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PEASANT WOMEN AND POLITICS IN FASCIST ITALY

THE MASSAIE RURALI



PERRY WILLSON

PEASANT WOMEN AND POLITICS IN FASCIST ITALY

Peasant women were the largest female occupational group in Italy between the wars. They led lives characterized by great poverty and heavy workloads but fascist propaganda extolled them as the mothers of the nation and the guardians of the rural world, the most praiseworthy of Italian women.

This study is the first published history of the *Massaie Rurali*, the Fascist Party's section for peasant women, which, with three million members by 1943, became one of the largest of the regime's mass mobilizing organizations. The section played a key role in such core fascist campaigns as nation-building and ruralization. Perry Willson draws on a wide range of archival and contemporary press sources to investigate the nature of the *Massaie Rurali* and the dynamics of class and gender that lay at its heart. She explores the organization's political message, its propaganda, structure and activities and the reasons why so many women joined it.

Perry Willson is Lecturer in Italian History at the University of Edinburgh. Her previous publications include *The Clockwork Factory: Women and Work in Fascist Italy* (Oxford 1993) and numerous articles on modern Italian women's history.

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The Massaie Rurali

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ABBREVIATIONS

Archives

- AFCDEC – Archivio della Fondazione centro di documentazione ebraica contemporanea. Archivio generale (Milan)
- Arch. Cernezzi – Private archive of the Cernezzi family (Milan)
- ASSA Lombardia – Archivio della Società agraria di Lombardia (Milan)
- ASArezzo, PNF – Archivio di Stato di Arezzo, fondo Partito Nazionale Fascista, Carteggio con i Fasci di Combattimento e con i gruppi rionali
- ASL, PNF – Archivio di Stato di Livorno, fondo Partito Nazionale Fascista
- ASM, Gab. Pref. – Archivio di Stato di Milano, fondo Gabinetto di Prefettura
- ASPisa, PNF – Archivio di Stato di Pisa, fondo Partito Nazionale Fascista
- ASPistoia, Gab. Pref. – Archivio di Stato di Pistoia, fondo Gabinetto di Prefettura
- ASRE, Gab. Pref. – Archivio di Stato di Reggio Emilia, fondo Gabinetto di Prefettura
- AST, PNF Conegliano – Archivio di Stato di Treviso, fondo Partito Nazionale Fascista, Sezione di Conegliano
- AST, Gab. Pref. – Archivio di Stato di Treviso, fondo Gabinetto di Prefettura di Treviso
- ASTorino, Gab. Pref. – Archivio di Stato di Torino, fondo Gabinetto di Prefettura
- ASV, Gab. Pref. Vercelli – Archivio di Stato di Vercelli, fondo Gabinetto di Prefettura

Archivio Centrale dello Stato (Rome)

- ACS, MRF – Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista
- ACS, PI, DG, Ist. Tec., Div.III – Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione, Direzione Generale, Istruzione tecnica, Divisione III, Insegnamento agrario 1925–1940
- ACS, PNF, DN, SV – Partito Nazionale Fascista, Direttorio Nazionale, Servizi Vari

ABBREVIATIONS

- ACS, PNF, SC – PNF Senatori e Consiglieri
- ACS, PNF, SPEP – PNF Situazione politica ed economica delle provincie
- ACS, SPD-CO – Segretaria Particolare del Duce, Carteggio Ordinario
- ACS, SPD-CR – Segretaria Particolare del Duce, Carteggio Riservato

Newspapers/magazines

Almanacco – Almanacco della donna italiana

AMR – *L'azione delle massaie rurali*

Bullettino – Bullettino dell'agricoltura: Giornale della Società agraria Lombarda

DF – *La donna fascista*

DR – *Domus rustica*

DR_u – *La donna rurale*

DC – *La donna nei campi*

Giornale – Il giornale della donna

LAF – *Il lavoro agricolo fascista*

MR – *La massaia rurale*

RR – *Radio rurale*

Other abbreviations used in the Notes

b. – *busta*

fasc. – *fascicolo*

sf. – *sottofascicolo*

FD – *foglio di disposizioni*

FO – *foglio d'ordini*

(NB The FDs and the FOs were the 'sheets of directives and orders' sent out by the PNF Secretary to local Party Federations. The numbering of the 'sheets' started from scratch each time a new Party Secretary was appointed.)

