim land. This movement occurred during the *Battaglia del grano*, a Fascist campaign that aimed to make the Italian wheat-production industry more profitable and self-sufficient. The *Battaglia del grano* hoped to reduce trade deficits, lower the necessity for foreign imports, and establish Italy as a powerful and self-sufficient producer and exporter of goods.<sup>35</sup>

Coined as “bonifica integrale” [integral reclamation], it was “not intended to mean only hydraulic remediation and the fight against malaria, but also reforestation, land reorganization, canalization, irrigation, construction of aqueducts and road connections. [non si volle intendere solo la bonifica idraulica e la lotta alla malaria, ma anche rimboschimento, sistemazione delle terre, canalizzazione, irrigazione, costruzione di acquedotti e di collegamenti stradali.]”<sup>36</sup> Its success echoed throughout all of Italy: over 6,500 hectares were removed from the swamp, with 3,000 new farms and farmhouses erected, freshly equipped with stables and walls. The cities of Littoria (today known as Latina), Sabaudia, Potinia, and Aprilia were born in December 1932 and August 1933 respectively.<sup>37</sup> Some good came from this movement, but no Fascist policy succeeded without loss: numerous farmers took advantage of the system by settling, for they saw no need to modernize or expand production. The campaign also created a decline in high-demand exports, such as Italian wines and cheeses.

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<sup>35</sup> Celli, pp. 41-55.

<sup>36</sup> Russo, p. 92.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

Racial policies exploded within Italy. Unlike its Nazi counterpart, Fascist Italy did not initially practice open racism. Mussolini expressed contradicting perspectives regarding race while in power, one time holding people of paler complexions in highest regard and the next repudiating the theory of race. In November 1938, Mussolini solidified his stance as being in favor of racism by publicizing his endorsement of the idea that “it is time for Italians to be openly racist”, published in the “*Manifesto della razza*” [Manifesto of Race], an article published by the Italian national newspaper *Corriere della sera*. This manifesto supported the implementation of radical political and social antisemitism, perfectly representing the hold Hitler had on Mussolini once their respective empires allied with one another. Prior to Hitler, there was no execution of racial legislation; Mussolini maintained that since Italian Jews had resided in Italy since Roman times, he felt no need to disturb their lifestyles. There was Jewish representation in the Fascist Party, the most notable contributor being Ettore Ovazza, the founder of the Jewish newsletter *La nostra bandiera*, or “Our Flag”,<sup>38</sup> which served to remind his community of their services and sacrifices for the Italian nation and culture during the Great War. Black and African Italians, admittedly, have always been greeted with cultural hostility. Yet, it was not until his interactions with Hitler that minorities were lawfully ostracized; by 1940, Mussolini passed legislation banning intercultural marriages and relocations to Africa, as doing so would tarnish the upstanding reputation of white-Italian supremacy. These laws quickly spilled into racial and religious segregation of public

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<sup>38</sup> Brownfield, “The Italian Holocaust: The Story of an Assimilated Jewish Community.”

facilities, companies, and sporting events.<sup>39</sup> Concentration camps were erected across Libya and Jewish deportation from Italy removed hundreds of citizens per day. Conditions were “appalling, and certainly not eased by the long, grueling hours of forced labor, and numerous cases of torture and murder.”<sup>40</sup> Under Mussolini and his Fascist regime, Jewish families were torn apart, tortured, and murdered. Starvation and social deprivation were rampant across Italy. It was time for a change.

### **2.3 Dreams, Debt, and Changes in the Workplace**

Mussolini was an avid fan of developing the public sector, particularly the infrastructure of schools. His infrastructure was rather improvident and unnecessary for elevating the nation to his promised political status. His buildings served the same purpose as a redecorated lobby of a public high school; the fresh paint and new wall-mounted flat-screen television seem promising to the public eye, a well-placed facade to deter from the lack of working sinks and half-hinged doors in student bathrooms, or the twenty-year-old water-damaged stains that litter the ceiling tiles in nearly every classroom. It all sounded delightful: The Fascist programs advocated “a modern insurance, provident, and social welfare system that would include accident, sickness, unemployment, and old-age provisions.” It was apparent from its initial proclamation that these concessions were to go to an “organized, independent, and aggressive labor movement”<sup>41</sup> as recapitulated in their dictum: “the rights of labor

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<sup>39</sup> Pugliese, *Fascism, Anti-Fascism, and the Resistance in Italy: 1919 to the Present*.

<sup>40</sup> “ANED: Bolzano.” Translated by Corey Dimarco.

<sup>41</sup> Gregor, pp. 258-259.

depend upon labor's discharge of its obligations.”<sup>42</sup> At first, their programs were viewed favorably by other European nations, labeled as “progressive” continuations of other programs in place during the previous administration. Fascist programs successfully gained mass political support. However, government spending was increasing and disorganized in a deliberate effort to cripple the Italian socioeconomic structure.

The Italian budget experienced an economic drought, yet the Fascist programs proved themselves capable of concentrating considerable financial resources into their projects: scarcity was viewed as an investment regardless of the fact that it was at the expense of the people. To paint a picture: 655 million lire was used for aqueduct construction during the same period of the 4,722 kilometers of constructed railroad track. Just prior to the Fascist regime, spanning a period of sixty years, the Italian government stretched 310 million lire in infrastructure. Fourteen billion lire went towards agriculture, 1 billion 540 million lire towards general building construction.<sup>43</sup> In 1922, Italy’s national debt amounted to 93 billion lire. By 1934, it had risen to an estimated 149 billion lire. By 1943, Italy’s national debt rose again to an estimated 406 billion lire.<sup>44</sup> Financial consumption, painted with a virtuous guild of a “Greater Italy”, lost appeal among the working class just as quickly as it had gained as the increasingly undeniable reality of eternal poverty and starvation settled throughout Fascist Italy.

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<sup>42</sup> Marx, pp. 295-300.; Gregor, p. 259.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 264.

<sup>44</sup> Flynn, pp. 50-52.

Italy declared war in July 1940. At this point, due to the impending war necessity, companies were legally allowed to raise their working weeks to forty-eight hours. They rose again to sixty hours in February 1941. Exhausted employees were a common sight: desperate breadwinners napped in barns because there were typically no other places for them to go, having commuted a considerable distance to work. There were company huts built to house commuters, but so few of them, which made it difficult for commuters to reserve them. However, due to little availability (and consideration), most workers wandered out to the countryside for a night's rest. For commuters, there were very few shelters and public transportation was severely limited. The welfare benefits that were designed to provide a blanket of security for the common Italian citizen were ripped from their hands under the pretense of active productivity. In fact, the structure of the working class and organization of labor provided the foundation for its economic underdevelopment. The economic environment in which Mussolini introduced his brand of socialist idealisms was unsuitable for radical change, which included the application of a dependable structural, industrial base. In summation, Mussolini was too idealistic; the prospect of a modernized militaristic regime was out of reach for a vastly impoverished Italy. Raw materials were limited, and the military equipment produced lacked in quality and quantity. Fascist investments were ineffective and plunged an already weakened Italy into its own Depression.

## Chapter 3

### STANDARDIZE THE IDEAL WOMAN

Fascist sexuality was built upon a foundation of hypocrisy. Externally, Mussolini heavily emphasized the need to raise the birth rate, which would then fuel his historical turn in Italian politics and his imperialistic impulses. Mussolini marked the beginning of his demographic campaign with his *discorso dell'Ascensione* [Ascension Day Speech] in May of 1927, which called upon Italians to salvage the depleting birth rate.<sup>45</sup> However, Mussolini's policy exacerbated any chance for women to play an active role in New Italy. Motherhood in New Italy was viewed as the best thing a woman could do for her country; the mere physical act of having babies received the highest praises from the regime. Female rights, both natural and those previously reserved for the workforce, were threatened by catechized Fascist officials. *Why would they need rights if women belonged nowhere except at home to birth and care for their children?* Fascism had great intention of making these narrow-minded ideals permanent by introducing them institutionally, for incorporating them into school curriculum proved a way for them to 'get a head start', so to speak, on the future generations.

The first step was the removal of unlawful sexual practices. Prostitutes were mandated to carry with them special passports that presented their vaginal examination

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<sup>45</sup> Passmore, p. 17.

and venereal disease records.<sup>46</sup> By the late 1920s, local law enforcement patrolled the streets with vigor, detaining prostitutes and commanding even home-bodied women to submit medical checkups to prove their sexual cleanliness. Opposition or signs of impurity, which could include solicitation or the presence of alcohol, resulted in prison sentences that could last for over a year. Mussolini refused to tolerate unregulated prostitution as it was insulting to Fascist views of motherhood. Ridding Italy of unlawful prostitution expelled the streets of sin and restored the legitimacy and dominance of male sexuality. This mindset extended to the traditions of marriage and views of procreation.

Following the abolition of unregulated prostitution came a wave of legislation. Anything involving women and reproduction developed rather slowly, beginning in the early 1920s and solidifying itself by the end of the 1930s. There were a myriad of seemingly positive measures, such as welfare institutions, maternity insurances, and temporary job security for soon-to-be and new mothers. However, with this semblance of positivity came the criminalization of abortion. Here is the hypocrisy: Mussolini and his regime introduced Italy's first modernized welfare system to include women and children. At the same time, they also did nothing to lift the prohibitions in place that prevented women from obtaining any true representation or legal privileges. In regards to legislative privileges, there were plentiful additions and few subtractions. Though some were great ideas, Fascism put women at a crossroad: find themselves a job or be mothers.

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<sup>46</sup> De Grazia, p. 44.

