

Living War,
Thinking Peace
(1914-1924)

Living War, Thinking Peace (1914-1924):

*Women's Experiences,
Feminist Thought, and
International Relations*

Edited by

Bruna Bianchi and Geraldine Ludbrook

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CONTENTS

Introduction	viii
Bruna Bianchi and Geraldine Ludbrook	

Part One: Living War. Women’s Experiences during the War

Chapter One.....	2
Women in Popular Demonstrations against the War in Italy	
Giovanna Procacci	

Chapter Two.....	26
Inside the Storm: The Experiences of Women during the Austro-German Occupation of Veneto 1917-1918	
Matteo Ermacora	

Chapter Three.....	44
“Their Wounds Gape at me”: First World War Nursing Accounts and the Politics of Injury	
Carol Acton	

Chapter Four.....	64
“That massacre of the innocents has haunted us for years”: Women Witnesses of Hunger in Central Europe	
Bruna Bianchi	

Chapter Five.....	93
The Lady and the Soldier: Virginia Woolf and the Great War	
Marisa Sestito	

Part Two: Thinking Peace. Feminist Thought and Activism

Chapter Six.....	108
“Fighting for Peace amid Paralyzed Popular Opinion”: Bertha von Suttner’s and Rosa Mayreder’s Pacifist-Feminist Insights on Gender, War and Peace	
Laurie R. Cohen	

Chapter Seven.....	123
Living Peace, Thinking Equality: Rosika Schwimmer's (1877-1948)	
War on War	
Dagmar Wernitznig	
Chapter Eight.....	139
"Pacifist Revolutionary": Crystal Eastman, the Dilemmas	
of Intersectionalism, and the Struggle for World Peace	
Amy Beth Aronson	
Chapter Nine.....	153
Economics and Peace: Yella Hertzka (1873-1948)	
Corinna Oesch	
Chapter Ten.....	169
"Do Women Want War or Peace?": Female Peace Activists	
in First World War Austria	
Brigitte Rath	
Part Three: International Relations. Toward Future World Peace	
Chapter Eleven.....	190
War, Peace, and Suffrage: The First Italian Section of the Women's	
International League for Peace and Freedom	
Maria Grazia Suriano	
Chapter Twelve.....	204
"War as the Beginning of a New Era": Polish Feminists' Thoughts	
and Reflections on Peace and their Visions about the Post-War Era	
(1914-1921)	
Angelique Leszczawski-Schwerk	
Chapter Thirteen.....	223
Helping the German Children: French Humanitarian Aid and Franco-	
German Reconciliation after the Great War (1919-1925)	
Marie-Michèle Doucet	
Chapter Fourteen.....	239
Peace Without Freedom is Not an Option: Race and the Women's	
International League for Peace and Freedom, 1914-1945	
Joyce Blackwell-Johnson	

Contributors.....	264
Index.....	270

INTRODUCTION

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This volume is the result of a long commitment of the online journal *DEP* (*Deportate, esuli, profughe*) to the themes of women pacifists' thought and activism in the 1900s. In November 2014, to mark the centenary of the First World War, the journal organized a conference entitled *Living war. Thinking peace (1914-1921) Women's experiences, feminist thought and international relations*. The volume collects a selection of the papers delivered on this occasion as well as other chapters that complete and enrich the ideas presented in this framework.

In selecting the contributions we favoured certain specific contexts, both European and non-European, which are little known in international history studies: Italian, Polish and Austrian cases are rarely included in similar collections. Likewise, the theme of the presence and contribution of African-American women has been neglected in the history of women's pacifism, which in recent years has shown particular interest in the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom and in the International Congress of Women held in The Hague in 1915. The notion of pacifist activists that emerges from current studies is in fact generally that of white middle-class women.

The volume is aimed at a wide public: students, teachers, scholars and specialists alike. It takes a comparative perspective, and links experience with reflection, including the spirit and the pacifism of working-class women and giving prominence to the originality and the intensity of reflection that is far from being fully valued.

The first section of this volume is entitled *Living War. Women's experiences during the war*. It brings together first-hand personal accounts from women's lives as they face the horrors of war, drawn mainly from original sources such as diaries, letters, memoirs and writings.

The opening chapter by Giovanna Procacci provides an overview of popular demonstrations in Italy in which she aims to fill a gap in Italian historiography by tracing women's popular protests from before Italy's entry into the war in 1915 to demonstrations and strikes during and after

the war. She reveals common patterns in the causes and forms of protest in both urban and rural settings, from the revolts against food shortages and military repression before the war to the protests against economic hardships and anti-State sentiment during the militarization of civil society during the war.

Using primary sources such as women's diaries, letters and memoirs, Matteo Ermacora paints a vivid picture of the hardships experienced by women during the occupation of Veneto by Austro-German troops after the Italian defeat at Caporetto: hunger, violence and forced labour were only some of the adversities women faced. Together with their physical and psychological suffering, Ermacora examines how women took on new roles and devised endurance strategies during the war to ensure the survival of their families. He also looks at the post-war period and the further difficulties brought about for women by return to peacetime society.

Carol Acton provides a new range of perspectives on the war drawn from the diaries, poems and writings of British, American, and Canadian women working as nurses at the front. She focuses on the complexities and conflicts faced by these women as they negotiated their pride in the importance of their work and their pacifist beliefs. Acton reveals how they questioned their role as nurses, often volunteers, and used their writings, especially after the war, to express their anti-war ideals.

Bruna Bianchi examines the devastating effects of the Blockade of Germany by the Allied forces through the eyes of women involved in bringing humanitarian aid to Central Europe, with particular focus on their first-hand experience of the suffering of the starving children. She first traces Emily Hobhouse's 1916 peace mission through Belgium to Germany, before dealing with Madeleine Doty, one of the first witnesses of hunger in Germany, and then Hobhouse's later mission to Vienna and Leipzig. She recounts the founding in 1919 of the Save the Children Fund with the aim of providing relief to the starving children. Bianchi also follows the mission of the Quakers Francesca Wilson, Ruth and Joan Fry, joined by Jane Addams. Bianchi concludes with the activism of Helena Swanwick after the war, and her fight to abolish military aviation that brought about so many deaths during the First World War.