GLOSSARY OF ITALIAN TERMS AND ORGANIZATIONS

- Agrari* – large farmers (landowners or tenants)
- Ammasso* – official stockpile or warehouse for collecting produce
- Appoderato* – peasant who was resident on the land actually tilled
- Biennio rosso* – the ‘Red Two Years’ (1919–1920) when there was huge unrest in both rural and urban areas and Italy appeared to be on the brink of a socialist revolution
- Bonifica integrale* – land reclamation and improvement
- Bracciante* – farm labourer
- Bracciante avventizio* – casual farm labourer paid by the day
- Capoccia* – most widely used term for male head of smallholding or sharecropping household. (Other regional terms include *reggitore*, *vergaro*, *azdor* and *massaro*)
- Cassa Nazionale di Maternità* – National Maternity Fund
- Cattedre Ambulanti di Agricoltura* – ‘Travelling Agricultural Lectureships’. Organization which provided farm education for adult peasants
- CFSLA Confederazione Fascista Lavoratori dell’Agricoltura* – National Fascist Confederation of Farmworkers. Fascist union for farmworkers
- CNFSA Confederazione Nazionale Fascista Sindacati dell’Agricoltura* – National Fascist Confederation of Agricultural Unions
- Coldiretti* – Christian Democrat organization for small farmers in postwar period
- Colona* (f), *colono* (m) – sharecropper
- Contadina* (f), *contadino* (m) – peasant
- Compartecipazione* – land tenure system that includes some sharing of the crop between landowner and peasant household
- Comune* – unit of local government. Can be a village, town or city
- Collocamento di classe* – ‘group recruitment’. A list of union members who took turns at work available in order to share the burden of unemployment
- Donna(e) fascista(e)* – member(s) of the *Fasci Femminili*
- Donne Rurali* – women’s section of the *Coldiretti*
- Dopolavoristi* – members of the OND
- Dopolavoro* – see OND

- Fascio di Combattimento** – local section of the Fascist Party
- Fasci Femminili** – women's sections of the Fascist Party
- 'Fascists of the First Hour'** – those who joined the fascist movement during the very early days (usually means before the March on Rome)
- Fattoressa** (f), **fattore** (m) – farmsteward
- Fattoria** – central farmbuilding. This term is most often used for farms where the peasantry are *appoderati*. Generally means where the *fattore* lived
- Federale** i.e. **Segretario Federale** – (male) head of a Provincial PNF Federation
- FNFMR Federazione Nazionale Fascista delle Massaie Rurali** – National Fascist Federation of *Massaie Rurali*. Name of *Massaie Rurali* organization when it was part of the farmworkers' union in 1933–4
- Frazione** – subdivision of a *comune*. Smallest administrative unit of local government. Usually corresponds to a village or hamlet too small to have its own Town Hall
- GIL Gioventù Italiana del Littorio** – Italian Youth of the Lictors. Name of Party youth organization from 1937
- Giovani Fasciste** – fascist organization for young women aged 18–21
- Giovani Italiane** – fascist organization for girls aged 13–18
- GUF Gioventù Universitaria Fascista** – Fascist University Youth. Student section of PNF
- Imponibile di manodopera** – 'labour tax'. Contractual obligation forcing landowners to hire a specific number of farm labourers per hectare of land according to crop and season
- Ispettorati Provinciali dell'Agricoltura** – Provincial Agricultural Inspectorates. New name for *Cattedra Ambulanti di Agricoltura* from 1935
- Maestra/o** – primary school teacher
- Massaia** – housewife. See *Massaia rurale*
- Massaia rurale** (or *massaia*) – member of the *Sezione Massaie Rurali dei Fasci Femminili*. Literally means rural housewife/farmwoman. See also *Reggitrice*. In the text *Massaia(e)* with a capital M indicates the organisation, while *massaia(e)* is used for the individual members of the organisation.
- Mezzadria** – sharecropping
- Mezzadria** (f), **mezzadro** (m) – sharecropper
- Mondina** – female riceweeder (although the term is usually applied to all female riceworkers)
- ONB Opera Nazionale Balilla** – National Balilla Agency. Fascist youth organization founded 1926
- OND Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro** – National Fascist Afterwork Agency. Fascist mass leisure organization
- ONMI Opera Nazionale per la Maternità ed Infanzia** – Fascist Maternal and Infant Welfare Agency
- Podere** – small farm worked by sharecroppers, smallholders or small leaseholders who actually live on the land itself
- PNF Partito nazionale fascista** – Fascist Party