### 3.1 The Birth Rate Dilemma

Mussolini desired to increase the birth rate. Following World War I there was a “mini-boom” or rise in birth rates. Shortly after, however, Italy’s birth rate took a sharp turn downwards. It seemed that, despite putting forth their best efforts, the regime was unsuccessful in raising the birth rates. Efforts included the concessions given to large families in 1928, as well as state employment and housing preferences for those married and/or with child (over the single and/or childless) the following year in 1929.<sup>47</sup>

The birth rate was rather low throughout the 1930s. Described as a national emergency, Italians were forced to turn their attention towards raising fertility rates. As De Grazia describes, the decline was uneven and occurred over a period of about four decades:

“By the 1930s the Italian fertility rate was down from its 1880 high of 39 births per thousand persons, a figure typical of early industrializing regions, to 24 per thousand. In the 1880s all regions had more or less the same fertility rates. By the mid-1930s at least twenty-five urbanized provinces of northern and central Italy (out of a total of ninety-two provinces) had succumbed to what Livi called ‘demographic death’; that is, Italian adults were not producing enough offspring to replace themselves. Meanwhile, in the Italian south and islands, excepting several large towns and their hinterlands, population growth remained strong. In industrial Turin, birth rates were 14.6 per thousand; in impoverished rural

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<sup>47</sup> Durham, p. 14.

Lucania, they were more than double at 33.7 per thousand. Among urban professionals, the median family size was 3.28 persons; among peasants, it was nearly twice that figure, 6.43 persons. White collar wives averaged just over two children each, whereas rural women averaged over four. Interwar Italy was thus characterized by two fertility regimes: one seemingly traditional, the other stigmatized as modern. This dualism affected every aspect of fascist policy, as well as people's attitudes toward it."<sup>48</sup>

Northern procreation habits concerned the regime, for it foreshadowed economic issues. The bigger cities, upon which Fascist Italy relied to cater and carry industrialization, were becoming increasingly short of offspring. Contrarily, the villages and cities of rural, poverty-stricken Southern Italy experienced a considerable rise in birth rates. With industrialization painting a picture of a vigorous and seemingly inexorable urban contamination effect, many tired and frustrated Italians retired from city life and took refuge in the countryside. It is here they adapted to the customs of, perhaps, a more relaxed way of life, which involved settling and having multiple children. The threat of Fascism drove families to put off having children in order to establish for themselves a sense of stability; maintaining a family proved too difficult to achieve in an urban setting.

The birth rate fell from 24 births per 1,000 to 23.4 between 1931 and 1935. Mussolini shifted the blame to the women in the workforce, whose employment was well-understood at this point to be a burden. There were also attempts to prevent women

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<sup>48</sup> De Grazia, pp. 45-46.

educators from teaching male students, imposing the preference of an education catered specifically and exclusively to female students. Fascism increasingly dismissed women as unsuitable for the workforce, placing numerous restrictions on entering employment and civil service opportunities. In 1934, Fascist antagonism towards women made itself pointedly clear through a published article entitled ‘Machine and woman’, which declared that female hires acted as the nucleus of the economic and social quandaries tormenting Italy. Women could not work outside the home, for working was incompatible with child rearing, and therefore, by expelling them from the workforce, men would once again be able to ‘raise their heads high’.<sup>49</sup> There were over 5 million women occupying the workplace by 1938, during which the government placed restrictions on the number of women in any enterprise.<sup>50</sup> Unless said enterprises were hiring women to complete jobs already considered ‘womanly’, such as typewriting, answering phones, or dry cleaning, women’s employment was restricted to 10 percent of any large and medium enterprise, and none in small businesses.<sup>51</sup>

### **3.2 Forced Family Planning**

Italian women took fertility into their own hands. Upon learning that their fertility was in reality a manageable aspect of their lives and was just as much of a family consensus as it was an individual choice, more women welcomed the support of their husbands in their decisions. More traditional wives embraced certain emancipation by

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<sup>49</sup> Durham, p. 15.

<sup>50</sup> Bell, pp. 363, 369-370.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

relying less on Catholic teachings. Self-management seemed optimal at this time, as maternity was steadily becoming difficult to manage. Plain and simple, children cost money; they deserve stability, a prerequisite rendered scarce in Fascist Italy. New models of financial compensation for mothers in the workforce exposed liberal ideals and encouraged women to make their own decisions regarding the treatment of their bodies. These liberal ideals were too new and out of place in a traditional society, and Fascist Italy, partly by circumstance and partly by choice, was simply not equipped to implement and maintain drastic changes.

Social and economic reasonings were better documented. This is due to the fact that women of that time felt more comfortable speaking of overarching issues. A woman's body was not her own; it was to the detriment of her happiness that she was to uphold societal expectations. Motherhood especially was an expected indoctrination and the highest honor a woman could achieve, for "the birth of a child signifies the birth of the family" and to not have a family was seen as "abnormal and selfish." The woman is held accountable for a childless marriage. There is also this unspoken yet palpable and gratifying contentment when a woman can finally be placed in society as "a 'signora' and a 'mamma'". People who would pass a lone woman on the street without a second glance, will block a woman with a child to admire the 'little doll' and bombard her, the mother, with advice and criticism.<sup>52</sup> Mothers are a public treasure and spectacle, a reminder of a beautiful and attainable vision: an image so attainable that it was seen as offensive to

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<sup>52</sup> Costa, p. 45.

question the validity or desirability of having children. Why would a woman *not* wish to have this perfect life, particularly if it is not difficult for her to achieve it?

It should be noted that even if a woman were to birth a healthy baby, there was an implicit disappointment if the baby were female. First-born children should be male. Sons are the backbone of the nation: the soldiers, the businessmen, the builders; a mother birthing sons grew with importance with each child. Her ability to birth male children was seen as a woman devoting herself to her country. Any power and prestige granted to adult males “indirectly [reflected] glory on their mothers”<sup>53</sup>, which is perhaps the reason why Italian mothers seemed more dedicated to their male children than to their female children and even husbands. Expecting mothers experienced social acknowledgement and respect; mothers of male children got to retain it after childbirth.

Planning when to have children grew in popularity upon the introduction of a new kind of middle class: Fascist wartime Italy bred widespread financial diffidence, inspiring those with jobs to deem the prospects of parenthood as delusional in favor of staying right where they were. Maintenance of social rank took precedence. Too quickly could a person go from employed to unemployed; the comforts of opulence were well out of reach, and families were developing the forethought to not bring children into the mess.

Fertility reconsiderations affected all of Italy, not just the affluent Northern half, popular cities, and more prosperous agricultural regions. Historian Victoria De Grazia references the Sicilian City of Villamaura and its local artisans who had been “badly

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

buffeted during the interwar decades by economic distress, higher outlays for apprenticeship, and the cutoff of emigration outlets abroad.”<sup>54</sup> Making sedulous use of what they called *marcia indietro*<sup>55</sup>, or ‘going in reverse’, tradespeople and artisans restricted family sizes to inspire pecuniary recovery. Having copious amounts of children goes against interest. Fascist propaganda is harmfully inconsistent with the realities besetting the Italian family unit. The logic was simple: how can you support children when you cannot support yourself? Mussolini and his regime countered newfound liberalism by condemning women of the workforce, blaming their choice to postpone childrearing for the insecurities faced in society. Motherhood, although highly celebrated, became a lugubrious drudgery.

No one could be certain of the true feelings of women during this time for they were seldom expressed. Working class women looked forward to giving birth in a public ward with limited resources and medical surveillance, only to return with their child to a soiled home, unclean and without a consistent supply of food. A husband out all day left the housework and family care to her. If her husband had a business, then she would probably have had a hand in managing internal affairs, on top of domestic obligations. If, for one reason or another, a woman decided to not bear children, then she would likely have had to assign herself to what could very well have been a long and physically arduous professional career. Considering their limited options, it was not unreasonable to

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<sup>54</sup> De Grazia, p. 50.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

assume that academics and going to school were kindnesses in both the physical and psychological sense.

Exposure to alternative lifestyles was considerably, if not entirely, dependent upon financial circumstances. Women of the upper class were more likely to look into alternative methods of maternity, as they were more likely to have the freedom of exploring the ‘opportunity costs’ of bearing children. Upper-class women also had access to the latest contraceptive information. Though the wealthy had the means, their financial predisposition did not exclude them from the Fascist ‘necessity’; many of such families were still bound to their rural origins. Regardless of the help they received from servants and family members alike, child-rearing became a mundane, yet unnecessarily complicated and importunate inevitability, and, as a result, women became more motivated to spend as little time on that portion of their lives as possible.<sup>56</sup>

Preservation of self-interest came at a high cost. Employers and coworkers offered little sympathy for the modernized woman. For women of working classes, condoms prevailed as the leading (and only legal) contraceptive on the market at the time, even so with limited availability to the poor or to those residing in more conservative neighborhoods. Unwanted pregnancies were a nightmare, so much so that women turned to creative, mostly hand-constructed douches and aborters, choosing to risk their physical health than to have an unplanned child. Italian women all over the State began to adopt a similar mentality, and those who maintained their traditional

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

values were beginning to develop a new sympathy towards the modern female perspective: children were an expectation that did not have to be met; the choice to conceive was the woman's, not the man's, the State's, or the Church's. It seemed that no matter where one turned, the story was the same: how many came from a large family, whose mothers experienced multiple pregnancies, whose husbands had too fragile a sexuality to endorse such a refreshing idea as refashioned motherhood. In reality, it was motherhood that surrendered women to a great social disadvantage; familial appearances tarnished by female members daring to set apart themselves from the males, causing them to find work and marry young to fix the damage. Unfortunately, these traditional fixes were very much against their own personal wishes.

The eugenics of Fascist Italy were complex and overall unfavorable, as the mere concept of contraception was a topic of which Mussolini found himself quite wary. Fascist Italy was “not simply pro-natalist but eugenic, utilizing propaganda, economic incentives and restrictions on abortion in an attempt to raise the birth-rate alongside the deliberate use of sterilization to selectively lower it.”<sup>57</sup> Females were tasked with maintaining strict social behaviors to ensure the prosperity of a populated Italy. On the other hand, females were weakened from the poisons of individualization; the pursuance of professions and the delay of maternal obligations thrust them into a “[physical] state of imbalance because of emotional reasons and constitutional factors.”<sup>58</sup> Biological politics

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<sup>57</sup> Durham, p. 169.