English essayist and novelist Virginia Woolf provides the focus for the chapter by Marisa Sestito in which she examines Woolf's writings – diaries, letters and fiction – to create a highly personalized account of the war. Sestito describes how Woolf repressed or misrepresented the wartime experience as too painful for her to deal with, including as it did the deaths of friends such as Rupert Brooke and her brother Thoby. Sestito also looks at how Woolf describes the traumatic effects of the war through her

fiction. In particular, she links the post-war psychological scars of the fictitious character Septimus Smith with Woolf's own mental illness and final tragic suicide.

The second section of the volume – *Thinking Peace. Feminist thought and activism* – brings together several key figures who challenged inequalities and sought to create new opportunities for women. Their anti-war activism led them to question national political choices from a gender perspective, which brought about the definition of a transnational culture of peace.

Laurie Cohen takes two remarkable woman activists, Bertha von Suttner and Rosa Mayreder, who were active in Austria between the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries, providing biographical overviews for both. Although von Suttner was principally considered a “pacifist” and Mayreder a “feminist,” Cohen’s aim is to compare their thought on war, peace, and gender relations in order to show how their work, although starting from different perspectives, ultimately came to converge in many ways.

Dagmar Wernitznig explores the work of Rosika Schwimmer, the Hungarian-born pacifist, feminist and suffragist. She looks principally at Schwimmer’s exceptional personal, political and ideological commitment to peace, and her “grass-roots” approach to pacifism. She points to Schwimmer’s pivotal role in international women’s associations for suffrage and world peace, and her important post-war legacy despite being subjected to harsh right-wing backlash, xenophobia and anti-Semitism from the 1920s.

Crystal Eastman, the American activist, pacifist and suffragist, is the central figure of the chapter by Amy Beth Aronson. Aronson mainly deals with Eastman’s role as co-founder of the American Woman’s Peace Movement and with the tensions that arose between her and Alice Paul, leader of the National Woman’s Party. Aronson argues that it was Eastman’s attempts to seek interconnectedness between diverse movements that led to her increased marginalization, despite her pioneering legislation at the Second International Congress of Women for Peace and Freedom in Zurich in 1919.

Corinna’s Oesch’s chapter on Yella Hertzka also deals with a pacifist and suffragist whose work has become lost from view. Oesch outlines Hertzka’s work in pre-war Vienna, where she founded the New Women’s Club and the Austrian section of the WILPF. In particular, Oesch investigates Hertzka’s belief in the importance of economic training for women through the women’s Association for Social Assistance work and the founding of a horticultural college for women. She also examines

Hertzka's work with the WILPF's Economic Commission and her involvement in economic and social questions in relation to peace.

Brigitte Rath reports on the work of the women peace activists in Austria in the early 20th century. She examines the different positions held by socialist, Catholic, bourgeois, and proletarian groups, and how these different ideas were disseminated. Rath looks in particular at the First International Peace Congress held in The Hague in 1915 and the post-congress meetings and activities that took place in Vienna in the following years.

The third section of the volume – *International relations. Toward future world peace* – examines the human and political experience of a small group of women who saw in the outbreak of the First World War and the emergence of an international women's movement for peace the opportunity to act for their personal emancipation, and in some cases for a different idea of politics.

Maria Grazia Suriano traces the history of the founding of the first Italian Section of the WILPF in Milan and Rome in 1915. Suriano recounts the activities the Italian WILPF carried out during the war, despite considerable police controls. She goes on to describe the work for peace carried out in the 1920s and the group's links with Italian Socialism. She analyzes how the Italian Section remained essentially an associative movement, never taking on the role of a transnational organization.

In her chapter on the work of Polish feminists after the war, Angelique Leszczawski-Schwerk focuses first on the roles of two leading Polish activists: Zofia Daszyńska-Golińska and Justyna Budzińska-Tylicka. She then looks at how the two women contributed to the First International Women's Peace Congress in 1915 and the Third International Peace Conference in 1921. Leszczawski-Schwerk dedicates considerable attention to the activity of Polish feminists in international peace work after the war within the context of the fight for Polish independence.

Marie-Michèle Doucet examines the post-war period and the assistance provided to German and Austrian children by French pacifist women, partly as a means to exercise their political rights at a national and international level. She describes the strong opposition from the French population as a whole to any rapprochement with the Germans. Nevertheless, the French women pacifists continued not only to raise money to provide humanitarian aid to these children, but also to work towards the establishment of new international relations and moral disarmament.

The volume closes with a study by Joyce Blackwell-Johnson of the issue of race and the American peace activists. In particular she examines the work of Mary Church Terrell and her fight against the discrimination

and injustice she encountered within the women's peace movements. Blackwell-Johnson traces the history of the black peace activists and reformers, who focused on the problems faced by African Americans, including the fight against the phenomenon of lynching. She recounts the international activity of the African-American peace activists in Haiti, which was under American military rule from 1917, and their opposition, together with the WILPF, to this occupation. To conclude, Blackwell-Johnson examines the white and black activists' involvement in Liberia focusing especially on the black WILPF members' successful lobbying of the State Department to avoid U.S. military intervention in Liberia.