GLOSSARY

- Reggitrice** – most authoritative female figure in a sharecropping or smallholding household. (Various other terms are used in different regions including *massaia* and *arzora*.) Usually, but not always, the wife of the *capoccia*. In the text I have used the term *reggitrice* rather than the term *massaia* which I use only to indicate a member of the *Sezione Massaie Rurali*
- Salariato fisso** – landless farm labourer with annual employment contract
- Sansepolcrista** – person who had been present (or was officially recognized as having been present) at the founding meeting of fascism in Piazza San Sepolcro in 1919
- Sbracciantizzazione** – ‘decasualization’, fascist policy of reducing the numbers of *braccianti*
- Sezione Massaie Rurali dei Fasci Femminili** – Rural Housewives section of the Fascist Women’s Groups. Section of PNF for rural women. Founded 1934
- SOLD Sezione Operaie e Lavoranti a Domicilio** – section of *Fasci Femminili* for women workers and homeworkers
- Squadrista** (pl. *squadristi*) – member of the fascist squads, gangs of armed thugs who violently attacked opposition groups and organizations during the rise of fascism
- UMC Unione delle Massaie della Campagna** – Union of Country Housewives. Lombard organization for rural women. Founded in the First World War
- UNMC Unione Nazionale delle Massaie della Campagna** – National Union of Country Housewives. New name for the UMC from 1932
- Ventennio** – the ‘twenty years’. Name often used to denote the fascist regime 1922–1943



INTRODUCTION

In 1946 Italian women voted for the first time. In the language of many contemporary politicians women were 'granted' suffrage by the new anti-fascist coalition government (rather than 'winning' it) as a reward for their role in the wartime Resistance. However, as Anna Rossi Doria has argued,¹ the reasons for women gaining the vote were more complex and include the strategies of the major political parties at the time as well as the fact that, both in the pre-fascist Liberal period as well in the early years of the fascist regime itself, women themselves had actively campaigned for it.

Rossi Doria's important book, published only in 1996 and somewhat startlingly the first real research published on the advent of female suffrage in Italy, is part of a tentative process in some recent historiography to rethink the role of the Resistance as a huge watershed in women's history. It is undeniable that the Resistance was extremely important in the history of Italian women and that millions were involved in various ways² but there is an increasing recognition recently that too much emphasis has been placed on this short, if momentous period and too little attention paid to what preceded and followed it.

The suffrage campaign born in the Liberal period died out in the late 1920s. Its only success had been the meaningless law of 1925 granting the vote to specific groups of women in local elections just as democracy was about to disappear. Nonetheless, as increasing numbers of studies are now showing, fascism was far from a mere 'gap' between two periods of female political activism when women were passively crushed by the fascist boot. Instead it was a time of complex changes which shaped the future in ways which are only just beginning to be explored.

It is, of course, no longer true, as many commentators used to note, that there is no research on the role of women in the fascist period. Recent studies have successfully undermined the idea that this was simply a reactionary period for women. Instead, it was full of contradictory trends, both traditional and modernizing. Despite fascist misogynous rhetoric and some oppressive legislation limiting their employment prospects, the interwar also opened up new activities and opportunities for many women. Many had fewer babies, some did gymnastics and other types of sports³ and a few found new types of employment in the

growing social welfare sector. Even fascist ideology on gender roles was somewhat contradictory. On the one hand, the aspect most often stressed in early research on this topic⁴ was the fact that it preached female subordination and women's need to submit entirely to their biological destiny. On the other hand, it also offered a new definition of the relationship between women and the state/nation. This implied, on a purely theoretical level, some equality of the sexes since, in the new totalitarian order, no individual, of either sex, had rights. Instead both sexes had duties to the state.⁵ The duties of each sex were, of course, quite distinct and, where the state intervened to arbitrate between the competing needs of each gender, it invariably came down heavily on the side of male needs (giving them, for example, priority in certain forms of employment).

