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Jomarie Alano

Armed with a Yellow Mimosa: Women's Defence and Assistance Groups in Italy, 1943–45

During the night of 12–13 March 1945, the Italian fascist police executed two sisters, Vera and Libera Arduino, on the bridge over the Pellerina canal in the city of Turin. Both sisters had been involved in the Italian Resistance or *Resistenza*, Vera as a *staffetta* or courier with the partisans in the mountains and Libera as a social assistance worker.¹ At their funeral, hundreds of women staged a large anti-fascist demonstration, and many were arrested. When the situation finally quietened down, a small sign of defiance appeared on the tomb of the fallen sisters — a bouquet of yellow mimosa tied with a tricolour ribbon accompanied by the words *Gruppi di difesa della donna e per l'assistenza ai combattenti della libertà*.² The yellow mimosa — symbol of International Women's Day, begun in 1910 by German socialist leader and women's rights activist Clara Zetkin (1857–1933) and celebrated on 8 March — carried a message of solidarity, reminded women of the obligation to fight, and represented Italian women's hopes for the future. The tricolour ribbon, displaying the red, white and green of the Italian flag, reflected their love for their homeland.

FIGURE 1³
The Arduino sisters



Vera (1925–45)



Libera (1929–45)

1 Testimony of Alberto Arduino in Bianca Guidetti Serra, *Compagne: Testimonianze di partecipazione politica femminile* (Comrades: Testimonies of Women's Political Participation), 2 vols (Turin 1977), 3–6. All translations from the Italian are my own unless otherwise indicated.

2 Ada Gobetti, 'Ma perchè li chiamammo Gruppi di difesa?' (Why Did We Call Them Women's Defence Groups?), *Noi Donne*, 17 (23 April 1978), 39.

3 Reproduced with the permission of the Istituto piemontese per la storia della Resistenza e della società contemporanea in Turin.

Vera and Libera Arduino (Figure 1) belonged to the Women's Defence and Assistance Groups or *Gddd*, the women's organization that led the demonstration and left the flowers, which was founded in November 1943 and had at least 70,000 members by 1945 (Table 1).⁴

TABLE 1
Women's participation in the Italian *Resistenza*

Members of the <i>Gddd</i>	70,000
Engaged in combat as partisans	35,000
Arrested, tortured and tried	4,633
Deported to Germany	2,750
Wounded	1,750
Executed or killed in combat	623
Commanding officers or battle inspectors	512

Although the *Gddd* comprised the largest organization through which women participated in the *Resistenza*, it has not received the attention it deserves as a training-ground for women's political participation in postwar Italy. Instead, up until recently most historians and politicians have praised only the activities of assistance to male partisans and their families carried out by the women of the *Gddd*. This view fits comfortably with attempts by right-wing parties in power in Italy from the late 1940s to the mid-1960s to construct a collective memory of the *Resistenza* that upheld paternalistic notions of Italian society. Their efforts appear to have succeeded. Even prominent women's historians have underestimated the political significance of the *Gddd*, particularly with respect to its impact on women's individual and collective perceptions of themselves, their gender and their rights. For example, in her study of women under fascism, Victoria de Grazia maintained that 'as a political and social movement on behalf of freedom and social justice, the Resistance did not encourage critiques of male supremacy nor contemplate situations in which to confront complex issues of self-identity and gender reconstruction'. While she acknowledged the *Gddd* as 'the most formal organization' through which women joined the *Resistenza*, de Grazia remarked that planning for emancipation was 'lost in the face of day to day exigencies' of helping the *Resistenza*.⁵

Such a conception of women's participation in the *Resistenza* as an appendage to the armed struggle carried on primarily by men has been challenged by Italian historians Anna Bravo and Anna Maria Bruzzone, who asserted that

4 A literal translation of the name of the organization would be 'Groups for the defence of women and for assistance to the freedom fighters'. Postwar figures on women's participation in the *Gddd* and on the number of women who fought as partisans cannot be exact, given the clandestine nature of resistance in general and the fluidity with which some women moved between military and non-military activities. Most sources, however, agree essentially on the breakdown given in Table 1.