**PART ONE:
LIVING WAR**

WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES DURING THE WAR

CHAPTER ONE

WOMEN IN POPULAR DEMONSTRATIONS AGAINST THE WAR IN ITALY (1914-1918)

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Introduction

In recent years Italian historiography relating to the period 1914-1918 has seen the publication of a large number of studies on the active presence of women in the spheres of assistance and pro-war propaganda. Other research has concentrated on the violence inflicted on women, above all in the months following Caporetto, either because they were residents of the occupied zones, or because they were refugees, or, if they were Austrian nationals, during the period in which they had been detained in internment centres. Previously historiography had addressed the question of the exploitation of women workers in the militarized factories where, even if not as great as in the other industrialized countries, the presence of women and children represented a significant component of the workforce subject to military discipline, in labouring jobs behind the front lines, and in domestic production.¹ Studies on pro-intervention women or on women who were victims of the conflict form part of the dominant historiographical trend of recent years. In Italy as elsewhere there has been a tendency to favour themes relating to a simple narration, to propaganda, and to brutalization, whereas those on women in the factories were the *leitmotif* of the social history of the 1980s and

¹ The reference is above all to the work by Beatrice Pisa, Stefania Bartoloni, Augusta Molinari, Emma Schiavon on women employed in the patriotic mobilization; to Daniele Ceschin on refugees and on women in the occupied zones, to Matteo Ermacora on the internees and on the women workers at the front; to the less recent works of Luigi Tomassini, Piero Di Girolamo, Laura Savelli, Simonetta Ortaggi Cammarosano, Giovanna Procacci on women in the factories. For an overview of the literature see Matteo Ermacora 2007; and Bruna Bianchi 2015.

1990s, which put the factory and the work carried out there in exceptional circumstances at the centre of historical research. However, even in this earlier period, only sporadic and partial attention was paid to any kind of reality not directly relating to the working class.²

In particular, few scholars had looked at the revolts in rural areas and cities during the war, and if they had done so, this had been purely functional to other objectives and had examined only marginally the nature and the causes of the revolts. This was the case with the demonstrations of 1914-1915, analysed in terms of popular attitudes towards intervention in the conflict, and the same was true of the revolts of spring 1917, considered in the light of the incapacity of the Socialist Party to either understand or lead the protest (Monticone 1967; De Felice 1963; Vigezzi 1968). Here we can see the negative influence of the presupposition, still present in much of the historiography, that popular protests were nothing more than pre-industrial episodes – explosions of rage with neither political relevance nor consequences in so far as they were spontaneous, not led by the socialists, and (perhaps above all) because they were organized and carried out by women (Ortaggi Cammarosano 2003).

I myself, when writing at length about the living conditions of the urban and rural female population (Procacci 1981; 1989), was motivated by the intention of demonstrating that the existence of dissent with respect to the war was widespread throughout the country. This was to counter the prevailing line of interpretation (in no sense totally discredited today) that argued for a unanimous consensus for the war, disturbed only by the socialist opposition, whose influence was considered decisive in the culminating episode of revolt – the insurrection of Turin in August 1917. Only comparatively recently has Roberto Bianchi addressed more thoroughly the question of popular revolt, arguing – from a comparative analysis of certain examples of female protest both during the war itself and in the disturbances that shook the Italian countryside for several days immediately after the war – that there was a substantial continuity between war and post-war periods (R. Bianchi 2001; 2006). The demonstrations of popular protest have thus finally emerged from the limbo of episodic pre-industrial spontaneity and entered into the mainstream of study as a phenomenon that in certain specific conditions

² A rare exception is represented by the volume of the *Annali dell'Istituto "Alcide Cervi,"* 1991, 13, *Le donne nelle campagne italiane del Novecento*, with contributions by Simonetta Soldani, Giovanna Procacci, Laura Savelli. Soldani (1986) had already published an important article on living conditions in Tuscany, but containing information valid for the whole country.

– the war and the ensuing traumatic social transformation – can itself be considered a protagonist of modernity.

In the following pages I shall attempt to describe the progress of popular demonstrations during the war and demonstrate the continuity with those preceding the conflict. My aim is to underline the specific nature of the Italian example in respect to both the causes and the forms of protest.

The pattern of popular demonstrations before the war

Unlike other Western belligerent countries in which bread riots had largely ceased after the first half of the nineteenth century, in the fifteen years that preceded the war in Italy there took place a large number of very serious episodes of popular unrest motivated by lack of food – in particular, of bread, the basic food of most of the population – and of huge anti-militarist demonstrations, both of which involved town and country and which were often connected.

The most significant incident occurred in 1898 when the whole country was shaken by popular riots about the cost of living and about the widespread use of the army for repression. The protest had followed the traditional line of popular uprisings (*jacqueries*): burning down of tax offices, storming of town halls and land registries, interruption of all communications through the cutting of telegraph lines, looting of bakeries, and the destruction of the clubs of the landed nobility. The protest involved the towns and the rural areas of the whole country and culminated in the tragically famous events of Milan: the bread riots and the consequent ferocious repression carried out by the army in which 400 civilians were killed and 1000 injured. Throughout Italy the protagonists and victims were peasants, workers, and the poorer elements of the population. Women had participated actively, even in certain areas of the South such as Puglia.

As far as the content of the protest went, the classic protest “about hunger,” although it still dominated, was accompanied from the start by an anti-war undercurrent, as indicated by the cries of “Long live Menelik” and “Out of Africa” with which, in 1896, several thousand people in Milan had expressed their opposition to the African war of conquest. This was a war that, because it was a failure, left the ruling group with aspirations to colonial expansion (Levra 1975).

In the following years, thanks to a more careful approach to economic problems and social relations by the new government dominated by Giovanni Giolitti, a liberal open to democratic impulses, but always

heavily conditioned by conservative forces linked to the monarchy and to the military, protests related to hunger died out. There were nonetheless ample motives for continuing popular uprisings, such as the breaches of contract by landed proprietors, failures of local administration, and the use of the armed forces for the maintenance of public order. These demonstrations concerned mainly the agricultural regions of the South. The North had seen the gradual establishment of a more modern system of mediation between employers (both industrial and agricultural) and workers, with the consequent appearance of strike action as a weapon, involving women workers on occasions, both in rural areas (in particular in the rice fields) and in the factories. The use of strikes spread widely and very quickly, and reached its high point in the years 1912-1913, producing a violent reaction from the employers. However, in an economy in the process of industrialization as was the Italian economy, protest was obviously expressed in different forms, characterised by both popular riots and disturbances, and more organised strikes.