Such dual, contradictory aspects affected the mass political organizations. As De Grazia has argued, the women's sections of the Fascist Party – the *Fasci Femminili* – and the girls' organizations may have preached motherhood as women's mission and destiny but, at the same time, they opened up new spaces for women. Despite the utterly subordinate nature of the *Fasci Femminili* to the male party hierarchs, the women involved in this organization were clearly activists, widening their own sphere as they busied themselves with carrying out the Party's orders, mainly in politicized versions of welfare activity. The activism of the middle-class women was, however, in marked contrast to the experience of millions of other women who joined the PNF in the special sections, one for peasant women set up in 1933, and another for workers in 1937 (the *Sezione Operaie e Lavoranti a Domicilio* – SOLD),⁶ both of which encouraged a far more passive approach to politics among its membership. This book is a study of the larger of these two organizations⁷ – the *Sezione Massaie Rurali dei Fasci Femminili* (Rural Housewives Section of the Women's Fascist Groups).

Perhaps surprisingly, whilst we now know a good deal about many aspects of women's experience of the *ventennio*, the historiography on the role of women in the Fascist Party itself is still extremely patchy. Most 'general histories' of the PNF have either ignored women or simply devoted very brief sections to them⁸ and, whilst feminist historians have been keen to record and analyse the heroic activities of antifascists,⁹ they have dragged their feet in studying Party members, seen as a rather unpalatable topic. This has resulted in the rather odd phenomenon that, until very recently, a disproportionate number of the studies published on this topic were by foreigners such as De Grazia and Detriagache.¹⁰ Conversely the historiography on anti-fascist women, until the publication of Jane Slaughter's recent book,¹¹ was almost non-existent in languages other than Italian. We still know little about either ordinary female PNF members or about organizers at local or national level or about such topics as how hierarchies of gender and class intersected within the Party. This situation is now beginning to change as a new generation of younger Italian historians, such as Helga Dittrich Johansen,¹² are beginning to work on these questions but, even so, much research remains to be done on the role of Party women.

This book deals with the largest group of women who joined the PNF – peasants. For many years, the historiography of fascism and of the Resistance, long dominated by communist historians, was more concerned with workers than peasants, seen as the less interesting ‘backward’ class. The situation has changed greatly over the last decade but it is only very recently that the revival of interest in the peasantry has begun to encompass gender issues, with, in particular, the appearance of important new research by Salvatici and Imbergamo.¹³ All this helps explain why only one previous scholarly historical article has been published on the history of the *Sezione Massaie Rurali* – a local study of Lombardy by Angela Amoroso.¹⁴

Perhaps it is not surprising that a conservative organization concerned mainly with cookery, gardening and the raising of farmyard animals should have failed to capture the imagination of the new generation of feminist historians. Nonetheless, although the history of the *Massaie Rurali* might seem a rather uninspiring subject compared with the heroic deeds of Resistance heroines, such a huge organization as this clearly merits serious investigation, both in terms of the history of women and in terms of historical knowledge of the impact of fascism on the rural world.

The Sezione Massaie Rurali dei Fasci Femminili

In fascist ruralization propaganda extolling the virtues of traditional lifestyles on the land, where honest peasants toiled for the nation unpolluted by urban values, peasant women often appeared clad in regional costumes or wearing the headscarf and badge of the *Massaie Rurali* section.¹⁵ They were paraded through the streets of Rome and photographed on many occasions and, according to a letter from one *Partito Nazionale Fascista* (PNF) hierarch to another in 1939, this was an organization which was: ‘particularly dear to Mussolini and the Party’.¹⁶

Founded in the early 1930s, the *Massaie Rurali* grew rapidly to an impressive membership of three million by the fall of the regime. It lay at the heart of a number of important fascist campaigns, particularly those concerned with gender roles, ruralization, demography, and autarky. Although its real mission was political mobilization, its declared aims were to give moral, social and technical assistance to rural women, promote technical education on small-scale farming methods as well as domestic science, childcare and craft manufacturing and to discourage the rural–urban shift.