<sup>58</sup> De Grazia, p. 54.

implemented by Mussolini were an attempt to rid Italian society of impure and imperfect offspring. There was this necessity for women to be young, for it is during their youth that a woman is most fertile without complications. Fascist reproductive ideologies went as far as to deny or prevent women from receiving medical or financial aid. Serving as yet another means to divide social classes and lay a foundation for a flourishing middle class, the poor were excluded from the immoderate surmises that went along with the concerns of physical well-being. To put it simply, the weak and decrepit will die off, and those remaining will have to do whatever they can to survive in these overly exhaustive and competitive conditions.

Mussolini's plan to seize and maintain control of women and families, referred to as the "prod to mores" or *pungolo al costume*, consisted of three components: propaganda, social welfare programs, and, of course, repression. The message was everywhere: indoctrinations "to equate womanhood with breastfeeding continued to cover Italy's urban centers across the temporal interval."<sup>59</sup> Though these images date back to the Renaissance, Mussolini did little to deter such messages from their traditional trajectory. Women, just as they had centuries ago, featured "ample"<sup>60</sup> bodies with large hips and breasts: symbolically, the portrait of a perfect bearer.<sup>61</sup> The iconographic fertile female was plastered on every metropolitan wall in the effort to subliminally convince women to breastfeed as many infants (of their making, preferably) as possible.

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<sup>59</sup> Garvin, pp. 129–165.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

Breastfeeding was an iconic depiction, a preferred artistic authoritarian representation of Fascist Italy. Posters of a breastfeeding mother and child were frequent works of renowned propaganda printist and avid Mussolini supporter Gino Boccasile in the 1930s and 1940s,<sup>62</sup> whose illustrations served as powerful instruments in swaying public political alliances.<sup>63</sup>

Every woman felt some form of oppression, whether that meant encountering misinformation regarding birth control, denial of contraceptives, or feeling the grip of the ever-tightening abortion penalties. To marry and bear children seemed an unavoidable destiny, with her social success measured solely by her capability to carry and birth the future of the State. Lower-class women were particularly vulnerable to the uncompromising Fascist programs and their inevitably bleak impacts, having no choice but to be dependent upon them. Mussolini argued that repression served as the most reliable form of birth control. Bans on birth control, the releasing and distribution of information on birth control, and abortion were deemed illegal and punishable by law. This prohibition extended to banning any art, object, or service that “offended public decency” or had the intention of “preventing or interrupting pregnancy”, even encouraging the prosecution of those praising the procurement of abortions or publicly instigating the use of contraceptives, regardless of scientific research or possible remedial consequences.<sup>64</sup> Solidified on 30 October 1930, these laws and penalties repressed

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<sup>62</sup> Arrasich, *Boccasile: Catalogo Delle Cartoline*.

<sup>63</sup> Biribanti, *Boccasile: La Signorina Grandi Firme E Altri Mondì*.

<sup>64</sup> De Grazia, p. 55.

women under the pretense of protecting the Italian people from racial impurities. Fascist Italy was not the only nation experimenting with removing abortion from its registry, and it should be noted that, although legislations indeed passed and prohibitions became canon law, it is difficult to prove whether or not these obstructions were truly successful in countering the modern motherly reformation.

Abortions were expensive, too:

“When abstinence or coitus interruptus failed, and douches and other postcoital home remedies proved futile, women resorted to abortifacients: emetics, irrigation with herbal infusions and chemical irritants, hair pins, knitting needles, scraping, and probes. They might range in cost from 400 lire for a douche or 600 lire for a probe from a so-called angel-maker to as much as a 1,000 to 2,000 lire for a medical intervention--- a huge sum considering that an average monthly wage for a male industrial worker was only 300 lire. Women, however, almost always paid for their abortions, either from their own wages or by scrimping on the household budget, pawning objects, or drawing on savings from small domestic industries.”<sup>65</sup>

Due to a major decline in fertility rates, the regime desperately assembled medical and social welfare workers to reinforce abortion prosecutions. Ramifications included the increase of jail sentences and hefty fines, particularly for a woman performing an abortion on herself. For additional surveillance, doctors were mandated to record and

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 58.

report unlawful abortions. Doctors were reluctant to do so because to disregard the privacy of their patients was a violation of the Hippocratic oath; however, few went on record to denounce this ordinance.<sup>66</sup> There were also moments of leniency in which doctors or courts would overlook an abortion, reducing charges or dismissing cases due to a supposed lack of evidence, therefore making the accusations burdensome to authenticate.

The increase of abortions seemed to have affected people's overall perspectives. Abortions were originally denounced as an act associated with poverty, for only a poor mother would need to resort to deserting her child or committing infanticide. Now it was a staple of the urban working class; with a myriad of new meanings attached to the mere concept, its presence had become a topic of debate and even defense while under public perusal. Meaning, it was more than just abortion: it represented a stance in a variety of societal debates, such as womanhood and Church and State involvement. Abortions were severely unlawful to the State and inveterately monstrous to the Church. The Church deemed any sexual act that was not for procreative reasons ungodly. However, it was the laws of the State that created an environment in which abortions had to be seriously considered. Abortions were a means of survival. Eventually, its prevalence became a "therapeutic psychological act, as if it were a part of modern maternity practice"<sup>67</sup> Women began rationalizing their behaviors with the mentality that "Mussolini's not going

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. 59.

to raise this child” and adjudged the backlash by the State to be immaterial. Regardless, conditions were rather unpropitious, and the guilt of voluntarily ridding oneself of a child, perhaps multiple, seemed a small weight to bear when faced with everyday hardship. It was a preference for the living over the potentiality of the unknown, unborn.

At this point, abortion was not yet legalized, and would not be for another forty years. The laws were favorably modified in May of 1978, which stated that abortions could be lawfully performed in a public structure, such as a hospital, within the first ninety days of gestation. An abortion exceeding those first ninety days may only be performed if the mother’s life is in serious physical or mental danger.<sup>68</sup>

Abortions presented a philosophical incongruity to Fascist Italy: the prohibition of abortions meant a violation of the right for a woman to treat her body as she pleases. Yet again the hypocrisy of Mussolini presented itself: women were to birth children in a severely impoverished society, incapable of providing for their children a stable, healthy environment; women were to consign to a domestic role when their husbands were not making enough to support the same family demanded by the State. Women, *if* able to find work, were subjected to pitiful pittances all while fighting the contradicting laws designed to keep them unemployed in the first place. Abortions were no different: women

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<sup>68</sup> Law 22 May 1978, n. 194: “Norme per la tutela sociale della maternità e sull’interruzione volontaria della gravidanza” a series of multiple articles indicating the rules for the social protection of maternity in regards to abortions. Published in the *Gazzetta Ufficiale della Repubblica Italiana* (n. 140), an official source of knowledge of the lawful rules and regulations in Italy.

were the nurturers, and the mother was to be the nurturer, regardless of delinquency, poverty, or marital status.

So, what *did* Mussolini do with the mothers and children residing outside of societal normalities? Mussolini had a plethora of services designed to handle outsiders, which typically included unwed women, women with disabled, imprisoned, or absent husbands, and abandoned children. Dating back to December 1925, *L'Opera Nazionale per la Maternità e l'Infanzia* [National Organization for Mothers and Infants] (ONMI) was an organization aimed specifically at providing social assistance to mothers and children.<sup>69</sup> ONMI derived itself from the Belgian National Child Protection Organization that had begun six years prior. Similar programs had already been established across Europe at the point of Fascist Italy's ONMI, such as in Norway in 1915, France in 1921, and Germany and Denmark in 1922.<sup>70</sup> ONMI established a series of intervention programs with rather romantic intentions to extirpate child mortality rates, which were considerably high at the time. By doing so, Mussolini expected to see a significant increase in population. Mussolini cherished the idea of power in numbers [*“numero come potenza”*], as expressed through his famous Ascension speech in May 1927.<sup>71</sup> Mussolini's ONMI was another measure to mold Italians into an acquiescent master species.

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<sup>69</sup> N. E. M, p. 601.

<sup>70</sup> Minesso, pp. 49-50.

<sup>71</sup> Mussolini, *Il Discorso Dell'ascensione Pronunziato Da Benito Mussolini Il 26 Maggio 1927*.

### 3.3 Women and Education

Nothing dazzled the attention of young women much like a tabloid cover depicting two star-struck lovers sharing a passionate kiss. While the ideas of exploring young love were tempting and, according to the State, outlandish, young Italian women were often vulnerable to the repercussions of natural curiosity. Censorship was on the rise in Fascist Italy and, in addition to the war beyond the borders, there was a war waged between young adults and the State over the sensitivity of censorship. Mussolini and his regime sought to create an Italy of families and marriages, yet gave their citizens little-to-no education regarding either subject. Love was whimsical and an unquestionable destiny for young women, as were wedding bells and little ones crawling around the tiles of their new home. Yet, Mussolini was adamant about the abnormalization of sexual education, preferring to leave curiosities that come with having to build a marriage and family answered by shoving two young adults, male and female, together and allowing them to figure things out than with proper preparation or demonstration.

Lack of physiological education extended to teaching about menstruation and giving birth; women learned of these natural and essential processes by ‘having and giving’, not ‘reading and talking about beforehand’. Girls studying at convent schools “had to wear ‘bathing’ dresses when they took baths, so as to not to see or touch themselves.”<sup>72</sup> Mothers, as their girls approached puberty, refused to relay such information, for it was condemned as a blasphemous act. Even today, mothers claiming to

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<sup>72</sup> Costa, p. 46.

have detached themselves from such religious notions stutter through the facts of life with a prominent blush and dismissive wave of the hand. Menstruation can be a traumatizing experience for a young woman, and to not warn her of the next forty years would be a great disservice to her. Ignorance, in this case, is certainly *not* bliss.