Both forms of protest were present in what was a real revolutionary event that involved the whole of Italy in June 1914, just before the outbreak of the world war, and which has been termed, precisely because of its radical character, the “Red Week” (*Settimana rossa*). The protest sprang from purely political issues: the killing of two people in Ancona during a demonstration for the liberation of two anarchists, one of whom was in prison, the other in a mental asylum, who were held because they had participated in a protest against the Libyan war of 1911. This war had represented a new attempt at colonial conquest by the government and had been met by anti-militarist demonstrations organised by socialists and other political groups opposed to the war. The demonstrations, which had spread even to certain areas of the South – in particular, to Naples – and had seen the very active participation of women, continued even after the Libyan war was over and undoubtedly contributed to the events of the “Red Week” of 1914.

This insurrection, which saw the involvement of a large number of women, began in the Romagna, but extended very rapidly to other rural areas, where it often assumed the traditional festive and triumphalist characteristics of popular protest. There were attacks on town halls and railway stations, assaults on the houses of the proprietors and appeals for a more just and equal world (the division of wheat in the public piazza); people erected the “tree of liberty” and arrested army officers with the cry of “Long live the republic and the revolution.” The insurrection then spread to many cities, including Turin, Milan, Genoa, Florence, Naples and Bari, where barricades were erected in some places (Lotti 1965;

Martini 1989; Aragno 2005). The whole episode of “Red Week” finished dramatically with 16 dead and 600 wounded among the demonstrators and one dead among the government forces. Nevertheless its duration and extension to a large part of the country, and the simultaneous involvement of both rural areas, where popular riots took place, and cities, with a general strike called by the General Confederation of Labour and the participation of workers in the revolt, together with its spontaneous nature – the Socialist Party and the unions were caught unprepared and tried to hold back the movement – terrorised the Italian ruling class. It never forgot this shock, and reacted politically with drastic measures of repression, rendered even harsher by the exceptional legislation of the war, legislation that would become part and parcel of the institutional structure of the fascist regime.

When the First World War broke out in August 1914, “Red Week” was only just over. After a few days of uncertainty during which there were fears of renewed disorders, the declaration of neutrality seemed to offer Italy an unexpected prospect of tranquility. But such hopes were soon shown to be unfounded. In the following months the country experienced a very serious economic, social and political crisis, which the government was unable to handle. Although Italy depended to a large degree on the import of cereals, the necessary measures to ensure a continuing supply were not taken. At the same time, in order to meet the economic difficulties related to the European war, the government pursued – even during the months of Italian neutrality – a monetary policy based on increasing circulation and raising indirect taxation rather than imposing heavier direct taxation, as happened in England and, to some extent, in France. As a result, there was a massive increase in prices, which rose by 60 percent even in the period of neutrality. This was accompanied by an increase in unemployment, both because many factories had closed due to a lack of raw materials and difficult trading conditions, and because of the disorderly return of thousands of emigrants from the countries of central Europe.

Economic conditions, together with concern about a possible Italian entry into the conflict, were the principal reasons for the renewal of protest. From November 1914, and above all between January and May 1915, all the regions of Italy witnessed demonstrations that linked strikes and marches in the cities with the more traditional popular riots in the rural areas and in the villages. There were clashes at railway stations, railway lines were blocked, and the trains sent to take away those called up to the army were sabotaged; there was looting at bakeries, at flour

mills, and from lorries carrying wheat and flour; and there were the usual attacks on town halls.

The disorders were particularly severe in the poorer areas of the South and the islands, and in those areas of central and northern Italy that had seen large numbers of workers laid off by industry (Veneto, Emilia, Tuscany, Lombardy, Piedmont) and a lot of returning emigrants. Hundreds – sometimes thousands – of people took part in the demonstrations, which often ended with bloody clashes with the police forces (B. Bianchi 2002; Cammarano 2015; see also B. Bianchi 1998).³

The presence of women became more marked after January and February 1915, as food became more difficult to find because of the winter, and prices rose day by day. The sharpening of the protest was also linked to premonitions of war, made explicit in many of the main cities, especially in those with a university, by the pro-war demonstrations of groups of young men, usually students, either nationalists or, as they were called at the time, “democratic interventionists” and/or “revolutionary interventionists.” These young, middle-class men distinguished themselves for being noisy and aggressive in their attitudes towards the much larger pro-peace demonstrations usually organised by young supporters of the Socialist Party and by the workers. Often the opposing groups limited themselves to slogans, but increasingly the shouting turned to violence, where those opposing entry into the war came off worse as those in favour of the war were protected by the police. So, by spring 1915,

³ Thus – to give a few examples of the most clamorous episodes – as early as December 1914, 6,000 workers of the Terni steelworks went on strike in Perugia because of the cost of living, and were immediately supported by the rest of the population; in February 1915 a crowd of women and unemployed building workers were involved in a protest in Rome; in Naples, in the popular areas of the city, 15,000 workers from the steelworks demonstrated, together with several thousand women and children; in Scandiano, in Emilia, at the beginning of March, 25,000 people took part in the funeral of two men, killed during a demonstration of 600 landless agricultural workers, protesting about unemployment and the high cost of living; 80,000 workers in Turin demonstrated on 3 March, complaining about the high price of bread; in Venice, where in September 1914, women and unemployed had already united in protest, more violent riots broke out in March 1915; in Ginosa, in Puglia, two thousand people attacked the flour mills, with one death: Archivio centrale dello Stato, *Ministero dell'Interno, Direzione generale di Pubblica Sicurezza, Divisione Affari Generali e Riservati, cat. A5G, Conflagrazione Europea, 1914-1918* [henceforth A5G], bb. 88, 198, 1 (Bologna); 94, 212, 1 (Firenze) 103, 225, 1 (Milano); 108, 227, 3 (Napoli); 123, 250, 1 (Torino).

discontent and popular protest about food supplies was accompanied by protest related directly to opposition to the war.