This was an organization typical of the 1930s when fascism decided to ‘go to the people’ enrolling millions of Italians into mass mobilizing organizations with the aim of forging a consensus for the regime and its policies, and binding the people to the ostensibly class-neutral concept of nation. Mass organizations such as youth groups, leisure clubs and so on mushroomed in this period. One truly innovative aspect of this new wave of mobilization was the fact that it included women. Unlike certain other fascist organizations such as the unions and the mass leisure organization the *Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro*

INTRODUCTION

(OND), which essentially replaced existing class-based ones, the women's organizations represented an attempt to bring into the nation a section of the population largely previously excluded from organized politics. This book examines how the regime attempted to reach out to a group of women who were amongst the most excluded and neglected of all – the female peasantry. As I aim to demonstrate in this book the inclusion of poorer women into the study of fascist political mobilization policies tends to create a somewhat different picture from the 'modernizing view' which emerges from certain other studies.

The following pages will trace the history of the *Sezione Massaie Rurali* in a roughly chronological fashion. After a look at the general situation of the peasantry and the female peasantry in particular in Chapter 1, I go on to examine the origins of the organization and its initial foundation as part of the fascist farmworkers' union in the next two chapters. Chapters 4, 5, 6 and 8 focus on the nature of the organization after it was absorbed into the PNF, looking at, in particular, its structure, its political message and its activities. Chapter 7 considers the special training school for *Massaie Rurali* leaders set up in Rome in the late 1930s and Chapter 9 addresses the question of who the members were and how Party organizers managed to recruit them in such large numbers. Finally, in the Epilogue, the organization's legacy is examined.

Intertwined with the history of this fascist organization is the history of another, much smaller one, the *Unione delle Massaie della Campagna* (UMC), a good example, amongst many, of an autonomous women's organization which could not survive the totalitarian aspirations of the fascist state. This, the decline of autonomous female politics, was a notable feature of the fascist period. During the 1920s, many women continued to belong to the range of non-fascist women's organizations which had emerged before the *ventennio*. Some of these were explicitly feminist, while others were primarily focused on causes such as the promotion of women's education or the defence of the interests of specific groups such as war widows.¹⁷ Gradually, however, fascism closed down or absorbed and refashioned most of them. This process led eventually to the eclipse of an important field of women's political activism – autonomous organizations dedicated to what could be called specifically 'female' (although not necessarily 'feminist') agendas. As time went by, during the *ventennio*, the only real alternative to the Fascist Party women's sections were other organizations which were also dependent on and subordinate to the interests of a powerful male-dominated institution – those for Catholic women.¹⁸ There was a degree of continuity in this trend in the postwar and, after the fall of fascism, much 'women's politics' was pursued in sections of parties or trade unions essentially controlled by men, and, at least in part, pursuing agendas set by men. The history of the UMC's ill-fated postwar revival (discussed in the Epilogue) well exemplifies this trend: this small, essentially autonomous, organization was quickly overwhelmed by the polarized politics of the immediate aftermath of the Second World War.