Unfortunately, female students had little success in obtaining an education that would be beneficial to their professional success. Changes in policy were rampant from 1925 to 1939, during which the *scuola complementare* [complementary schooling] was replaced with another that will better prepare students for the rising economic industry. Although there was a significant increase in students attending secondary school and university, this extension of education could not promise that the students would be qualified for better jobs upon graduation. Rather, it reflected the necessity to postpone unemployment for as long as possible.<sup>73</sup> Educating female students presented a greater dilemma: Mussolini required the superintendence of women, preferring them to reside well within the domestic sphere. However, he needed people to work, and women proved themselves more than capable of completing the educational requirements.<sup>74</sup> To demonstrate, the enrollment in *liceo femminile* [females-only high schools] increased from 100,000 in 1930 to 350,000 in 1940.<sup>75</sup> The number of females entering university increased to twenty-one percent by 1940, with women receiving a quarter of all higher

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<sup>73</sup> Dunnage, p. 83.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Istituto centrale di statistica (Italy).

education degrees awarded by that time.<sup>76</sup> Despite their educational success, women received more professional backlash than men. Women were prohibited from obtaining leadership or teaching positions; they could no longer be headmistresses, middle school leaders, or instructors of economics or philosophy, for their ethics would certainly clash with that of a man's. Prioritization of male employment dominated every field and education was no exception.

Laws that appeared designed to promote female employment were a cover-up for motivating a male-dominated workplace. For example, introducing maternity leave and benefits served as a good deterrent from the workforce. Contradictive legislation provided little incentive for protecting women, for the restrictions and obligations an employer approving of female employees became overbearing and, at times, nonsensical. For example, women were prohibited from arduous work in arduous conditions, for it would hinder their reproductive capabilities. Agricultural and domestic work provided perfect opportunities for female labor to be exploited: rural workers found themselves with little legislative protection and were therefore subjected to extensive manipulation, as seen with the lowering of the female working age from fourteen to twelve.<sup>77</sup> Despite her ever-growing list of responsibilities, a Fascist woman had no official power over her place in life.

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<sup>76</sup> For statistics, various sources are referenced by Dunnage. They are: Marzio, pp. 159-162.; Caldwell, *Italian Family Matters: Women, Politics and Legal Reform.*; De Grazia, chapters 5-6.

<sup>77</sup> Dunnage, p. 83.

Fascism used education as a means to transform each individual into a sponge, eager to sop up whatever propaganda Fascism spilled in front of him or her. It was a coercive consent to Fascism without the necessity for coercion; placing Italians in a place of complete subordination was a relatively easy process if they began the process young, which they did. The Education Reform of 1923 of Giovanni Gentile, a fellow Fascist philosopher and Mussolini's right-hand man, mandated that compulsory education be raised to ten years and operated on a sort of ladder system: upon the completion of the first five years of elementary schooling, the child chose a *scuola media* [middle school], which would then permit him access to *liceo* [high school] as well as other secondary or vocational education, referenced as *avviamento al lavoro*, with the intention of preparing him for immediate entry into the workforce.<sup>78</sup> Young Italians faced a childhood of psychological penetration of authoritarian character. Initiating this process began in the 1920s, concluding the decade with the signing of the Lateran Pacts of 1929,<sup>79</sup> solidifying the Church's agreement to give the State more influence on nationwide education.<sup>80</sup>

One of the earliest forms of 'Fascistization' was *Opera Nazionale Balilla* (ONB), an Italian Fascist youth organization that emerged in 1926 and lasted until 1937. This organization emphasized the importance of sport to develop a master race: nationalists, exhausted from having to witness the Great War devastate an already impoverished Italy, rallied the cooperation of various primary schools and the ONB and created an

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<sup>78</sup> Gentile, *The Reform of Education*.

<sup>79</sup> Dunnage, p. 91.

<sup>80</sup> Rhodes, p. 46.

impressionable organization dedicated to whipping Italy's unfit youth into shape. The regime reinforced Fascist ideologies in schools throughout the 1930s by mandating an oath of allegiance sworn by all instructors in addition to administering a policy of employing teachers that had been certified after 1923.<sup>81</sup> Textbooks and other reading materials used in schools were engorged with pro-Fascist propaganda, including themes of modernization, industrialization, creating a master Italian race to surpass all other races of the world, the goodness and godliness of Mussolini, and the myth that Fascist Italy existed to fulfill its prophecy of reviving the successes of Ancient Rome. Rural families that did not have sufficient funds for books received their helpings of propaganda through the radio by the Ente Radio Rurale radio board, established in 1933. Therefore, children (and adults alike) were able to receive the teachings of Mussolini regardless of socioeconomic status.<sup>82</sup> Fascist education instilled obedience and patriotism, declaring that self-sacrifice laid the foundation for greatness and that it was the duty of a loyal Italian citizen to put aside their selfishness for the sake of their nation.<sup>83</sup> A noble sacrifice, really, for a gilded cause.<sup>84</sup>

### **3.4 Representation in Media**

Approaching the end of the Second World War, Italian theatre began moving from melodramatic storylines to a discussion of issues of contemporary life. Realist

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<sup>81</sup> Dunnage, p. 92.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ledeen, pp. 137–154.

<sup>84</sup> Dogliani, pp. 326–348.

writers and directors thrived on portraying working class domestic issues while keeping in circulation common historical references, such as dramatic reenactments or pre and post perspectives of the *Risorgimento* [Unification of Italy]. As a viewer and consumer of Italian drama, I have noticed that Italian filmmakers and playwrights favor expression through issues of everyday life; creativity comes in the form of a plot with deprecating humor. Through these publications, Italians also felt empowered to express their stances on ‘hot-button’ issues, such as Fascism, Communism, the workforce, and women outside the home.

Middle class was a common setting and theme of Italian theatre and cinema. Unsurprisingly, women played the parts of mothers, wives, and daughters. Post-*Risorgimento* theatre immediately began adopting new ideologies regarding the family unit appropriate for a recently unified nation. Carrying through well into Mussolini’s reign, the theatrical representation of the family unit continued to evolve and going to the theater rose as a national pastime. Education was a luxury in Italy; few received education outside of that received at the theatre,<sup>85</sup> which did not do anything favorable for a woman’s independence. In numerous portrayals, “success or failure was determined on the stage more by the attitude and behavior of the wife and mother than by the probity of her husband.”<sup>86</sup> Still, women went to the theatre, just as they were encouraged to do so: attending the theatre was considered a suitable activity for the social

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<sup>85</sup> Trevisani, *Sulle condizioni della letteratura drammatica italiana nell’ultimo ventennio.*; Willson, p. 110.

<sup>86</sup> Willson, p. 110.

woman. Those of higher social standing frequented urban venues such as parks and tea rooms, whose lights and aromas practically implored women to occupy them with their dates before attending a show, only to be dropped off home shortly after so that their male dates could depart for their *circoli* [clubs].<sup>87</sup>

Representation as a whole was unsurprisingly objective and detached from the doleful Fascist reality. Women were dismissed as “underlin[ing] a fundamental inconsistency in the face of managerial tasks, [for this was the basis for] her total psychological dependence, her priority being, even physically, in the traditionally feminine attitudes and modalities of relationship, therefore linked to expressive rather than productive purposes. [...sottolineare la fondamentale inconsistenza della donna di fronte ai compiti direttivi, la sua totale dipendenza psicologica, il suo prioritario essere, anche fisicamente, negli atteggiamenti e nelle modalità di rapporto tradizionalmente femminile, quindi legata a finalità espressive piú che produttive.]”<sup>88</sup> If a woman were to commit violence, then she would be labeled as another example of a product of a broken family unit, a fractured psyche, or other condition that rendered her incapable of maintaining complete control of herself. Something had to have happened for her to act violently, a conservative perspective built upon the fiction that violence could only be attributed to a “broken normality [dalla normalità infranta]”<sup>89</sup> and not due to her own choices and priorities. Female dominance is taboo, an exploration of exceptionality,

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Iaccheo, p. 107.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., p. 108.; Ronci, *L'immagine della donna terrorista della informazione*.

incapable of being supported by Fascism or any kind of conservative political structure. When explored in a place that prefers to reconstruct female representation, her story becomes repetitive and circular.

Italian neorealist films emerged as a form of escapism following the end of World War II. Admired for its realism and respected for its complexity, Italian neorealism established itself as a genre that demonstrated conflict in the sphere of traditional masculine fantasy. A variety of films of this category offer interpretations of reality and the truths within it that are lived day in and day out, a sometimes-radical disillusionment during times in which a little invention and fallacy would be preferred. Neorealism begs the question: whose identity is truly being deconstructed, and why is this experience demonstrated?

*Roma, città aperta* [Rome, Open City] in 1945 captures the realism of the Italian man just after World War II. Praised for its excellence in its aesthetic and theoretical demonstration of neorealism, director Roberto Rossellini began its production amid the war in January of 1945, which required resourceful efforts and fearless perseverance. Catering a plot line that entails true events, *Roma, città aperta* questioned the constructs of traditional female identities and how they flourished in the presence of male identities. This observation appeared as one to social subservience rather than political condemnation. *Roma, città aperta* offered both male and female characters significance, but through differing means: male characters received significance through their political efforts and sovereignty while some female characters received significance as victims. A

weak woman extracted sympathy from its audience and in turn was empathized.

Although Pina, a woman in the film, achieved heroism, it was only due to the fact that she carried the film's overarching theme of unanimity. Pina was the most contradictory character in the film, having a sense of independence and demonstrating other assertive traits that, if not for her physical figure, would otherwise characterize her as a man. For example, her introduction involved her among other women out of a bakery protesting her frustrations with a baker who sold bread to Fascist customers.

Rossellini demonstrated a duality with Pina through the way in which her scenes were shot. During the protest, the scene was shot in two-shot to blatantly portray Pina as a hero among the people. She received a single-shot close-up to emphasize her self-governance, but from then on was shown in only two-shot portrayals, possibly to erase her individualism. Medium-length shots carried Pina throughout the film as a subliminal means to reinforce her maternal responsibilities that are to soon override her independent thoughts.<sup>90</sup> Pina, a woman that was kind, caring, and unafraid to protest her frustrations, was burdened with maternal expectations that would eventually force her to retire from her activism.

