

BOOK REVIEWS

Interventiste nella grande guerra. Assistenza, propaganda, lotta per i diritti a Milano e in Italia (1911–1919), by Emma Schiavon, Florence, Le Monnier, 2015, 362 pp., €26,00, ISBN 978-8-800-74540-6.

In the last decade Italian historiography has increasingly focused on women's involvement in patriotic mobilisation during the First World War as a crucial step in the nationalisation process (Bartoloni 2016; Bianchi and Pacini 2016). This book by historian Emma Schiavon analyses the women's interventionist movement in Milan and in Italy between 1911 and 1919 and seeks to re-write this history. The first part of the book describes the various women's associations in Milan in the pre-war years; alongside the well-known democratic, socialist and suffragist associations such as the *Unione femminile italiana* or the *Comitato pro suffragio*, which were related to the emancipationist movement, Schiavon sheds new light on the moderate associations, such as the *Federazione lombarda delle opere di attività femminile* and the monarchic and nationalist ones (the female sections of *Pro Esercito* or the *Lega navale*) and their different goals and actions, which ranged from traditional philanthropy to relief and army support.

The war against Libya (1911–1912) generated an aggressive nationalist atmosphere, and after the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, while right-wing associations mobilised for Italian intervention, democratic ones were progressively marginalised and shied away from internationalism or anti-militarist issues. Many embraced nationalist ideas. In analysing biographies of activists such as Sofia Bisi Albini and Rosalia Gwis Stefani, the author underlines not only the importance of their *Risorgimento* background (leading, for example, to their stress on territorial unity, and their struggle against German militarism), but also their conviction that war could produce 'moral regeneration' and civil progress; from this point of view the *Risorgimento* represented the origin of the spiritual and moral unity of the nation and was conceived as an ideal '*union sacrée*'. Therefore, feminist activists conceived of the war as a 'great opportunity' to affirm women's citizenship, a citizenship based on the values of care and motherhood at the service of the nation. Aware of the link between military service and citizenship in European culture, interventionist women claimed the institution of an official 'auxiliary civil service' on the home front with the aim of achieving political rights in the aftermath of war and creating new roles for middle-class women in welfare and social activities. According to Schiavon, feminist interventionism should not be interpreted as a 'capitulation' to the political and nationalist pressures (as suggested by historian Annarita Buttafuoco) or a 'lack of an adequate theoretical and political preparation' (in the words of Franca Pieroni Bortolotti), but a 'precise strategy', an active involvement in the political struggle aimed at recognising the inclusion of women in the social and political body of the state (Buttafuoco 1988; Bortolotti 1972). In this framework, unlike Augusta Molinari, who highlights the diversity and the different goals of women's associations in the patriotic mobilisation on the home front, Schiavon revalues and emphasises the particular contribution of interventionist women (Molinari 2014).

In the second part of the book, the author analyses the key role played by interventionist women on the home front and their effort in two lesser-known organisations, the *Comitato Lombardo di preparazione* (CLP), formed in January 1915, and the *Federazione nazionale dei*

comitati di assistenza e propaganda nazionale (FNCA, formed in April 1916). Activists such as Carla Lavelli Celesia, Rosalia Adami and Sofia Bisi Albini were able to impose gender parity in these organisations, and worked hard to achieve a national and long-lasting role in welfare through the CLP and FNCA. Indeed, interventionist feminists were the first and also for a long time the only group to understand that in a situation of prolonged mass warfare, it was necessary to ensure organised welfare assistance to the population. Thus, they tried to exploit the new wartime opportunities for women on the home front. The interventionist effort was remarkable not only for its scale, but also for its notable contribution to welfare, propaganda and fundraising. Through the pages of *Assistenza civile*, the FNCA's official bulletin, interventionist women praised women's effort in the wartime economy and their patriotic mobilisation, with the aim of gaining visibility and promoting the professionalisation and training of social workers. The modernisation of new wartime jobs was conceived as a key to emancipation, and a progressive extension of the public sphere of middle-class women. In this new framework, emancipationist issues concerning maternity (*funzione sociale della maternità*) were 'nationalised' and patriotism, the ethics of sacrifice, and a sense of duty and obedience to the nation became the cornerstones of women's patriotic mobilisation and public legitimisation. Overall, war was seen as a tool for emancipation, but also a bond-forming collective experience in the name of the nation. Alongside a description of the various aid activities developed by the civil mobilisation committees, Schiavon's research focuses on the little-known involvement of activists in the production of propaganda on the home front. Analysing unexplored sources such as committee bulletins, propaganda leaflets, guidelines for propagandists and activity reports, the author underlines the 'confidential' tones used to gain the confidence of peasant women and workers to promote national war loans and the reduction of consumption. Activists faced great difficulties, and this aspect indirectly corroborates previous research on wartime social conflict which indicated a deeply divided society in Italy, especially in 1917–1918 after the Caporetto defeat (Procacci 1999; Bianchi 1994; Ortaggi 2004).

