

Jane Slaughter. *Women and the Italian Resistance, 1943-45.* Denver, Colo.: Arden Press, 1997. 171 pp. \$32.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-912869-13-1.



Reviewed by Andrea Peto

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When Victoria de Grazia published her influential book on *How Fascism Ruled Women*, some thought the topic had been exhausted.[1] Jane Slaughter has now reopened this theme with her analysis of how fascism *failed* to rule women in Italy.

However, the time period indicated in the title of Slaughter's book is misleading: the story of Italian resistance did not start in 1943 and it did not end in 1945. Even Slaughter's well structured book actually starts well before 1943, introducing the basic features of fascism in Italy, and stretches beyond 1945, analyzing the post-1945 Italian political scene as far as women's political participation is concerned. Still, the time frame in the title reflects a theoretical weakness in the book. The post-1945 Italian political reconstruction, as in other European countries, was based on the myth of the Resistance: that Italy resisted the fascist regime.[2] The armed, mass resistance, as Slaughter notes, started in September 1943 and ended in April 1945. Before that period, however, Italy was a victorious fascist country, stationing occupying forces abroad, and with an increasing subordina-

tion to Nazi Germany. References to the "downward spiral of the regime" (p. 28) or the comment that "the Fascist regime had collapsed internally" (p. 33) are misleading, since they indicate that the Mussolini regime rotted away itself. But the Mussolini regime only started trembling when the Allied troops landed in Sicily. The categories of resistance, accommodation and collaboration are blurred; the same people stood on different sides in different historical moments. After Allied military action started, then massive armed resistance began in Italy, organized by all non-fascist political parties.

Legitimization for the postwar Italian political system was based on this participation in the resistance and the myth of resistance was formulated, targeting the Germans as convenient scapegoats. After 1945 the antifascist tradition and the exaggeration of the otherwise unquestionable achievements of the resistance contributed to social and political "coming to terms" with the Fascist past of postwar Italy. Jane Slaughter's work follows the same logic. It is not an accident that in her otherwise very rich bibliography she does not

refer to the work by David Travis.[3] The author briefly covers the prehistory of the armed resistance (pp. 18-21), but does not investigate the political and psychological consequences of the fact that the pre-1943 resistance was politically trained abroad—in the Spanish civil war, in Moscow or in France. The history of these political emigrants is difficult to study because of the necessary secrecy around this phenomenon; also, the Italian section of the Comintern Archive in Moscow was only recently opened up, and caused a political storm in Italy.

The author is undoubtedly fascinated by the lives of Italian women, whom she had the opportunity to meet personally (p. 8). That might be one of the reasons she considers every word of participants of the Italian resistance as true. For example, she quotes Lina Fibbi, a communist who joined the resistance in 1935 in France, about how she experienced difficulties of women in the party: "the limits, if there were any, are mine" (p. 80). Jane Slaughter is very bravely using oral history sources, interviews made by the author or by other Italian women, but with the intention to get the facts in the Rankean tradition, how *es gewesen war*, which is especially problematic if we take into consideration of the intention of Italian history writing to mythicize the antifascist tradition. Oral history is undoubtedly the most valuable historical source on the history of resistance, but I would advocate analysis on two levels. Janet Hart achieves this in writing on women in the Greek resistance.[4]

Jane Slaughter's book is a well-documented, reader-friendly work. Her sophisticated analysis belongs to the best tradition of feminist history writing. The text of 130 pages is supplemented by 41 pages of notes and bibliography, chronology and abbreviations. The structure of the book is clear. The first chapter briefly introduces the reader to the general characteristics of Italian fascism with a special emphasis on gender ideology. The second and the third parts analyze the ways

in which women became partisans, their social background, and their role in the movement. Based on a sample of 943 cases, the author thoroughly examined the functions of women in the hierarchy of resistance. After the war 200,000 Italians were registered formally as active members of the resistance, of which 55,000 were women (p. 33). So already these numbers indicate that here we have an untold story: how women experienced the political changes. One decisive argument supports Jane Slaughter's view of limiting the resistance to two years: after April 1945 Italian women got into politics in unprecedented number. Fifty percent of the women elected to the postwar Parliament had a partisan background (p. 107).

The volume is highly recommended for students of European history and not only for specialists. It raises the most disturbing questions for feminist historians of post-1945 period: why women failed to change their position in postwar society although they were given credit for their heroism during the antifascist struggle, and why women were unable to transform their moral capital to political power. The post-1945 public discourse was framed in a "respectability frame"; people wanted to get back to the perceived normality of their prewar life, no matter how patriarchal that was.[5] Jane Slaughter points out that meant the myth of the patriarchal family; for most of the women, participation in the resistance was only an *intermezzo* between two long periods of respectability (p. 6).

The discourse of the second wave of feminism put women's identity, the search for the feminist consciousness, in the center. If we let women in the Italian Resistance speak, as Jane Slaughter did, we hear their assessment of their participation in the resistance: that they gained a "sense of themselves" (p. 116). In a European comparison we meet with the same phenomenon; as it is quoted in the book, "equality erases identity" (p. 127). The general democratization in the post-1945 Euro-

pean climate erased the special female identity which was created during the war and the resistance. In the countries under Soviet occupation we see the emerge of a new, "imagined" female identity.[6]

Jane Slaughter's book offers us a "thick description" supported by massive statistical data about women in the different branches of the resistance, and in the post-1945 political institutions.

Notes

[1]. Victoria De Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women*, University of California Press, 1992.

[2]. Tony Judt, "The Past is Another Country: Myth and Memory in Postwar Europe," *Daedalus* 1992 (4) pp. 83-118.

[3]. David Travis, "Communism and Resistance in Italy, 1943-1948," in *Resistance and Revolution in Mediterranean Europe 1939-1945*, Tony Judt ed., Routledge 1989, pp. 80-110.

[4]. Janet Hart, *New Voices in the Nation. Women in Greek Resistance 1941-1964* Cornell University Press, 1996, p. 50.

[5]. Irene Bandhauer Schliffmann, Ela Horning, "Vom 'Dritten Reich' zur Zweiten Republic. Frauen im Wien der Nachkriegszeit "in (From the Third Empire to the Second Republic. Women of Vienna in the Post-War Years" in *Frauen in Österreich. Beiträge zu Ihrer Situation im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* Hg. David F. Good, Margarete Grandner, Mary Jo Maynes. Bhlau, 1993. pp. 232-233.

[6]. Andrea Peto, "Dilemmas of Women's Mobilization in Hungary (1945-1951)" in *Women in Europe after WWII*, Claire Duchens, ed., Cassell, London (forthcoming); and Andrea Peto, *Nohistoriak. A politizalo magyar nok tortenetebol. (1945-1951)*, (Women's Historica: From the History of Hungarian Women in Politics) Budapest, Seneca, 1998.

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