Pina died an autonomous hero. Pina, among other apartment residents, was evacuated by the Nazis in an effort to track down Resistance leaders. Amidst the chaos, Pina spotted her lover being taken by officials. She broke away from the crowd and the Nazi officials and took off in a sprint towards the vehicle housing him. A rebellious act,

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<sup>90</sup> Wagstaff, pp. 115, 117-118.

she was shot by the Nazis as punishment. A vision of her collapsed body is shown, for the shot was taken from the perspective of the lover watching her death from the back of the truck. Her death and its portrayal conveyed the cold and thoughtless nature of violence, for that soldier of the Nazi regime showed no qualms in killing a pregnant woman who, other than having a natural reaction to distressing circumstances, posed no threat to elicit sudden death as a proper response. Characteristically, her death was also “unrealistic and out of character”<sup>91</sup>: she demonstrated an understanding of how to cope with Nazi occupation. She was an otherwise logical woman succumbing to blindness of love and passion. Pina died for romance and not for political injustice. Pina visually represented the struggle of the misrepresented female: she died a concerned mother and a vulnerable, lovesick woman, and not as an assertive, self-governing hero that died defending her beliefs like some of her male counterparts in the film.

The other two supporting female characters in *Roma, città aperta*, Marina and Laurette, illustrated characteristics of femme fatale through their sparks of independence and challenging of male authority. Marina, an opposition to Pina, refused to observe the traditional role of housewife and mother because she did not wish to sacrifice her financial autonomy. Having come from severe poverty, Marina feared that marriage would only hinder her financial growth. It was out of fear that she instead filled her life with material possessions and evaded advances from potential suitors. Laurette was envious of Marina and her lavish lifestyle and strived to provide for herself the same

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid., p. 126.

economic comforts. Both of these women were materialistic and faced punishment for their shallowness, a cautionary tale to consumerist culture. All three women succumbed to a traditional trope, thus rendering their efforts useless and their resolutions tragic.

Bound to the mercies of tradition, there was a persistent underlying expectation for women to capitulate a portion of her sense of self to an overlying patriarchal cause. Pina was a forthright dissident carrying the weight of a baby, along with it the expectation that motherhood soon will silence her; Marina and Laurette were two women chasing after their envy. Women have more depth than what could be visually perceived; the nature of the woman herself seldom addressed. It was under this focus that the representation of women in cinema was circular and lacking.

## Chapter 4

### THE RISE OF ANTIFASCISM AND THE BIRTH OF THE RESISTENZA

Between the inflation of prices, the limits of food availability, and the long, dreadful working hours, it comes as no surprise that there was a surge of defiance. By 1942 there were an estimated two strikes a month, and by 1943 that estimation grew to an average of five a month. Pippo Coppo, a communist activist of Northern Italy, described that the rapid augmentation of anti-fascist activity was because of “mothers and parents, all those who had sons under arms, knew they were at war [and] started to rebel...”<sup>92</sup> The bells of war rang loud and clear, salient by the bombing of Turin by the British in November 1942.<sup>93</sup> The war efforts of the early 1940s were a catalyst for the withdrawal of support. Italian citizens began to silently advocate for true peace at the sight of their world, which resembled the top of a coffee cake: *sbrisolona*, or crumbly.

There were a myriad of resistance organizations that were born amidst the rise and fall of the Fascist regime, one of the most fundamental (and, until recently, seldom mentioned) being specifically the female contributions within the *Resistenza* [Resistance], whose movement emphasized the efforts of the *women* of Italy. The *Resistenza* was a compelling inducement for modernizing the pre-established overbearing

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<sup>92</sup> Behan, p.21.

<sup>93</sup> Coppo, pp. 16-17.

traditional perspective. It served to demonstrate the Italian woman as an equal among men, and to assert her right to pursue political, economic, and social autonomy, as well as whatever it is she desired in life. The Fascist woman was a nurtured hybrid, acting as both a caretaker to her family and as a servant to the State. Italian women presented themselves as a new apparatus that garnered praise from the regime for their unique dedication and placement within the realm of Fascist Italy.

The Fascist women of Mussolini with appreciable accommodations had a comfortable seat on the social ladder, blissfully ignorant of the realities of women residing beyond the borders of their social circles.<sup>94</sup> Rural women, isolated from any possibility of evading the woes of poverty, were more robust and submerged in the intolerances of tradition. These lives, often shrugged off as “dismally dull and backward”<sup>95</sup>, experienced a tug-of-war, so to speak, between the excitement of new opportunities and the dread of having to adhere to a rather uncompromising and conservative mindset. The constraints on women were normal and unquestioned. Females existed to bear children, maintain the household, and care for their families. The working woman was a myth. With all of the social, racial, economic, and political stifling unfolding just outside their windows, the further lawful degradations of women came as no surprise.

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<sup>94</sup> De Grazia, p. 1.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

What made their circumstances all the more ironic was the fact that Fascist Italy celebrated the idea of a *Nuova italiana*, or “New Italian Woman” in an effort to create stronger nationalism. Perhaps this was also an effort on the part of Mussolini to stall the imminent social fallout to occur once his policies were put into action. When it came to women, Fascist Italy greatly contradicted itself: on one hand, any policies having to do with the emancipation of women were gravely condemned. On the other hand, Fascist Italy promoted the pursue of self-interest that would subconsciously feed into demands for sexual autonomy and equality. In summation, the propaganda of the regime sought to restore tradition when it contrarily inspired change. Modernization was established, but just not in the way it was envisioned by Mussolini.

Prior to Fascism, feminine intervention and participation in politics was exceptionally rare. It was not until the latter half of the nineteenth century that manifestations of sexual liberation were explored, which was partially due to the unstable fluctuations of a wartime economy, having affected Italy at every possible socioeconomic level. All Italian feminism had to do at that point was be ‘picked up’ by mass culture.

Furthermore, Fascist Italy was the first in Italian political history to designate family values as the center of its statecraft. Their prioritization of family produced contradictory results and put familial life under an unusual amount of pressure. Economic crises, such as the farming crisis of 1927, demanded hefty tribute from the resources of families, many of which were already well within the throes of poverty.<sup>96</sup> The regime

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<sup>96</sup> De Grazia, p. 80.

exploited merchant and artisan communities in order to fuel mass consumption and reduce opportunities on public services. This pressure forced people to have bigger families and for men to be employed farther away from home. However, the lack of available employment and terribly low wages had families scraping together subsistence. Fascism was horribly intrusive in its demands for loyalty, justifying the separation and persecution of Italian working families in the name of [delusional] prosperity and military provisions. Italian Fascism was a paradox: it produced a State that gossiped sexual purity, family values, economic abstemiousness, and ascetic habits to prioritize industrialization, yet exacted legislations to divide families and force its citizens to reconsider their dignities.

Fascist propaganda asserted that the nation did so to support the doting mother bent over her children, a popular form of propaganda. However, Fascist policy desired to push women back into the household. Nonetheless, women seeking work were limited to family and social welfare professions, for their progression outside of these categories was viewed as a problem for society. It was largely assumed that women held little expertise, patience, or capacity for subjects beyond what was necessary for a caregiver to know. The modern side of Fascist welfare was designed to “guarantee that, through the wage system, [the male] was the family’s main provider and the chief guardian of the family’s well-being.”<sup>97</sup> Fascist welfare was a synthetization of old and new, and the more families had to rely on the system, the more that women began to play an important role

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid., p. 82.

previously unanticipated by the party: due to having to budget obsessively and meticulously calculate the best means to use the State welfare services, women became acquainted with bourgeois resistance ideologies and assisted lower-class women to acquire them as well. Women used their private and public spheres to “great effect: producing leaflets or newspapers in family homes, quietly involving other relatives in activities, shopping and carrying out anti-fascist propaganda at the same time, and passing off partisans or activists as refugees, sons, husbands or even lovers.”<sup>98</sup> Far more women were volunteers than men, who were often forced to be involved in other, more hands-on and violent activities; whereas men always had to leave and fight, women always had the excuse to sit out at home.

As Fascism progressed, women became more vital to the turning of the tides. Initially the women who were older and more experienced took on the role of acting in the Resistance, but their ranks were joined by younger women as necessity evolved. Women went from transporting or carrying ammunition, money, bombs, or medical supplies to providing complex financial help, which extended to families in need after the death or arrest of their anti-fascist or partisan relative. Due to their inconspicuous natures, women could be called upon at any moment, making them an invaluable resource and powerful ally.

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<sup>98</sup> Behan, p. 163.

#### 4.1 Women and Politics

Initially, Fascism catered to mainly the middle and upper classes and disregarded the rest. As Fascism grew in popularity, it appeared that its members and their socioeconomic placements were widening the class base, expanding Fascism to suit a more colorful collaboration than initially intended. However, aristocratic influences maintained control of the majority of leadership positions at the very top of the Fascist ladder and allowed anyone to assume control of a leadership position at a local level. The 1930s brought little reconciliation: women grew surfeited with having to succumb to boorish and unsympathetic male-dominated political practices. Although the rise of organizations, whose inceptions were caused by the continuous passing of exhaustively restrictive legislations, certainly pressured the Fascist administration, it did not do much for putting a woman in office. Fascist administration sought to ensure the fulfillment of central policy by appointing enforcers at local levels. Those chosen for these salaried positions were often devoted local federation leaders with years of unpaid service under their belts.<sup>99</sup> It was not until the Second World War where women began to see progress: female party members obtained their first seats on the PNF Provincial Directories and moved into local corporative bodies, both within 1940. The Fasci Femminili Provincial Fiduciaries<sup>100</sup> obtained seats to aid in overseeing local economics. The Fasci established

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<sup>99</sup> Passmore, p. 24.

<sup>100</sup> The *Fasci Femminili* (or 'FF') was the women's section of the *Partito Nazionale Fascista* and assimilated all subsections of female-oriented Fascist organizations. Its origins trace back to 1919 and officially disbanded immediately following the end of the Second World War in 1945.

their first central committee after the Second World War.<sup>101</sup> Although their victories were small, it still remains as an appreciable procurement of rightful representation, especially considering that corporate Fascism, at that time, served as a stand-in for democracy.<sup>102</sup> Fascism did not support the theoretical flexibility necessary to incorporate other opinions and organizations into its institution.