The days immediately before Italy's declaration of war on Austria saw clashes in the principal cities of the centre-north between those favourable to intervention, led by their chief political and cultural representatives (Mussolini in Milan, D'Annunzio in Rome) and favoured by the police, and crowds of people, including a large number of women, who protested against the war. In Turin on 16th and 17th May more than 100,000 people demonstrated against the war and put up barricades against the police, resulting in clashes that left one dead, many injured, and the arrest of over 100 demonstrators. There were clashes in Milan as well (with one death) and in Florence. At the same time, in many smaller centres in Emilia-Romagna, Lombardy, Veneto, Lazio, Puglia, Calabria, Sicily, and at Terni and in Naples, the population – in particular, the women – tried to prevent the departure of those called up, using the usual, well-tried, methods: cutting telegraph and telephone wires to prevent the arrival of reinforcements for the carabinieri, damaging the locomotives, stoning and struggling with the police, all accompanied with shouts of “Down with the war” (Vigezzi 1960).⁴ The clashes left one dead in Vignanello in the province of Rome on 27th April.

At this point the exceptional legislation, passed immediately, compelled silence.

Protest against the war

The war against Austria began on 24th May 1915 and for several weeks there was no protest; war had been declared and it was necessary to prepare to face the consequences. It was generally believed that the ordeal of war would be over within a few weeks, a conviction shared by the politicians and the military and put around by propaganda. In addition, the apparent inevitability of the conflict, for which the population had been summoned by patriotic appeals urging the need for sacrifice by the whole community, the harsh repression of any kind of opposition, the concession of certain benefits regarding agricultural contracts and rents, and the fact of money being available through the subsidies paid to the families of those called up – something quite new for many women –, all this, together with the burden of seasonal agricultural work, silenced protest for a few months.

⁴ ACS, A5G, b. 68.134. 83-98.

Protest began again, however, in the winter of 1915, when women began to hear the first reports about what was really happening at the front, thanks to the news of the indescribable suffering in the trenches that soldiers on leave recounted or to the contents of letters the censor (who was not too careful in the early months of the war) had missed.

During these months the economic situation in the country had not improved. Certain that the war would be short, the government had been concerned above all with two considerations, thought to be priorities. Firstly by crushing protest at home through the exceptional legislation: decrees that harshly repressed any kind of public assembly or the diffusion of any “alarming” news; and secondly by reinforcing the army. In fact 82 percent of war expenses were devolved to the military ministries during the course of the conflict, to which were also entrusted the administration of large areas of the country and numerous responsibilities within the sphere of civilian life. This was a political choice that sacrificed any measures in support of the civilian population to the strengthening of the military sector. It aligned the government of Antonio Salandra, a man of the Right who had favoured the repressive policies at the end of the previous century, with the authoritarian positions of other continental belligerent nations – in particular, Germany, Austria, and Russia – where there was a similar neglect of investments in support of agriculture and foodstuffs. These policies differed markedly from those of the western powers and of England in particular, which was careful to balance military spending with that in favour of the civilian population (Winter 2007). And while even in England and in France there were protests about rationing and rising prices (in northern France there had been protests of this sort in 1911), a careful policy of supply, together with measures designed to prevent an excessive devaluation of the currency, with consequent price increases, served in these countries to avoid hunger riots and with them the accompanying delegitimization of the political governing class.⁵

But let us return to the conditions within Italy after the entry in war. Since the government had not envisaged that the war would last long and had taken inadequate measures to ensure imports, and given that a large amount of the reserves of foodstuffs were allocated to the armed forces,

⁵ On the 1911 demonstrations in the North of France in protest at the price of certain food products (butter, meat, eggs), see Hanson 1988. On the uniformity of motivation at the heart of popular protest in London, Paris, and Berlin (inequality of access to food) and on the differences between the first two capital cities and the last (where speculation and black marketeering generated popular anger until rationing was imposed): see Bonzon and Davis 1977; Davis 2000.

the country soon found itself in a dramatic situation, with shortages of bread, flour, and rice. As far as prices were concerned, the government pursued the inflationary policies already followed in the period of neutrality, with the result that food prices continued to rise. The price index for meat and cereals in the period between July 1914 and October 1918 showed an increase of 267 percent (Bachi 1919, 95) while the currency, devalued by 56 percent in the same period, made the subsidies given to the needy families of soldiers totally inadequate.⁶ Only in August 1916 was a central agency set up – the Commissariat for supply and consumption, which subsequently became a ministerial agency – with the task of fixing prices for a limited number of essential food products and which, in 1917, began first rationing and then the issue of coupons. But the Commissariat was not up to the task, with the result that food distribution remained without coordination into 1918.

A similar situation existed in the sphere of assistance. While the government had abandoned the principles of non-intervention in the industrial sector and had instituted an obligatory regulation of labour through the Institute for Industrial Mobilisation (entrusted to the military), in the sphere of assistance to civilians it maintained a rigid liberalism, delegating the task of assigning subsidies to local private associations which were often not in a position to assess individual family needs. Many families, therefore, although poor, got no financial help. As before the war, women volunteers worked to help the needy (for example, running kindergartens, soup kitchens), but such assistance was inevitably inadequate and, in the smaller agricultural centres and in the mountains, practically non-existent. As the prefect of Rome wrote in 1917, the assistance committees “either do not work or don't work effectively both because of lack of funds and because of the lack of concern of the component members.” The government began to worry about the problem of assistance in 1917 but, as well as being late, the intervention attempted was subject to such bureaucratic obstacles and such poor financing that it realized little (Pisa 1989, 957).

