Wendy Pojmann’s book *Italian Women and International Cold War Politics, 1944-1968*, together with the excellent *Women in Twentieth Century Italy* by Perry Willson (2010), marks a welcome development in English-language scholarship on a previously understudied topic. The title is slightly misleading, however, being a history not of all Italian women but of two specific women’s associations, the leftist Unione Donne Italiane (UDI) and the Catholic, anticommunist Centro Italiano Femminile (CIF), as well as the international associations with which they worked most closely, the Women’s International Democratic Federation (WIDF) and the World Movement of Mothers, respectively.

This narrower focus is by no means a loss. Pojmann has done extensive archival work on both organizations, in particular appearing to have read through the entire print run between 1944 and 1970 of each of their publications, the UDI’s weekly *Noi donne* and the CIF’s monthly *Cronache e opinioni*. Her stated purpose, at which she largely succeeds, is to “demonstrat[e] that the voices of liberal [or ‘bourgeois’] feminists have not been the only ones at the center of questions about women’s rights in national and global politics, not even in western Europe” (p. 189). Building on transnational work done by historian Francisca De Haan on the WIDF, and showing mastery of the relevant secondary literature on Italy’s Cold War history, Pojmann convincingly argues throughout the book that although the actions and agendas of the two Italian associations were limited and conditioned by the circumstances of national and international Cold War politics, neither association relinquished its autonomy in relation to the national institutions of the Italian Communist Party for the UDI or the Christian Democrat Party and the Vatican for the CIF, or to the international women’s organizations in which they participated. Despite compromises and disagreements which Pojmann does not shy away from presenting, she does convincingly demonstrate that in crucial moments both associations defied those who wished to instrumentalize them. By prioritizing women’s interests over party politics and Cold War divisions, both associations survived the many challenges of the Cold War years and still exist today.

In arguing for the autonomy but not the separatism of the women’s associations, Pojmann overturns the assumptions made by too many authors that these groups can be ignored or overlooked as nothing more than flanking organizations or ladies’ auxiliaries of the two mass parties of the Italian Cold War, the Communists and the Christian Democrats.[1] She also treats Catholic women’s activism with as much attention and seriousness as she does the women of the Left, an approach that was lacking much previous scholarship on feminism. She thus significantly revises the historiography of feminism in Italy, showing that this generation of women constructed a quite specific and successful form of women’s political activism and grassroots social work that had real impact on Italy’s political system and left an important legacy for later feminist movements. As an activist of the 1968 youth generation she quotes asserted, “I believe feminism would not exist if the UDI had not been there first” (p. 179).

The book is divided chronologically into six chapters, each treating a three- to five-year span and consisting of an introduction, a summary of national events in the period, a summary of the national activity of each women’s association, a summary of international events, a summary of the interaction between the associations and
their international organizations, and a conclusion. The prose is clear and straightforward, the concrete examples from archival sources adeptly chosen, and the summaries of national events will prove useful to readers unfamiliar with Italian history in this period; but the structure produces two weaknesses. On the level of format, these multiple stops and starts create repetitions from section to section and chapter to chapter and force the history to remain at a superficial level that recalls textbook narrative, often asserting rather than analyzing. On the level of content, it creates the perception that UDI and CIF were always in reactive mode to larger events of the Cold War, undermining the book’s central claim regarding these women’s agency and influence. A positive exception to this critique is Pojmann’s treatment of the crucial year of 1956 on pages 108-112; here she does a sophisticated job of incorporating the specific and the general and conveying powerfully how these women leaders navigated competing political pressures in the midst of huge political events and tensions over Nikita Khrushchev’s de-Stalinization speech, the Suez Crisis, the Hungarian revolt, and the uprising in Poland. Both UDI and CIF swung into action, reporting on events and educating their members and readers as to the political significance of global politics, influencing public opinion and governmental action, and taking steps to preserve the unity of women in their associations even as the Socialist and Communist parties split their Popular Front coalition, the Socialists and Christian Democrats took their first hesitant steps toward each other, and many rank-and-file Communists left the party over the question of continued loyalty to the Soviet Union. Thus when Pojmann later recounts how the UDI women walked out of the WIDF meeting in Moscow in 1963 to protest the Federation’s too credulous support for the Soviet party line, but shows why UDI did not entirely break ties with the international organization, instead seeking to change its focus back to emancipation for women, she transforms the famous moment from a dramatic stunt to a coherent example of a strategy Italian women pursued quite consciously and continuously (pp. 147-150, 158-163).

Readers interested in women and gender history and the history of feminism will find a valuable new source in the book, which fills an important gap in showing how Italy fits into the larger European and Western field; and all those concerned with the history of the Cold War will appreciate Pojmann’s digestion of current historiography and her lucid explanations of the overlapping but not identical divisions between the Italian ideologies of antifascism, leftism, and Catholicism; and the international ideologies of communism and anti-communism.

Still, readers already versed in the history of the period will find it rather a slow go through all the summary; while the thematic and analytical value of the scholarship is undeniable, it is not best served or highlighted by the format. A further quibble with the prose and editing: Pojmann misuses the word “weary” for “wary” in multiple instances (pp. 43, 50, 107, 108, 115), and some words and even authors’ names are spelled differently in the body of the text and in the notes. Such small mistakes do not in general harm the content, although there is an error on page 37 when Pojmann states that women’s suffrage was granted by the Constituent Assembly; she then goes on to state correctly on page 43 that the provisional Bonomi government granted the suffrage. In addition, on page 124 Pojmann states that law 1441 of 1956 allowed women to become judges; this is not accurate, since the law allowed women to serve as lay judges in the Court of Assize and in the Juvenile Tribunal, which is essentially akin to the position of juror. Further, the law limited the number of women serving to a maximum of three out of six (six men remained perfectly legal), and specified that a Juvenile Tribunal should be composed of two magistrates and two private citizens, of which only one could be a woman, and both of whom should be experts in social work, biology, psychiatry, criminal anthropology, pedagogy, or psychology, and over 30 years old. The law that actually made it legal for women to have professional careers as judges was passed in 1963.[2]

I repeat, however, that such details will not disturb any but the most punctilious reader. Indeed, the book should find an audience among scholars who will value access to new Italian evidence, as well as in undergraduate classrooms, where students of women’s history and students of contemporary European history will both have a reading either of the whole book or of specific sections to provide strong coverage of the Cold War years in their syllabi. The real value here is, as I stated at the beginning of this review, that English-language readers are now being enabled to join the conversation about gendering the Cold War and about the significance of Italy as a laboratory of politics; and Pojmann’s book makes a very useful contribution to that project.

Notes

[1]. As Pojmann notes, this assumption seems to have been established by Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum in Libera-

azione della donna: Feminism in Italy (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1986); and Donald Meyer in Sex

and Power: The Rise of Women in America, Russia, Sweden,
and Italy (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1987). 


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