Women saw little improvement regarding their roles in society despite their success in widening their political influence. Women only had real power over other women, particularly over women belonging to lesser social classes. Poverty-stricken women were frequent recipients of welfare and, because of this, were initially dismissed as incompetent or too dependent. Their small population size determined their contributions to be miniscule. Nonetheless, Fasci Femminili incorporated impoverished members by creating a membership category reserved exclusively for the rural and poor, for they realized that their numbers and contributions would be helpful to advancing Fascist policy. Within the Fasci Femminili emerged an organization for peasant women in 1933, which became the largest organization in Fascist Italy by 1943 due to its incorporation of working-class women.<sup>103</sup> An extensive training program was also initiated to help women improve their lives and carry out their rural and domestic responsibilities while maneuvering through the meticulous societal arrangements associated with a male-dominated hierarchy. Competitions were held to encourage

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<sup>101</sup> Foglio di Disposizioni no. 24, 18.

<sup>102</sup> Passmore, pp. 24-25.

<sup>103</sup> Willson, *Peasant Women and Politics in Fascist Italy: The Massaie Rurali*.

attendance to these training sessions. The courses, many of which were taught by women, covered a variety of subjects, including home management, childcare, hygiene, and manufacturing and maintenance of animal and vegetable farming, although the farming courses were mainly facilitated by men since few working women presented suitable qualifications to instruct.<sup>104</sup> After 1935 the party focused on economic independence and stability; women campaigned to increase domestic production of poultry to decrease the nation's reliance on foreign meat. They also exhorted others to collect wild herbs and use them to explore alternative cultivation techniques, such as finding herbs suitable for medicinal purposes.

With the myriad of courses and social events, it was fairly easy for a woman to encounter Fascist advocacy. And they were good enticements, too; offering a variety of educational and motivational courses and promoting welfare programs that catered to all levels of impoverishment; from the unfortunate to the distressingly penurious, the enticements were certain to succeed in spreading Fascism as a benediction to the people of a suffering nation. Fascism, in this light, brought optimism to a State wrapped in the woes of tradition. It granted women participation in programs that otherwise would not allow their presence. Pre-Fascist programs occurred without female considerations, for women were regarded as irrelevant due to their legal inability to vote. Numerically concerned, the party was massively successful: in 1929, Fasci Femminili membership stood at about 100,000, and by 1940 it soared to about 750,000, then exceeding a million

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<sup>104</sup> Passmore, p. 25.

by 1942.<sup>105</sup> The reasons why women joined varied. Poorer women held passive roles in the party for they were politically inexperienced. Women hailing from urban working families were likely to have left-wing family members influencing their decision. Regardless of initial reasoning or political understanding (or lack thereof), loyalty was a commonality among female members, for the party's offerings of maternity and social opportunities were undeniably favorable to the underprivileged and fraught. Still, Fascist women never acquired any actual political power and were not deemed qualified to formulate any of their own policies except at the most local level.<sup>106</sup> Italian women had no national representation and little legal credibility.

It was made abundantly clear by the 1930s that the employment and welfare benefits were the most attractive to prospective members. By the late 1930s, the Partito Nazionale Fascista required that members obtain a party card to access membership employment and welfare benefits. Some sections of the PNF had cards that were equivalent to the full PNF card, rather offering a cheaper membership and necessitating the purchase of the neckerchief and badge associated with that particular section. This was, to many, a reasonable alternative to the two (winter and summer) expensive tailored Fasci Femminili uniforms that members were required to purchase upon membership.

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

## 4.2 Women's Defense Groups

The reasoning behind a woman's involvement in the anti-fascist movement was, in general, the same as a man's. Fascist welfare systems made the public more aware of the conflict between its citizens and State policy. Extreme circumstances pushed too many to the edge of society. Mass activity continued to rise in frequency, with one of its peaks occurring in 1944.

Starting at the end of September 1943, local resistance groups made up of female partisans emerged to battle communal issues, known as the *Gruppi di Difesa della Donna* (GDD), or "Women's Defense Groups". Women's Defense Groups materialized in Milan in 1943 and spread to other regions as the war progressed, proclaiming itself a group dedicated to women "of any social class, of any religious or political belief, who want to take part in the task of liberating the nation and fighting for their own emancipation."<sup>107</sup> Women's Defense Groups began small, with a group of five to six women whispering among themselves in neighborhoods, schools, hospitals, and workplaces; over time, those whispers grew into complex geographical networks.<sup>108</sup> The Women's Defense Groups made an impact. Statistics show that by the eve of liberation, there were a total of 24,048 full-time members and 15,823 associate members.<sup>109</sup> The GDD was well-known and responsible for organizing demonstrations and printing local leaflets.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Slaughter, p. 66.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., p. 67.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., p. 68, 100.

<sup>110</sup> Behan, p. 166.

Organized to fight and protect the lives of their friends and families, Women's Defense Groups were a strong attempt to oppose and prevent the destruction of Italy by the Fascists and Nazis.

The goals of the GDD were clear and unified. They sought to create and enforce an autonomous and inclusive arrangement in which the structure of Italian society not only tolerated, but encouraged female involvement across political, economic, and social platforms; the Italian woman grew tired of subjecting herself to a life of servitude, craving a means to do something with herself that expanded beyond the confines of the house and family. The climate in which the GDD was forged provided the perfect opportunity for women to voice their difficulties. Women knew well that the path chosen would not be one of comfort, for the continuous confrontations of prejudices against traditionalist values, which were at times were certain to dim the hopes of achieving any level of political liberation. However, it was the fight for privilege and ambitious emancipationist projects brewing quietly in the background that convinced many to contribute their voices to the discussion.

There were plentiful obstacles to overcome before any acceptance of women in politics took place. First and foremost, the term 'defense' had to be clarified that "the expressions 'defense of the woman' and 'assistance' did not refer to a position of weakness of the women or their assisting attitude, but rather a combative attitude towards the abuses of fascism and a position of collaboration with the partisan groups. [...fu chiarito che le espressioni «difesa della donna» e «assistenza» non si riferivano ad una

posizione di debolezza delle donne o a una loro attitudine assistenziale, quanto piuttosto a un atteggiamento combattivo rispetto ai soprusi del fascismo e a una posizione di collaborazione con le formazioni partigiane.]”<sup>111</sup> Secondly, there was considerable distrust of those aligning themselves with the Left, and also of those looking to galvanize approbation or suspicion of the Leftist party. Upon examination, this could be the result of pluralism: simply, “the organization that was being born should have been open to all those who were willing to unite to fight against Nazi-Fascism and to assert their claims, regardless of any social background, religious faith or political trend. [l'organizzazione che stava nascendo avrebbe dovuto essere aperta a tutte coloro che fossero disposte a unirsi per combattere contro il nazifascismo e per far valere le proprie rivendicazioni, indipendentemente da qualunque estrazione sociale, fede religiosa o tendenza politica.]”<sup>112</sup> Though the circumstances were exhausting, Women’s Defense Groups established an important role and moment in the history of the Italian woman, for they “sanctioned the definitive break with the past. [...sancirono la rottura definitiva con il passato.]”<sup>113</sup>

The GDD had two objectives: the first was to organize the workforce to resist Nazi violence by sabotaging production and refusing the German occupants food. This included the call to gather the supplies from the Germans and distribute them to the partisans as well as their accomplices, families, friends, and allies, extending further to

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<sup>111</sup> Amoroso, p. 112.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., p. 113.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

partisans that had been taken captive by Germany, injured, or otherwise victims of the regime. Next, by means of demonstrations and protests, the GDD demanded the increase of food rations and other supplies, which included clothing, shoes, shelter, fuel, and higher wages, as well as the right to an education in a safe building with meals provided. Women in particular protested for formally sanctioned and women-inclusive welfare institutions, protection of health and safety, and the right to work, maintaining that women should be hired solely upon the basis of merit and be able to have the opportunity to manage their own lives from every socioeconomic angle. Mobilizing the female masses was argued to be “completely extraneous to politics [completamente estranee alla politica]<sup>114</sup>, which was another way of saying that this ‘argument’ was inarguable, and the excuse as to why these women were prohibited from such rights could only be deemed inexcusable.

Women’s Defense Groups were an ever-expanding cooperation holding functions at an eventual regional level. Although a slow start, the first GDDs of the seven sectors of Milan were passed with caution among women and partisans alike. Over the course of 1944 the newspaper *Noi donne* [*Us Women*] emerged as the underground communicator and voice of the budding movement. Founded initially in 1937 by Teresa Noce in Paris, *Noi donne* became a primary source of pro-women propaganda and a GDD organizational newsletter detailing strike dates and instructions. With its regional editions, it was able to create more personal connections with its consumers. It should be

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

noted that *Noi donne* was not the only underground newspaper; in Milan, there were also newsletters published by GDD activists as well as another GDD-affiliated magazine titled *Il Pensiero femminile* [The female thought] (although only a single issue was released).<sup>115</sup> Nonetheless, these publications spoke of liberal motivation and represented the struggle of establishing some sort of footing in the state of continuously swelling agitation.

Their protests yielded, at times, desirable results. On June 16th, 1944, the Women's Defense Groups demanded an increase in rations and warned that the Germans, who at the time were occupying Italy and controlling its economy, would steal all of the local food. Dozens of women spread the word hastily by hosting and attending protests, going door-to-door, and speaking at local workplaces. Their demonstrations created a support of several hundred male and female partisans, for trying the patience of the local population were the long lines at food distributors and terribly low rations. Public insistence persisted despite the threats of arrest and deportation by the Nazis. Reluctantly, the Nazis refused to commit a massacre and dropped their order for evacuation, resulting in a complete victory for the local Resistance.<sup>116</sup>

Workplace strikes, though powerful as statements, were long and arduous. Particularly with women, political tension reflected the working-class nature of its members. An example was the demand for a more accurate and professional description for women's services in lieu of the vague word *staffetta*. Women who were facilitators,

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid., p. 114.