The conditions of the poorer classes therefore worsened progressively. There were, however, notable variations between regions. In the North and the Centre a significant number of young women (198,000), even though proportionately fewer than in other belligerent countries, were employed in the factories that produced for the Institute for Industrial Mobilisation. Besides working in the big industrial complexes of the towns, many women were employed in the small factories – mainly making bullets and shells – set up during the war in the smaller towns or

⁶On the value and distribution of the subsidies, see Serpieri 1930, 57, 122 ff.

in the surrounding countryside, as with the arc of small centres around Milan. Yet even in these areas food was short and prices impossible. In the countryside, where most of those called up to the army came from, in the Centre-North – cultivated by share-croppers, small proprietors and small leaseholders – the women worked in the fields (unlike in a similar economy such as that of France), doing the same heavy work as men. The result was that, through a massive increase in female labour, agricultural production did not fall and living standards were maintained. But in those regions in which salaried day-labour was the norm and in which fewer men were exonerated from military service, women could not replace men. Here, as in those areas where the men had emigrated to the Americas, conditions were often dramatic. The situation was particularly difficult in the South, where there was no industrial network and where the socio-geographic structure, characterised by agglomerates of houses a long way from the fields and by large, extensive, landed properties, had traditionally kept women away from agricultural work. Moreover, cultural norms also made it difficult for women to work outside the home. In the South there was not even any real diffusion of domestic uniform-making for the army – something which, run by patriotic associations in the cities and surrounding hinterlands, provided work for 600,000 women. The wages were, however, miserable: 0.82 *centesimi* for a 12-hour day) (Pisa 1989, 957). In many areas of the country, therefore, the only resource was the subsidy, insufficient for needs and in any case not always granted.

These tragic conditions of existence, not mitigated by an adequate policy of assistance, produced inevitably protest, which began again soon after the outset of the war and continued uninterrupted and with increasing extension and intensity, in wave after wave, for all the following years. If, prior to the conflict, the presence of women in the protests had always been constant and committed, with most of the men now at the front, protest became almost exclusively that of the women, at times accompanied by large groups of children and a few old men. Only in the last year of the war did those men remaining take part in the protests, and even then in limited numbers because they risked being sent immediately to the trenches. In the factories as well, strikes usually began through the initiative of young women workers, often employed in the factory for the first time, as a reaction to the harsh working conditions and the severe discipline. Often, at that point, the spontaneous and unexpected demonstration would spread to the sectors where the men were working.

Unlike in the western powers and in Germany, in Italy, given the limited extent of industrialised zones and the rigid discipline in the factories, which was more severe even than in Germany, protest against the war took the form above all of popular demonstrations, although factory disputes were also numerous. Popular protest began early. From the winter of 1915 prefects signalled the presence of protest in the rural areas of the North. This was principally in the poorer areas of Piedmont, Veneto and Friuli, where returning emigrants and unemployed added to problems, but also in the agricultural plains of Emilia, in the Tuscan valleys, and in all the very poor South and islands: Puglia, Calabria, Sicily and Sardinia. In Sicily, between the end of 1915 and the summer of 1918, prefects reported more than a thousand demonstrations, with the participation of thousands of women and children and with occasional acts of violence against the municipal authorities, against the police forces, and even against priests.⁷ In 1916 the protests spread from the countryside to the smaller urban centres, and reached the big cities in 1917. According to one prefectorial report, there were more than 500 demonstrations across the whole country in the period from October 1916 to April 1917.⁸

The protests usually followed the same pattern. They broke out spontaneously when the women went together to claim their subsidy or when, in the countryside, they blocked lorries carrying away food products. The demonstrators marched along the roads shouting slogans: “War against war” was the slogan people used in Chianti on 1st May 1917, together with appeals to others to join the protest march (R. Bianchi 2005). They would direct their attention to the houses of the powerful, to schools, and then to the town hall, where they would break windows and sometimes burn the furniture and seize the lists of those called up. In the cities the gathering point was also the town hall, but often the women would begin the protest at the market or in front of the bakeries, where, on occasion, they would raid the storerooms (B. Bianchi 2002; Piva 1977). The poor distribution of food produced some tension between town and country: the peasants protested about products being requisitioned at prices that gave them no profit and then passed to the army and the cities. City dwellers complained that the prices of agricultural products were too high, accusing the peasants of hiding food in order to sell it on the black market. However, unlike in Germany, the

⁷ ACS, A5g. b. 81, 162, 1; on Sicily, see Bonomo 2014, 237.

⁸ The summaries of the prefectorial reports for the period October 1916 – April-May 1917, conserved in the *Archivio centrale dello Stato* (A5G, b. 81, 162, 4, 2), have been published in De Felice 1963.

tensions were never really acute in Italy, where almost all the cities, apart from two or three large industrial centres, had close contact with the land. If anything, the resentment of the peasants was directed against those responsible for requisitioning, and mirrored the anti-authority sentiments of the cities.

What were the motives for demonstration and protest? In some respects – the protests about lack of bread, about the cost of living, or about the inertia of the local administration – we can see an unbroken continuity with the protests seen during the period of neutrality. The demonstrations by the women when those called up were leaving can be considered as belonging to a traditional register connected to the sphere of emotion. However, the war had altered mentalities and, with them, the forms of protest. As protagonists on the home front in both the private and the public spheres, women had acquired new social awareness. The responsibilities of work, as well as the anger directed at the authorities who had deprived families of indispensable male assistance, had given women, who had filled the gap with success, a new image of themselves, very different from that of the subaltern female. Forced to face up to new family responsibilities and to find food, women were pushed into the position of having themselves to deal directly with bureaucratic structures and state authority, whether it was the local administration responsible for the subsidy, the private associations for assistance, or even the military authorities who requisitioned agricultural products. If these new tasks had generated within the women a new awareness of their role, the fact of being wives and mothers of soldiers had produced the realisation that there were rights that should be recognised in their regard, such as the right to have a subsidy, something to be considered not as a generous act of beneficence but as an obligation of the State. Equally, it was considered a duty of the State to provide the families of soldiers with sufficient food at reasonable prices. In this way food became a symbol of the *right to exist*, which the State had the duty to ensure on the home front, at a time when other family members were being sacrificed at the front.⁹