Notes

- 1 A. Rossi Doria, *Diventare cittadine. Il voto alle donne in Italia*, Florence, Giunti, 1996.
- 2 Their role, of course, was largely different from that of men – rarely, for example, bearing arms – historically often seen as a precondition for citizenship. On how female roles in the Resistance have been viewed by subsequent postwar generations see P.R. Willson, ‘Saints and heroines: rewriting the history of Italian women in the Resistance’, in A. McElligot, T. Kirk (eds), *Opposing Fascism. Community, Authority and Resistance in Europe*, Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- 3 On sports see R. Isidori Frasca, . . . *e il duce le volle sportive*, Bologna, Patron, 1983; Isidori Frasca, ‘L’educazione fisica e sportiva, e la “preparazione materna”’, in M. Addis Saba (ed.), *La corporazione delle donne*, Florence, Vallecchi, 1988.
- 4 See, for example, the pioneering book by P. Meldini, *Sposa e madre esemplare. Ideologia e politica della donna e della famiglia durante il fascismo*, Florence, Guarraldi, 1975.
- 5 See V. De Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women. Italy 1922–1945*, Berkeley, California University Press, 1992. See also L. Re, ‘Fascist Theories of “Woman” and the Construction of Gender’, in R. Pickering-Iazzi (ed.), *Mothers of Invention. Women, Italian Fascism and Culture*, Minneapolis, Minnesota University Press, 1995.
- 6 SOLD was, in some respects, similar to the organization for peasant women but its membership was far smaller. It had its own news sheet – the extremely tedious *Lavoro e famiglia*.
- 7 Most of the primary sources I have consulted – from central and local archives and from the press – are official fascist material. Such sources, of course, have many limitations. The central archive of this organization has not survived. Many fascist records were deliberately destroyed in 1943 and 1945 whilst others have been lost through archival disorganization or are closed to the public due to an overzealous interpretation of ‘privacy laws’ by archivists.
- 8 One noteworthy exception is R. Lazzero, *Il Partito Nazionale Fascista*, Milan, Rizzoli, 1985.
- 9 Much has been published on anti-fascist women ranging from published memoirs of some of the most important protagonists to recent academic studies such as those by De Luna and Gabrielli. See G. De Luna, *Donne in oggetto. L’antifascismo nella società italiana (1922–1939)*, Turin, Bollati Boringhieri, 1996; P. Gabrielli, *Fenicotteri in volo: Donne comuniste nel ventennio fascista*, Rome, Carocci, 1999.
- 10 De Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women*; D. Detragiache, ‘Il Fascismo Femminile da San Sepolcro all’Affare Matteotti (1919–1925)’, *Storia contemporanea*, no. 2, 1983, pp. 211–51. See also A. De Grand, ‘Women Under Italian Fascism’, *Historical Journal*, no. 4, 1976, pp. 947–68; P.R. Willson, ‘Women in the Partito Nazionale Fascista’, in K. Passmore (ed.), *Women, Gender and the Extreme Right in Europe 1919 to 1945*, Manchester University Press, forthcoming.
- 11 J. Slaughter, *Women and the Italian Resistance, 1943–45*, Denver, Arden, 1997. See also M. Gibson, ‘Women and the Left in the Shadow of Fascism in Interwar Italy’, in H. Gruber, P. Graves (eds), *Women and Socialism. Socialism and Women*, New York-Oxford, Berghahn, 1998.
- 12 See, for example, H. Dittrich Johansen, ‘Strategie femminili nel ventennio fascista: la carriera politica di Piera Gatteschi Fondelli nello stato degli uomini (1919–1943)’, *Storia e problemi contemporanei*, no. 21, 1998, pp. 65–86.
- 13 Silvia Salvatici, *Contadine dell’Italia fascista: presenze, ruoli, immagini*, Turin, Rosenberg & Sellier, 1999; Barbara Imbergamo, ‘“Si parte cantando giovinezza”: le mondine durante il fascismo (1925–1939)’, tesi di laurea, University of Florence, a.a.1997–98. See also the classic work by N. Revelli, *L’Anello forte. La donna: storie di vita contadina*, Turin, Einaudi, 1985.