<sup>116</sup> Giuseppe, *Quattro Giorni Del Luglio 1944 a Carrara*.

officers, and nurses wanted a title that reflected their education and expertise. Although it welcomed everyone and inspired partisans of both sexes, the Women's Defense Groups strived to defy and defeat the male-centered mindset that prevented them to stand as true equals; their struggles were just as internal as they were external.

During this period there was an increase in change, resistance, and violence. The reaction to violence varied from woman to woman. Violence and confrontation, often a result of these staged protests, was arguably "the exposition of its relationship with law and justice. [l'esposizione del suo rapporto col diritto e con la giustizia]." <sup>117</sup> Meaning, perhaps, that violence did not necessarily have to be an answer, but assumed the role due to the nature of the argument of which it was a part. Violence itself is broad and cannot be so easily specified. Some violence ends with both parties walking away, whereas some end in death; some end in physical harm without mental scars, whereas some end without a scratch to skin but haunt the mind for years. In times of momentous instability, often an influence of violence, some women sought self-affirmation, religion, or a utopia of some sort; these paths were all means by which these circumstances were eradicated, establishing some sense of equality among all involved. Sharing was risky and undoubtedly an anxiety felt by any woman wishing to express her truth. However, finding the right women, creating a group of familiar faces, and sharing with them the struggles of the fight proved a beautiful strategy in overcoming a subtle, but unprecedented adversity:

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<sup>117</sup> Iaccheo, p. 59.

“To plumb this backdrop is problematic, emotionally speaking, as the situations of violence experienced by the women of the Resistance and by the women of terrorism also propose very divergent behaviors and values. These are events in which women have often found themselves alone, but with the awareness of sharing risks and dangers that other women, at the same time, were experiencing. This fueled an intense solidarity, which helped to survive and cope with the situation. The actions of protest and struggle, even before being implemented, helped them to feel part of a united group, to cope with the violence carried out and those who suffered.

[Scandagliare questo fondale è problematico, emotivamente parlando, in quanto le situazioni di violenza vissute dalle donne della Resistenza e dalle donne del terrorismo propongono comportamenti e valenze anche assai divergenti. Sono vicende in cui spesso le donne si sono trovate sole, ma con la consapevolezza di condividere rischi e pericoli che altre donne, nello stesso tempo, stavano vivendo. Ciò alimentava una intensa solidarietà, che aiutava a sopravvivere e a fronteggiare la situazione. Le azioni di protesta e di lotta, ancor prima di essere messe in atto, le aiutavano a sentirsi parte di un gruppo unito, per far fronte alle violenze agite e a quelle subite.]”<sup>118</sup>

Emotional resources were scarce. There were not many options for a woman, particularly one in distress due to a government that did not support her individualism, to feel her

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

right to emotion, or the right to explore her identity outside of the realms of wife and motherhood. Women were equally capable of offering political value, and it was from this emergence of camaraderie and individual persistence that we see a connection between policy and humanity. Even today, politics involves the investment and maintenance of relationships, making it yet another social game. Grasping these relationships and learning to adapt to them is what builds a true and trustful experience. Even more so, identity is rooted in our relationships: having connections to love has as great an effect on the human experience as do relationships of violence. Women were able to function within disfunction, confronting fear with an impressive rigidity. Whether it was the fear of death or containment, or depression, or even perhaps envy when observing others, women wore a mask of courage and security that countered affliction with self-confidence and friendship.<sup>119</sup>

Strikes lasted for hours and included an aftermath of posting photographs of victims, creating articles in *Noi donne*, distributing tricolor ribbons, and collecting donations to support other GDD-affiliated underground publishing media. Improvised and unannounced speeches known as *comizi volanti* [flying rallies], were gaining popularity; speakers emerged to address the young workers in factories, local markets, and other public impromptu-venues, and then went on with their day. This method allowed for dozens of meetings to be held and for propaganda to be heard by thousands of people. A rise in political tensions and an increase in deportations to Germany surged

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid., p. 62.

mass strikes, violent protests, and the sabotaging of goods and services relating to war production. At this point, the GDD secured its ranks by declaring a myriad of directives for leaders of numerous committees<sup>120</sup>, for it was about having a well-established and coordinated collaboration of mass organizations, activists, and allies waging against the war-hungry Nazi-Fascists.

### **4.3 The Working Woman**

Working women during the reign of Mussolini received plentiful backlash and anguish for their contributions. Left to fend for themselves and their families, women were constantly battling to earn a place in the workforce, withstanding staffing cutbacks and miserable pay, even for women well past their birthing years. Fascist Italy treated its women “not only as inferior, but even deprived them of their daily bread.”<sup>121</sup> In the 1930s, over one-quarter of Italy’s working population was female. One out of every four women between the ages of fourteen and sixty-five were economically active. Sixteen percent of women were the main breadwinners of their households in 1931, and women supplemented the family income in several million others.<sup>122</sup>

Mussolini thrust women into a constitutional tug of war: “family necessity” was a means to justify Fascist transgressions; an adjustment, a defense, a push towards a citizenship that was only previously validated by their ability to reproduce. Hence the plea of family necessity, an implication that their presence in the workforce was merely a

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<sup>120</sup> Amoroso, p. 120.

<sup>121</sup> De Grazia, p. 166.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

temporary strategy, and that the jobs that women were filling were too ignoble for a proper man anyways. The dictatorship preached two contradictory conditions: on one hand, the Mussolini administration desired to secure men as the reigning kings of their families by maintaining their positions as sole earners of the household. On the other hand, women and minors were the cheapest and most accessible sources of labor. Well-established gender inequalities, both within and outside of the labor market, served to support the continuous enactment of regulatory economic debarments. Fascism is the point in which we see a shift from an agricultural to industrial economic environment, and socially, subsequent female involvement. Industrialization promoted the mass production of goods and services, marking the end of light manufacturing.<sup>123</sup> As a determined attempt by the regime to control this new current, employment was changed to cater to the male perspective to which special privileges and higher wages were distributed. This wave plunged women back into the house with no protection, no employment, and little (if any) pay. For Mussolini, ever the misogynist, reasoned that work “distracts from reproduction, if it does not directly impede it, and formants independence and the accompanying physical-moral styles contrary to birthing.”<sup>124</sup> Propaganda sought to convince Italian women that their presence in the workforce could only hinder their liberation. Deprecating their professional capabilities were not only men, employers, and the government, but also women themselves.

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<sup>123</sup> Federici, “L' Emancipazione Femminile in Italia. Un Secolo Di Discussioni 1861-1961.”

<sup>124</sup> Mussolini, p. 311.

The claim that women worked to merely satisfy some internal desire and not out of necessity was untrue. It was truly the period of industrialization and the Great War that elevated women from housekeepers to supplementary contributors of the household. The call of men to fight left a void in markets, workshops, and several expanding bureaucracies that women proved themselves more than capable of filling. It also contradicted fears of employers regarding the ethics of employing women, such as low intelligence, fickleness, and lack of seriousness or dedication. Despite such a pleasant surprise, the feminization of the workforce, as many employers claimed to foresee, propelled male-centered unions, rulings, and codes to be rethought or rebuilt. These arguments formed a compelling case against hiring women. Those who stood opposed compared the denunciation of Italian women to the camp followers of the Bolsheviks.<sup>125</sup>

Fascism did well to circulate these arguments. Since no reformist unions were in existence and unemployment was rampant, labor leaders treated female workers as full-fledged employees, which therefore permitted them to become completely immersed in the labor movement. In the past, political organizations such as the PSI and Italian Labor Movement were sympathetic towards female workers. However, the change in the air, politically and economically speaking, caused regression which once more pushed women back into the home. It was as if the State were saying, “your time to shine is over, now give your husband his job back and go make dinner.”

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<sup>125</sup> De Grazia, p. 171.

Pushing women away from the workforce was a practice predating the impositions of Fascism. The Movimento Socialista Italiano [Italian Socialist Movement], formed with the intention to unite and defend a woman's right to work backfired, serving to only further divide its followers amid Fascist attack. The labor movement in Italy was never a concrete force; it supported women in the workforce, but had no true anchorage to moor legislation. Without proper representation or footing, and with unabating unemployment, leaders were pressured to treat marginal women workers as full-fledged employees, which meant involving them as much as possible. A prime example of female involvement and leadership is the story of Argentina Altobelli, the first female labor unionist in Italy. Inspired by socialism, she assembled a labor union exclusively for female workers. Altobelli founded a trade union representing rural workers in 1901 called the *Federazione Nazionale fra i Lavoratori della Terra* [National Federation of Agricultural Workers or Federterra]<sup>126</sup>, and became its national secretary in 1906, which made her the first woman to lead a trade union that represented both men and women. In 1908, she was elected to serve as the executive for the Italian Socialist Party. During her time with Federterra from 1905-1925, Altobelli set up union offices and advocated for the nationalization of land. She also participated in other labor unions and councils until their terminations in 1926. In an attempt to gain the support of socialists, Mussolini offered Altobelli the position of secretary of agriculture in 1924.<sup>127</sup> She refused.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid, p. 172.

<sup>127</sup> Lane, *Biographical Dictionary of European Labor Leaders*.

<sup>128</sup> Fondazione Argentina Bonetti Altobelli.

The problem working women faced was multi-dimensional: on one hand, there were the conservatives and traditionalists demanding the preservation of motherhood by forbidding female involvement outside the home. On the other hand, there were recovering veterans of World War I returning home to reestablish themselves in the workforce. Socialists were divided over whether or not to agree with conservative attitudes. Women, who were defending their access to employment and government programs, were also willing to put aside their preferences in order to accommodate veterans and their families. This patriotic gesture, once met with public acclaim, proved detrimental to the long-term war women were fighting. Instead, proclaimed 'advocates' organized self-help programs for unemployed middle-class women; a pitiful apology to the thousands laid off post-war without pay or benefits.