Given that it had been officially declared that all members of the national community were called upon to make the sacrifices imposed by the conflict, the shortages of food served to make evident the unjust distribution of those sacrifices. In the cities, while the poor had difficulty in finding food and spent a lot of time standing in tiring queues, the better-off could avoid restrictions by buying the much more expensive,

⁹ On the demonstrations in the countryside and on the moral – and not simply economic – justifications that lay at the heart of them, see Procacci 1989.

non-rationed, foods, by going to restaurants, or by purchasing on the black market. For certain social groups, life in the city seemed to have changed very little: young officers strolled with their elegantly dressed fiancées, giving rise to suspicions that they had been favoured with leave or with office jobs; the cinemas functioned normally, the cafés were open, and – outside the towns – the resorts and spas were as full as ever. Although lack of food was a daily reality, it was often rather the sense of injustice, of moral outrage, that pushed people to protest. And the protest was directed predictably not only at the shopkeepers, but also at the houses of the upper classes or at holiday-makers. It could be said that there was a shift from protest at an event – the war – to a protest against those who had provoked it and who did not suffer the consequences directly, or who were even making a profit from it.

However, while at the outset of the conflict the protest was directed above all at the local authorities – in line with the anti-authoritarianism of the preceding decades – hostility very rapidly began to be aimed directly at the central State. The traditional anti-state sentiment of the Italian masses was given fresh impulse by the expansion of the state functions.¹⁰ It was further reinforced by the knowledge that it was central government that had entrusted the organisation of requisitioning and, for a certain period, the distribution of food to the military. In the same way, within the factories, it was the presence of the military in its role of enforcing discipline and carrying out mediation that led the industrial workers to see the State as their principal enemy, side by side with, perhaps even more than, the traditional bosses.

The militarization of civil society increased anti-state sentiment, therefore, and contributed greatly to delegitimize the governing class. In this sense, the Italian situation resembled that of Russia, Austria, and Germany, while differing from the experience of the western powers where, due to the attention paid to the welfare of civilian society, sacrifices and shortages were made acceptable. Protest, although still about food, was not so much about its absence but about prices and rationing, and was aimed less against the State than against those within the national community who seemed to be taking advantage of the condition of the weaker members of the population, getting rich at their expense: the “intermediaries,” the speculators, and the shopkeepers.¹¹ As

¹⁰ On the massive intrusion of the State in private life, see Soldani 1991.

¹¹ In both England and France the protests had their origin not in the shortages of food, but in the fear that it might run out or because legal prices were not being respected (England); because of injustice in distribution and the evident privileges reserved for certain social groups (France), see Waites 1987; Coles 1978, for the

in other countries, in Italy there was no lack of diatribe against the profiteers and the “sharks” (the arms manufacturers). However, in a nation profoundly divided after the rout of Caporetto, which was attributed by the nationalists to socialist “defeatism,” an accusation not refuted by the government, these diatribes became part of the larger “we-them” division. For the ordinary people, “they” were the profiteers, those in favour of the war, and, above all, the government, while for the nationalists “they” were the socialists, the pacifists, the masses and those soldiers influenced by them.

The transfer of resentments from the level of the local authorities to the national was reinforced by the news of the appeal for the conclusion of the war made by German diplomatic circles. This news spread during the winter of 1916 with the diffusion of leaflets that reproduced the text of the appeal and the passing, at the same time, of the motion of the socialist parliamentarians calling for peace, and the publication of the Zimmerwald manifesto of the socialists opposed to the war. The idea that the decision to enter the war had been unavoidable, spread by propaganda, was no longer tenable, in confirmation of the opposite idea that the war was really “a war wanted by the prosperous classes to the cost of the poor,” as proclaimed in more than one leaflet.

In the North and the Centre, the demonstrations became more precisely directed, often promoted and/or encouraged by socialist women, as, for example, in the province of Florence, where, in the winter of 1916-1917, demonstrations against the war took place almost daily. But even in the not traditionally socialist areas, with the passing of the months the protests became increasingly explicit in their denunciation of the war. Thus, in all parts of Italy and often moved by soldiers who, from the front, reproved the women “for prostituting themselves for 70 *centesimi* a day,” the amount of the subsidy,¹² women passed from protesting against the inadequate nature of the subsidy to refusing it in the hope that this would prevent the continuation of the war. On other occasions, groups of women refused to harvest the crops, with the intention of depriving the army of supplies, or else they appealed to both male and female workers in the factories to go on strike to stop the production of munitions and other requirements of war. Or else, much more directly, they helped deserters (B. Bianchi 1998, 174 f., 177-830; De Felice 1963, 483 f., 488, 503; on help given to deserters, B. Bianchi 2001, 280-294 and 1995, 133-141).

description of the demonstrations for the *taxation populaire* among the miners of North Cumberland; Darzon 2004, 216-220; Purcher 1994, 155-219.

¹² Letter of 5th July 1917 sent to Carpineto Romano: ACS, A5G, 118. 242. 2.

Tensions reached their height in May 1917 when news of the Russian Revolution began to circulate and when censorship was no longer able to conceal the truth about conditions at the front and the terrible bloodbath that was taking place. Shortly afterwards, the Pope's comments about the tragedy of the war and its uselessness encouraged people to think that peace was near. Desperation, anger, hope and courage united to give birth to a series of simultaneous initiatives that had the realisation of peace as their objective.