The last part of the book is devoted to the failures around political and gender issues of the interventionist strategy. In fact, from March 1917, at the National Congress of Civil Assistance, interventionist women demanded the institution of a national auxiliary service, but this request was rejected by the government; furthermore, the ongoing process of remobilisation implied a reorganisation of the patriotic effort with the creation of a new organism (*Opere federate di assistenza e di propaganda nazionale*), led by minister Ubaldo Comandini. This top-down process reduced women's visibility and their autonomy. In addition, the Caporetto defeat engendered anti-female prejudices, as women were accused of defeatism, and of 'weakening' the nation, as they had not reduced consumption and had 'corrupted' men on the home front. Thus, in 1917–1918 interventionist women reacted by radicalising their propaganda against home front defeatism and socialism, and creating a new organisation (the Fascio nazionale femminile, founded in February 1918) which united right-wing and democratic associations; together they slid towards anti-democratic ideas, and welfare activities were characterised by the exaltation of domesticity, military and anti-socialist values. According to Schiavon, this final effort provided momentum for the fight for political rights in the aftermath of war, but in the long run it was counterproductive, as it isolated the interventionist associations from the popular Socialist and Catholic parties which struggled with gender issues. Overall, if on the one hand feminist interventionism helped to bring urban middle-class women on board with the national project, on the other hand the 'gender backlash' in Italy was particularly strong; in the face of anti-female prejudice and post-war turmoil, the inclusion strategy based on nationalist values revealed its fragility. Despite the brief conclusive remarks, this well-researched and well-written volume contributes to our knowledge

of the role played by women's organisations, sheds light on the shift to interventionism, and on the dynamics of the patriotic mobilisation. Schiavon's research underlines the importance of the interventionist women not only in the general framework of the Italian wartime assistance activities, but also in their ability to shape the welfare procedures themselves. In this way, interventionists contributed considerably to the patriotic mobilisation on the Italian home front but failed in their main goal.

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Political Fellini: Journey to the End of Italy, by Andrea Minuz, translated by Marcus Perryman, New York-Oxford, Berghahn, 2015, 196pp., £56.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-78238-819-7.

Political Fellini: Journey to the End of Italy is the English translation of the book Andrea Minuz published in 2012 with the inverted title *Viaggio al termine dell'Italia. Fellini politico* (Rubettino). The Berghahn edition differs only in the addition of a 'Preface' titled *After the Great Beauty*, with an explicit reference to Paolo Sorrentino's film, which, coincidentally, was released after the publication of the Italian volume, and which now acts as an apt cinematic addendum to Minuz's main argument. Following the footsteps of Fellini, Sorrentino's film in fact 'reaches into the depths of the Italian unconscious', and displays 'a strong political dimension despite the fact that — unlike *Il divo* — it does not address Italian politics' (ix). By pivoting on Giulio Bollati's, Silvana Patriarca's and Suzanne Stewart-Steinberg's works on the character and vices of Italians, Minuz's argument hinges on the idea that Fellini channeled, metamorphosed, and aestheticised his political outlook through his representations of the many idiosyncratic aspects of the Italian mentality (or socio-anthropological ideology), particularly embodied by male characters. These men are seen as childish, egocentric, lacking any form of discipline and sense of responsibility, and neurotically or archetypically attached to variously transfigured mother figures. Rather than