Italian Women in the Cold War

In Italy in the mid-1950s, a Communist government official in Ferrara, Ermanna Zappaterra, reminded her female comrades in City Hall that before being members of the Communist Party they were first women and members of the Unione Donne Italiane (UDI, or Union of Italian Women) (p. 119). The priority of women’s issues for the left-leaning UDI and the lay Catholic Centro Italiano Femminile (CIF, or Italian Women’s Center) determined their agendas and relationships to other political organizations throughout the first few decades of the Cold War. Historian Wendy Pojmann examines these women’s associations within a national and global context to shed light on their political involvement. She argues that the UDI and CIF were not simply female branches of the main political parties but operated autonomously to promote particular women’s rights at home and abroad. From educating women on elections to dialoguing with international organizations and nation-states in the interests of peace and progress, the women of the CIF and UDI helped alter Italian gender relations and expanded the political worldview of Italian women. Throughout, Pojmann portrays the CIF as considerably less flexible and cooperative in part due to the Vatican’s influence on its operations. The UDI, meanwhile, had to accommodate the various ideologies of its members and placed women’s rights as its overriding focus to sustain its existence.

Pojmann’s claims are clearly stated and easy to grasp thanks to a uniform organization structuring each chapter. Usually beginning with a specific event, anecdote, or epistolary exchange, she then introduces the international climate by focusing on some of the major events of the time period covered in each chapter. A somewhat brief discussion of reactions from the two main political forces in Italy—the Christian Democrats and the Popular Front parties (the Communists and Socialists)—and from the Catholic Church helps contextualize the actions and programs of women’s associations. Pojmann dedicates the bulk of each chapter to analyses of the CIF and UDI and their particular members, supported by legal documents, print culture, and oral interviews (though some interviews are originally from the associations’ publications, which Pojmann refrains from scrutinizing as potential propaganda). In particular, the two main print outlets of the CIF and UDI—Cronache e Opinioni and Noi Donne, respectively—contain a wealth of information and provide a variety of strong evidence, even lending some statistics on the numbers of Italian women working outside the home in 1955 (p. 121). Supplementing this support with documents from the UDI and CIF archives, such as letters and association bulletins, Pojmann paints a nuanced picture of postwar Italian politics.

In the opening chapter, the author charts the development of Italian women’s movements before 1947. Her purpose is to explain the context in which the UDI and CIF emerged, the historical legacy of early women’s movements, and how the first years of free elections were met with both hope and suspicion from the women of the Resistance. She thus offers a relatively brief account of women’s groups during the Liberal and Fascist periods to focus on the impact of the war and women’s involve-
ment in the resistance against Fascism. Much like male-led organizations, the anti-Fascist sentiment drove many women to cooperate for a common goal. Following the war’s end, though, the ideological differences began to break up the wartime unity, and women’s associations mostly split along the East-West rift. The UDI and CIF, emerging outside the main political parties, proactively engaged and recruited the newly enfranchised women of Italy and began to dialogue with international organizations, such as the UN, when Italy’s international reputation was still in question. While sharing many similar goals and concerns, divergent views on the role of religion and the experiences of socioeconomic class drove them further apart during the first years of the Cold War. Indeed, women’s associations could not exist “outside the influence of other forces” and thus had to develop their “programs and ideologies in relation to them” (p. 17).

In the second chapter, Pojmann analyzes the responses of the UDI and CIF to a thoroughly polarized Italy at the end of the 1940s. The devastation and instability caused by the war was exacerbated by intense political divisions complicating the official positions of women’s associations. Most male political leaders—from each end of the political spectrum—asked women to contribute to Italy’s recovery by supporting the traditional family and to subordinate their roles in both public and private life. Both women’s associations, however, followed their own understandings of the domestic and international situations. While the CIF prioritized agreement with church doctrine and policy, the association’s leaders recognized the realities of women’s work life outside the home and instead sought ways to help women gain service-sector jobs that would be more suitable to their “special feminine qualities” (p. 72). The UDI, in contrast, viewed the full and equal employment of women as essential, criticizing the CIF and the World Movement of Mothers for idealizing a woman’s domestic role. Indeed, the lack of universal support among the Popular Front parties on issues such as equal pay and divorce led many UDI members to question their alignment with these groups. As Pojmann emphasizes throughout, conflicting priorities would continue to characterize the UDI’s relationship with the Left, in contrast to the more amiable rapport shared between the CIF, the church, and other Catholic organizations.

The next chapter discusses the escalation of the Cold War at the beginning of the 1950s and efforts from the UDI and the CIF to promote peace through an international discourse on motherhood. While each association remained entrenched in their political divisions, they both focused on the role and care of mothers and children in order to persuade more women to join their associations. In particular, the UDI turned to the support of motherhood and religion to counter accusations of a communist desire to destroy family and religion. Ironically, the CIF agreed with the UDI on many of the same issues due to a widespread Catholic concern over the moral impact of material capitalism and American consumer culture. The influence of American movies and comics on Italian children was especially worrisome, leading the UDI to invite Catholic organizations to a discussion in 1951 on the violence and sexual excitement found in such media (p. 85). The desire to expand their sway with Italian women also led both associations to extend their reach by attempting to improve the domestic and economic conditions of working mothers. Efforts to offer better housing and implement social service programs, like daycare, accompanied parliamentary petitions for equal pay and greater access to jobs in every economic sector. Both associations altered their particular stances—the UDI on motherhood and religion, and the CIF on types of work suitable for mothers.