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- 14 A. Amoroso, 'Le organizzazioni femminili nelle campagne durante il fascismo', *Storia in Lombardia*, no. 1-2, 1989, pp. 305-16. See also S. Salvatici, 'Modelli femminili e immagine della donna nella propaganda fascista con particolare riferimento alle fonti fotografiche', tesi di laurea, University of Florence, 1992, ch. 3. There is also some limited discussion of the organization in V. De Grazia, 'Contadine e mas-saie rurali durante il fascismo', in *Annali Cervi*, no. 13, 1991, pp. 151-76.
- 15 On the visual representation of peasant women in the *ventennio* see Salvatici, 'Modelli femminili e immagine della donna nella propaganda fascista'; Salvatici, 'Modelli femminili e immagine della donna attraverso le fotografie della stampa fascista', no. 18, *Archivio Fotografico Toscano*, 1994; M.R. Porcaro, 'Storia di una conquista, storia di un abbandono (1880-1950)', in C. Cristoforci, M.R. Porcaro (eds), *Immagini di donne dalle campagne umbre*, Perugia, Regione Umbria, 2000.
- 16 Letter from Mario Mazzetti of the PNF National Directory to Mario Muzzarini, President of the Fascist Farmers Confederation, 28.12.1939, ACS, PNF, DN, SV, Ser II, b.125, fasc.96/i.
- 17 See, on widows, F. Lagorio, 'Italian Widows of the First World War', in F. Coetzee, M. Shevin Coetzee (eds), *Authority, Identity and the Social History of the Great War*, Providence, Berghahn, 1995; Lagorio, 'Appunti per una storia sulle vedove di guerra italiane nei conflitti mondiali', *Rivista di storia contemporanea*, 1994, pp. 170-93.
- 18 The membership of the Catholic women's organizations was large. In 1939 the youth section (GFCI) had 863,000 members. (C. Dau Novelli, *Famiglia e modernizzazione in Italia tra le due guerre*, Rome, Studium, 1994, p. 203.) See also Dau Novelli, 'L'associazionismo femminile cattolico (1908-1960)', *Bollettino dell'Archivio per la storia del movimento sociale cattolico in Italia*, vol. 33, no. 2, 1998, pp. 112-37; P. di Cori, 'Storia, sentimenti, solidarietà nelle organizzazioni femminili cattoliche dall'età giolittiana al fascismo', *Nuova DWF*, no. 10-11, 1979, pp. 80-124.

PEASANT WOMEN, THE RURAL WORLD AND THE *FASCI FEMMINILI*

The pattern of agricultural production and women's place in this system helped determine how the fascists attempted to mobilize them politically. Agriculture was still Italy's largest single economic sector in this period. Despite rapid economic growth around the turn of the century, which had created pockets of modern industry, mainly in the 'industrial triangle' of the North, millions still worked on the land. Numbers of those occupied by this sector remained high during the first half of the twentieth century and by 1936 were still roughly the same as in 1901. According to the 1931 census 41.5 per cent of Italian families (3,800,000 families) had a 'head of family' engaged in farming. The rural world, however, was far from static. Since Unification a series of forces, including the increased role of the market, the agricultural crisis of the 1880s, the rise of socialism, emigration and technological innovation had led to much change.¹ In some rural areas, moreover, industry had an increasing impact on traditional lifestyles.² Rural industry varied greatly including both factories (mainly textiles and food processing) and various types of cottage industry. Large numbers of Tuscan peasant women, for example, made straw hats for export until the 1929 crash destroyed their markets.³ The First World War only served to accelerate processes of change when over two and a half million peasants went to the front.

Rural Italy was a mosaic of different types of farming and such changes interacted with local situations in diverse ways. Not just crops and methods of cultivation but the size of holdings, modernity of farming techniques and forms of land tenure varied greatly from region to region, and even within close geographical areas.⁴ It is, of course, beyond the scope of this chapter to properly investigate this complex panorama, one which has been the focus of a considerable volume of historical research. I will limit myself to a consideration of the main types of peasant figure, a brief overview of fascist agricultural policy and a look at women's role in agriculture. Finally I will discuss the founding of the fascist women's sections and their attitude to rural questions.

During the rise of fascism, peasants were to be found in a variety of positions on the political spectrum. Italy, of course, was unusual in Western Europe in that socialism had spread in some rural areas at the end of the nineteenth century. Just after the First World War, large numbers of peasants, particularly

landless farmworkers but also sharecroppers, belonged to socialist organizations. Others, including many smallholders, joined Catholic 'white' leagues. These had previously been tiny but now grew with, by 1920, nearly a million members.⁵ Yet others rallied to the blackshirts. There were still, however, many peasants little affected by organized politics. Italy's formidable geography meant that many had little interaction with the world beyond their farm and local community.

The lives of many Italian peasants were characterized by great hardship, poverty, insufficient diet and poor health. Insanitary and overcrowded housing was widespread. It was even possible to find peasants who lived in dwellings made of earth and foliage, or in caves or cellars. These were the most extreme cases but a survey of 1933 classified the housing of a third of the rural population as either 'uninhabitable' or 'almost uninhabitable'.⁶ Very few had running water or electricity.