News of the February Revolution passed from mouth to mouth, and arrived in April not only in the cities but also in the countryside. Prefects reported that everyone was talking about the revolutionary movement, but the significance given to the event was not always the same. In most of the countryside and in the South, revolution was considered the same as the riot (as if "making the revolution" was the same as organizing a demonstration) and was considered above all as a means for obtaining peace ("peace or revolution"). Where the socialists were traditionally strong, people went much further: "Everyone is talking about revolution ... which is supposed to take place shortly," warned the prefect of Turin, while in Tuscany children shouted "Long live the revolution, death to the nobles, we will celebrate." Sometimes the reference to the French Revolution was evident, "We want to have a revolution and cut off the heads of the *signori*," was the cry in Polesine in February 1918. *Ça ira* was the phrase circulating in Piedmont.¹³ Hopes for the end of the conflict were now being replaced by the certainty of a revolutionary event. If, in the previous disturbances, it had been possible to see elements typical of the "moral economy" described by E. P. Thompson – indignation for the increase in prices and at speculation, appeals to the principle of equity and of the right to food and to survival – now characteristics were evident that went beyond the re-establishment of order according to "natural justice," because the objective had become the transformation of the social order.

It was above all in this period that the phenomenon of the conjunction between protest in the countryside and protest in the towns grew. In Italy, in part as a consequence of rapid industrialization, not only had the industrial centres seen an enormous rise in the number of inhabitants, but even the small rural towns had expanded into the surrounding countryside, with the creation of new factories, now the centres around which most peasant families tended to gravitate. This close connection between factory and countryside and between workers and peasants,

¹³ ACS, A5G, 81, 162, 1; De Felice 1963, 479 ff.; R. Bianchi 2010, 121; B. Bianchi 1998, 183.

often members of the same family, produced an intertwining of strikes and popular protest. Groups of women and children from the rural hinterland would march towards the munitions factories, where the majority of the workers were women, and incite the workers to join the procession. On other occasions the demonstration would begin within the factory and then later involve the peasant women. Usually the cause of the revolt – what pushed the women factory workers to unite with the peasant women – was not working conditions within the factory but the lack of food or its high cost.¹⁴ Demonstrations frequently then turned into general protest about the war and the absence of husbands.¹⁵

The biggest episode of this kind took place in Lombardy, where the demonstrations started by the women textile and munitions workers, spread across the countryside of the Milan hinterland, reaching fairly distant centres (Como, Lecco, Pavia, Monza) and finally reaching Milan. There the around 10,000 demonstrators were “a large number of women who had come in from the countryside and who were joined by men and women workers from the factories [...] they broke what they could lay their hands on, doors, factory windows, and were in charge of Milan for 24 hours” (Martini 1966).

Turati wrote to Kuliscioff: “It is above all the women who have become furies. They want to stop the war immediately; they want their men back. They are hostile to Milan, seen as first wanting the war and now taking away everything – wheat, lard, rice ... They want to do for these *signori*” (Turati and Kuliscioff 1977, 501).

Similar thoughts and worries were expressed at the same time by Luigi Albertini, the Editor of the *Corriere della Sera* newspaper: “It is the women who make themselves felt, who break the windows, who demand the closure of the factories ... The pretext is the lack of rice or its high price, but in reality what all these women want is that their menfolk return home and that the factories close because the production of munitions just prolongs the war.”

The anti-war protest in the Milan area represented the largest phenomenon of association between town and countryside, but it was not

¹⁴ As Barrington Moore (1983: 435) observes, more than discontent at work, it is the disruption of daily life created by the scarcity of consumables that generates revolt.

¹⁵ “Bread, liberty, and peace” was the slogan of thousands of demonstrators in Berlin on 1st May 1916 – an example soon followed in other cities. “Bread, peace, and land” is what the peasants and workers in Russia demanded, after February 1917 when the food crisis became desperate: Chickering 1998, 156; Daniel 1997, 246 ff.; Engel 1997.

the first such episode. Similar alliances had already occurred in 1916. In March 1916 women in Pisa had formed a procession protesting about the war and the high cost of living and had marched to the factories and compelled the women workers to leave their jobs, threatening to break the windows of the factories with their clogs. There were similar protests in the provinces of Alessandria and Asti in February and April of 1916, around Biella, in Venice, around Ravenna and in Emilia and in Tuscany.¹⁶ In the same period women in Lazio began the occupation of the land and protested against the war, while in Naples workers and other citizens clashed with the police forces. In the rest of the South, demonstrations spread to the cities, transforming festivals for patron saints (as in Lentini, in Sicily, on 4th April 1917) or the commemoration of entry into the war (as in Scordia, in Sicily, on 24th May) into demonstrations against the war. On occasions these popular protests were accompanied by what was, in effect, a “*quasi* general strike.”¹⁷

The growth of protest could not but shock public opinion, which, because the demonstrations were occurring more or less simultaneously, tended to attribute them to a pre-arranged plan on the part of the Socialist Party and the unions. In fact, not only was the Socialist Party not behind the protest – it was still following its line to “neither support nor sabotage” the war effort, decided at the outset of the conflict – but had even taken its distance from the non-organized popular movements. The PSI kept on stimulating opposition to the war – many militants were given long sentences or interned without trial in distant places (mainly in Sardinia) – but gave no lead for an articulated political struggle.¹⁸ And, as

¹⁶ In April 1917 in Bologna, where the wage claims of the women workers in the munitions factories were subordinated to those related to the problem of food and, together with the women from the rural hinterland, to demands for the end to the war. In the province of Modena, where a demonstration that had originated among the women workers of a tobacco factory spread to the hinterland and to the factories involved in war production. And in Tuscany, the valley of Bisenzio, where, in July 1917, hundreds of women from the higher valleys, organized by the socialist Teresa Meroni, persuaded 1,500 women factory workers and “groups of children of all ages, to form a procession which, growing as it progressed, marched as far as Prato and even to the gates of Pistoia”: Degli Esposti 2012; Soldani 1986; Cintelli and Marchi 2007; R. Bianchi 2010, 120 f.

¹⁷ On Sicily, see Bonomo 2014; on the land occupations and the struggles of the agricultural labourers, see Procacci 1991 (then, with modifications, Procacci 1999).

¹⁸ B. Bianchi 1998, 163, 176. Even Modigliani, among the socialist leaders most opposed to the war, condemned the popular demonstrations, precisely because they were not organized: De Felice 1963, 490.