## Chapter 5

### PARTISANS AND THEIR STORIES

This section is dedicated to the women of the *Resistenza* that exhibited extraordinary wit, strength, and humility during a time of fearful uncertainty. As mothers, wives, and daughters, women must present themselves as good in character: to take refuge in the solace of her embrace in times of hopelessness, to trust in her guidance in times of disbelief, and to heal in her presence in times of hurt. In other words, a woman has a duty to the ones close to her. In Italy, a woman who can do it all: nurture, guide, love, and protect, is a woman of upstanding ‘Italianness’. She married young, therefore she [oftentimes] raises her family, husband included. She’s responsible for churning out a family of decent size, too, for according to Fascism: numbers matter. However, economic mandates made womanly obligations rather confusing to follow, for there were expectations that contradicted one another; how could a woman *not* work when it became exceedingly difficult for her husband alone to support her family, but she could be ostracized for ignoring the core societal mindset of staying home for her children? How could she be curvaceous and lively if she was miserably starving?

The Catholic Church and Fascism worked hand-in-hand, for the Church and Mussolini both had a picture of what ideals a woman should and should not assume. Mussolini despised a woman with a cigarette dangling from her mouth, and women who

choose to care for dogs over children.<sup>129</sup> Mothers cannot be only ‘mothers and doers,’ but rather behave themselves in such a manner that they may exhibit a little independence in managing household tasks, but demonstrate complete subservience to their husbands. Female involvement in external affairs was frowned upon. Rare was the female employee; if she were to sit among men, it would be at her dinner table after cooking a lovely meal for her family.

There were so, so many stories to sift through when deciding which to highlight in this essay. I chose these three stories for their heart, parallelisms, and impressive displays of humanity: Ada Gobetti, Carla Capponi, and Irma “Mimma” Bandiera. For a considerable period of time after the conclusion of World War II, the actions of these notable partisans were not remembered as acts of resistance. Perhaps this lack of acknowledgement stemmed from a blurred outlook, having been scrambled by years of political confusion, oppression, and misguidance; resistance might have looked different in the 1910s, 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, as did Italy.

Ada Gobetti (1902 - 1968) performed several antifascist resistance actions over a period of fifty years.<sup>130</sup> Having spent her entire life in Torino, she witnessed Italy endure the brutality of two world wars and the wave of Fascism that drowned society for decades. She and her husband Piero Gobetti were dedicated journalists and frequent contributors to the antifascist magazine *La Rivoluzione Liberale* [The Liberal

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<sup>129</sup> Innocenti, p. 7.

<sup>130</sup> Alano, p. 3.

Revolution]. In 1925, the magazine was shut down by the regime and her husband was beaten and forced into exile in Paris. He succumbed to bronchitis a year after. Vowing to continue his work, from 1928 onwards, she immersed herself as a teacher and translator of the English language. She helped to establish the *Giustizia e Libertà* [Justice and Liberty] in 1929, an antifascist resistance party, with notable partisans Carlo Rosselli and Ferruccio Parri (who later became the Prime Minister of Italy in 1945) and the *Partito d'Azione* [Party of Action] in 1942, a liberal-socialist political party that rejected Karl Marx's communist ideology in favor of overcoming class struggle by respecting civil liberties and enacting radical socioeconomic reforms.<sup>131</sup> Ada Gobetti kept a diary during the war, written in English to protect herself. She maintained a network of safe houses in Torino for anti-fascists in need of shelter and protection. Her address, 6 Via Fabro in Torino, became a center for smuggling pro-Churchill literature and other antifascist materials.<sup>132</sup> Ada, throughout this terrible time, expressed her inability to despise the Germans despite the atrocities she had witnessed them commit, but rather felt a burning compassion for all those affected by the war.<sup>133</sup> Gobetti continued to translate and publish reading materials for children and parents alike, never ceasing her dedication to fighting for women's rights and democracy until her death in 1968. On 2 October 1978, ten years

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<sup>131</sup> Berrettini, *La Gran Bretagna E L'antifascismo Italiano: Diplomazia Clandestina, Intelligence, Operazioni Speciali, 1940-1943*.

<sup>132</sup> Thomson, "The Woman Who Invented the Italian Resistance."

<sup>133</sup> Alano, *A Life of Resistance : Ada Prospero Marchesini Gobetti (1902-1968)*.

after her death, she was awarded the Silver Medal of Military Valour for her courageous efforts and role in the Resistenza.<sup>134</sup>

Carla Capponi (1918 - 2000) was another female participant in the Resistenza. A native to Rome and aspiring lawyer, she spent her early years working along with her two sisters after the death of her father. In July 1943, Carla rushed to the Policlinico Hospital in search of her mother after the bombing of San Lorenzo. She remained there after as a volunteer. She also provided her home as a place for communist activists to gather and discuss action. As the Germans occupied Italy, Capponi joined the Italian Communist Party and became active in the Resistenza. She was named *Inglesina* [The Little English Girl] and participated in a myriad of radical acts, such as the assassination of a German officer, who at the time was departing from a hotel with defense plans in his possession. She described the experience as traumatic and that it seemed impossible that a woman like her, peaceful and of a nonviolent disposition, could take a life and run off with his briefcase. Capponi noted that it was a twisted world and, with her comrades hunted and tortured, that her fears transformed into a determination to fight for what was right. In 1944, Capponi served as vice-commander for a *Gruppi di Azioni Patriottica* [Group of Patriotic Actions].<sup>135</sup>

Following the end of the war, Capponi served two terms as an elected member of the Chamber of Deputies of the Italian Communist Party. Shortly before her death in

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

<sup>135</sup> Slaughter, pp. 57-60.

2000, she published a memoir titled *Con cuore di donna* and served as an executive of the National Association of Italian Partisans. Capponi was also awarded the Gold Metal of Military Valour, one of only a handful of Italian women to receive such an honor.<sup>136</sup>

Irma “Mimma” Bandiera (1915 - 1944) was born to a relatively wealthy family in Bologna. Following the armistice in 1943, her boyfriend, soldier Federico, was captured by the Germans. The ship on which he boarded was bombed and sank off the coast of Piraeus.<sup>137</sup> Bandiera, frantic to find her lover, searched high and low for a trace of him. Understanding her efforts to be fruitless, she turned her attention to soliciting soldiers to join the Italian Communist Party. Soon after, she entered the Resistenza under the name ‘Mimma’ and participated in a series of violent resistance acts, including the murder of a German officer and commander of the SS on the 5th of August 1944. The following midnight on the 6th of August, a violent reprise erupted which resulted in the arrest of three partisans. On the 7th of August, Bandiera and two of her comrades were arrested at her uncle’s house and locked up in the schools of San Giorgio, where she was tortured for information. She was pronounced dead on the 14th of August 1944, her devastated body left in plain sight as a warning to others.<sup>138</sup> Bandiera was awarded posthumously with the Gold Medal of Military Valour. She is memorialized in the Shrine of Piazza Nettuno and in the Monument to the Partisan Falls in Villa Spada.<sup>139</sup> The road on which she was killed

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<sup>136</sup> Scarparo, *Across Genres, Generations and Borders: Italian Women Writing Lives*.

<sup>137</sup> “Bandiera Irma.” *Storia e Memoria Di Bologna*.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> “Monumenti Che Parlano: La Resistenza a Saragozza.”

has been named after her in Bologna, along with a plaque dedicated to her memory and sacrifice.<sup>140</sup>

These women, Gobetti, Capponi, and Bandiera, are a few of numerous women that showed valiant dedication towards a hope that Italy could become a place of equality and prosperity, achieved through reasonable and humane efforts, and allowing themselves to act if pushed beyond such limits. Their participation represented the question of gender and resistance; Gobetti, Capponi, and Bandiera utilized their identities and manipulated the patriarchal ideal to undermine their opponents and obtain the upper hand (albeit temporarily). Although not necessarily representative of other women's experiences, it certainly painted a picture of what kind of psychological warfare was necessary to further their cause. It begs the question: were women truly free in choosing their affiliations and involvements, or were they merely an extension of men? Gobetti and her experiences illustrated women at this time as living in a man's world; women carried weapons, were soldiers, and engaged in activism, activities that were otherwise exclusive to men. Their participation in the effort was simply unavoidable. Their presence was an obstacle to the dominant cultural and political perspective, for women were participating in spheres that did not welcome them.

In a sense, the Resistenza was a multi-layered movement in itself; it protested against Mussolini and his Fascist government, but also for the rights of women and their places in society. Women proved their worth in the partisan struggle. The Resistenza was

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<sup>140</sup> "Irma Bandiera." *Storia e Memoria Di Bologna*.

a place to vent years of previously subdued resentments towards a society that put men on a pedestal. Fascist Italy brought upon men and women the same anxieties: marriage and children, putting food on the table, having enough money for basic needs, securing fuel, maintaining a home. Women stepped forward and assumed roles that were not previously 'designated' for them out of necessity, knowing fully-well that they could complete their assignments with an equal dedication and competence. The Resistenza repudiated the concept of exclusivity in this sense, for it proved that necessity conquers social ideals. Censorship did nothing to withhold its intended audiences from acting of their own volition, their own faculties and judgements forging a wall around empty criticisms and a flagrant lack of moral consensus. Imprisonment, beatings, and death were a routine consequence and, if they were to occur regardless, then what did it matter what side of the conflict they were on? A bleak perspective, nihilistic and depressing in nature, transformed by some into a resolution to contest the equality and liberation sought after for so long.

## CONCLUSION

Under the command of Mussolini and his regime, Italy experienced periods of success and periods of instability. Fascism was a confusing time for Italy, for it drew citizens in with promises of socioeconomic restoration and prosperity. Wanting to industrially modernize the State, Mussolini enacted a myriad of legislations that, although progressive, were too much for recovering Italy to maintain. Women during this time in particular had a grand assortment of responsibilities to oversee with little intervention or assistance. Fascism desired women to stay in the house when it came to population, work necessity, and welfare qualifications. Women were always walking on a tightrope, in a sense: balanced as to not slip into the depths of complete subservience; balanced as to manage the home and health of themselves and their families; balanced as to provide familial needs without transcending traditional parameters. Women found a way to protest a change and to prove their worth outside of the home and family; it is a wonder that Italy took so long to recognize it.

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