In the fourth chapter, Pojmann examines a pivotal period for Italian women’s associations, which began to form theories of gender distinct from those of their Cold War allies towards the end of the 1950s. Confronting outmoded ideas about gender, the CIF and UDI unequivocally prioritized women’s rights and campaigned for access to careers and elected offices, pensions for housewives, and equal salaries. Their engagement with international events, such as decolonization, the Suez Crisis, and the Hungarian Uprising of 1956, contributed to a move toward more political autonomy. For the UDI, the Soviet repression of the Hungarian Revolution “shattered the association’s belief in the Soviet promise” and, although some members left the UDI to remain loyal to the Italian Communist Party, the association began to distance itself from the Kremlin and to take a more neutral political stance through calls for peace, nuclear disarmament, and increased civil rights for women (p. 110). The CIF, too, responded to international events such as the establishment of the European Economic Community in 1957, which some members viewed as an opportunity to “extend the values of a democratic and Catholic Italy to the rest of Europe” (p. 114). Here, Pojmann misses a chance to reflect on the impact of a renewed Italian migration. While it is true that Italy’s economic boom began at the end of the 1950s, many Italians sought work in other European countries and even moved their whole families to northern Italy or overseas. These demo-
graphic changes potentially resulted in a need for greater economic and political rights for Italian working mothers and housewives outside of ideological considerations.

In contrast to the first chapter, the maturity of the Italian women’s associations in the early 1960s emerges visibly in chapter 5 as Pojmann compares their changing roles within international women’s organizations and their interrelated responses to major global events. The increasing brinksmanship between the United States and the Soviets, as evidenced by the Cuban Missile Crisis, the building of the Berlin Wall, and nuclear proliferation, was particularly troubling to both women’s groups. Encouraged by Pope John XXIII’s proclamations for global peace and the opening of the Second Vatican Council in 1962, the CIF sought ways to ensure the influence of Catholic women in national, European, and global developments. They not only promoted a more comprehensive view of politics among Italian women but also supported the bankrupt World Movement of Mothers through financial assistance and by assuming a greater role in its administration. The UDI, meanwhile, responded critically to Soviet aggression, in part due to the political diversity of its members. The need for unity within the association led its leaders to place women’s emancipation above political conflict both in Italy and around the world. Disagreement with the Women’s International Democratic Federation—the main leftist international women’s organization—over accusations of political partiality, undemocratic procedures, and its failure to prioritize women’s issues led the UDI to distance itself from the organization after twenty years of close international cooperation. This chapter presents Pojmann’s overall argument most effectively, in part due to the greater assertiveness of the UDI and CIF.

The final chapter examines the responses of the UDI and CIF to renewed Cold War hostilities in the middle of the 1960s while they simultaneously struggled with an intellectual and experiential disparity from new generations of Italian women. Pojmann argues that both the UDI and the CIF maintained their core values and priorities from the previous two decades but found it difficult to relate to new equality issues and models of femininity embraced by young women. This disconnect was part of a broader generational conflict erupting as mass student protests in 1967 and spreading to nearly all universities the following year. Inspired by the recent work of historians to deepen the scholarly narrative, Pojmann seeks to show the contribution of women’s associations to changing societal values and behavior alongside those of the young protagonists. Concerns over sexual freedom, birth control, and divorce seemed unrelated and insignificant to the fight for economic opportunity and social services during the previous two decades. However, the CIF and UDI began to confront these issues with seriousness. The former chose education and the spiritual center of the family to overcome women’s inferior domestic status, while the latter welcomed the new activism so long as it did not overshadow the unresolved fight for women’s economic and political rights—responses well in line with their political histories. In spite of their diminishing influence, Pojmann concludes, their substantial flexibility in welcoming new generations ensured the continued existence of the UDI and CIF well after the powerful, but short-lived feminist and student movements of the 1970s.

Overall, Pojmann’s work is an excellent addition to literature on women’s movements, postwar Italy, and the complexity of Cold War politics. Following a growing trend in Cold War histories which emphasizes the autonomy of nation-states and political organizations outside of the East-West dichotomy, this book offers some major takeaways. Her main argument points to a need for a reconsideration of Italian women’s activism during the postwar period as part of a longer historical narrative. As Pojmann shows, the promotion of women’s rights and the progress achieved by these activists built on the work of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century feminists that was interrupted by the Ventennio. The more commonly studied feminism of the 1960s and 1970s benefited from the labor of the UDI and CIF, which opened space to focus on new issues and develop new conceptions of femininity. Additionally, Pojmann’s analysis resonates with recent scholarship on Cold War Italy regarding the powerful influence of Catholicism and the church. Just as direction of the CIF and UDI responded in part to their Catholic constituencies, the Christian Democrats and the Popular Front parties, too, campaigned with Catholic sensitivities in mind. These parallel narratives demonstrate a need to reassess the complexity of Cold War alliances and the role of women activists within this political framework.

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