Only hard labour could wrest a living from Italy's difficult terrain, 35.5 per cent of which was classified as 'mountainous', 53.5 per cent as 'hilly' and only about 12 per cent as 'plain'. Much farmland was the product of earlier reclamation efforts, mainly terracing, irrigation and drainage. Not all human interventions had improved things: some areas suffered from deforestation and soil erosion. Mechanization was introduced only slowly, held back by the abundant labour supply, fragmented landholding and steep slopes. In 1936, for example, Italy had only 32,500 tractors and 30,000 threshing machines.⁷ Rural unemployment and underemployment were endemic, problems greatly exacerbated by the reduction in emigration.

The peasantry was still the largest occupational group in interwar Italy. Behind the single term 'peasant' hid a complex range of different figures. Most belonged to one of three major categories: landless farmworkers, smallholders (tenants or owners) and sharecroppers. There were also various kinds of 'mixed' figures, such as smallholders who also did seasonal day labouring. Other peasant figures were essentially variations of the three main categories.⁸ All figures were found all over Italy although some broad generalizations are possible. Landless labourers were most numerous on the modern farms of the Po Valley, although even here there were also many other types of peasant. 'Pure' sharecropping (*mezzadria classica*) was most common in the Centre. In the South pockets of commercial farming producing things like olive oil and citrus fruits coexisted with huge estates of little improved land – the *latifundia* – run by tenant farmers.⁹

Many of the politically 'red' peasants were landless labourers. Various sub-categories of such farm labourers existed. The *braccianti avventizi*, day labourers without security of employment, usually lived in towns and villages, with whole families (often nuclear) in one or two rented rooms whilst '*salarati fissi*', who had annual contracts, were usually housed on the farm with their families and often paid in both kind and money. They sometimes also sharecropped small plots of land. It was particularly among the *braccianti avventizi*, especially in

the Po Valley and on the great estates of Apulia, that socialist politics had taken hold before fascism. The Po Valley had many large, modern capitalist farms, mainly run by improving tenant farmers on long leases, who worked the rich soils of the alluvial plain on land drained or watered by modern irrigation systems. Here the proletarianized peasantry¹⁰ had become organized from the late nineteenth century and unions had been extremely effective. In some areas they had achieved control of the labour market, introducing the *imponibile di manodopera* (which stipulated how many workers should be employed per hectare of land according to crop and season) and the *collocamento di classe* (a list of union members who did this work in turn).¹¹ Both were highly unpopular with employers.

Another area with huge numbers of *braccianti* was Apulia in the 'heel' of Italy where vast capitalist estates, devoted almost exclusively to growing wheat, had been established after Unification by ploughing up sheep pastures. Owned mostly by absentee landlords and run by tenants on short leases with little incentive to invest in improvements, profitability was maintained largely by paying near starvation wages to a mass of proletarianized labourers who lived in squalid conditions in agro-towns. Such expansive monoculture with low rates of mechanization meant high rates of seasonal unemployment. The Apulian social divide was stark and class hatred bitter. No paternalistic tradition softened landlord-peasant relations. Violence characterized class conflict and, from the turn of the century, revolutionary syndicalism spread.¹²

Landless day labourers were common in other parts of the South too but elsewhere they were frequently mixed figures, who might, for example, also farm tiny smallholdings. Although there was much unrest in the rural South before fascism, Apulia was the only place where socialism took root so strongly. In the turmoil following the First World War most Southern peasants hungered not for bolshevism but for land.¹³

The second category, smallholders, embraced both small tenant farmers and peasant proprietors who tilled their own land. Many owned only tiny unviable plots of poor land and despite having what was many peasants' most heartfelt dream – landownership – they were often extremely poor. By the end of the Second World War, 83.1 per cent of private landowners had less than two hectares. In this situation many could not survive by farming alone and pluri-activity was widespread, including, for example, industrial or agricultural waged work, handicrafts, wetnursing, remittances from migrants and so on. Nonetheless, these peasants' land-owning status was one that they clung to, toiling endlessly to retain it. Traditionally most smallholdings were in mountain areas but many more recently created small farms were established in hilly or flatland areas. Although some smallholdings were essentially subsistence farming, many (particularly in parts of the South such as Campania and Sicily) produced specialized crops like fruit and vegetables, often for export.¹⁴

The third major category was sharecropping, a land tenure form much praised by the regime. There were broad categories – classic sharecropping