5 Victoria de Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women: Italy, 1922-1945* (Berkeley, CA 1992), 283, 285.

the actions of women constituted a unique form of resistance, ‘practicable in many more places and accessible to many more persons’, including mothers and old women.⁶ Mirna Cicioni called for a still more extensive approach — one that asked ‘how what we know about the involvement and the role of women changes what we know about the Resistance as a whole, namely, how the Resistance was affected, militarily and politically, by the participation of women’.⁷ Official *Gddd* documents, archival sources in Italy and the USA, interviews, and the writings of *Gddd* leaders Ada Gobetti and Bianca Guidetti Serra show that the *Gddd* did have a significant impact on individual and collective women’s consciousness and their perceptions of gender, and did set the stage for postwar advances regarding women. Moreover, a thorough analysis of the *Gddd* as a microcosm of the *Resistenza* as a whole sheds light on the tension between solidarity and autonomy that characterized the various anti-fascist elements of the *Resistenza* and reveals the complexity and plurality of this movement for liberation.

Under Benito Mussolini’s fascist regime of 1922–43, prospects for the emancipation of women disappeared and women’s right to work, access to the professions, and personal rights were curtailed significantly. Feminist groups were outlawed, except for those created by the fascists, which operated under strict state surveillance and regulation, or those connected with the Catholic Church. Although some women tried to resist, the fascist police apparatus was quite successful in eliminating opposition. During the 1930s, 235 Italian women were sent to prison for their anti-fascist activities by the Special Tribunal, serving a combined number of 1310 years; another 2690 were deported to remote locations for a collective total of 13,450 years.⁸ Others went into exile or operated underground until Mussolini’s fall from power on 24–25 July 1943.

On 8 September 1943, Mussolini’s successor, Pietro Badoglio, signed an armistice with the Allies, beginning the twenty-month period known as the *Resistenza*, which lasted until the end of April 1945. Immediately following the armistice, Germany sent forces across the Italian border and soon occupied all of northern and central Italy, including Rome and extending almost as far south as Naples. Mussolini, rescued from imprisonment by a German airlift on 12 September, set up a puppet government on 23 September that was officially named the Italian Socialist Republic, but called the Republic of Salò after the town on Lake Garda in the north where the former leader sought refuge. Badoglio fled south with the King to Bari; his government declared war on

6 Anna Bravo and Anna Maria Bruzzone, *In guerra senza armi: Storie di donne, 1940–1945* (At War without Arms: Stories of Women, 1940–1945) (Rome-Bari 1995), 27.

7 Mirna Cicioni, “In order to be considered we must first have fought”: Women in the Italian Resistance’ in Alastair Davidson and Steve Wright (eds), *Never Give In: The Italian Resistance and Politics* (New York 1998), 100.

8 Camilla Ravera, ‘La donna nella lotta contro il fascismo e per la democrazia’ (Women in the Struggle against Fascism and for Democracy), *Il Congresso di Parigi* (The Paris Congress), single issue edited by the *Federazione democratica internazionale delle donne* (March 1946), 13.

Germany on 13 October. In the meantime, leaders from anti-fascist parties including the Communist, Socialist, Christian Democratic, and Liberal Parties and the recently-formed Action Party, banded together in Rome under moderate socialist Ivanoe Bonomi to form the Committee of National Liberation (CLN) and unite in opposition to the Badoglio government. Each of these three governments claimed to be the true government of Italy. Although the British and the Americans recognized the Badoglio government, they also set up administrative units in areas they conquered and eventually established the Allied Control Commission (ACC). Following the lead of the CLN, similar liberation committees sprang up in other cities, most importantly the Committee of National Liberation of Northern Italy (CLNAI) in Milan. On 7 October, the CLNAI issued a 'Call to the Italians', which proclaimed:

Italians! Hitlerian Germany has menaced our country, revealing itself under its true guise as a greedy pillager. . . . Men and women, old and young, everyone must consider himself to be mobilized for the great common cause. . . . For our civilization, for the future of our children, let us resist the bullying of a tyranny that has already been condemned by history.⁹

Answering the CLNAI's call for resistance, a group of women activists met in Milan and created the *Gddd* on 28 November 1943. In their charter, they recognized the CLN as the official government of Italy: 'The *Gddd* recognize . . . in the CLN the guiding force of popular action and of independence and freedom against the Germans and the fascists and unite with [your organization] while declaring our complete independence from any party.' They described the dire situation and urged women to resist:

Italian women who have always opposed fascism . . . cannot remain inactive at this grave moment. The Hitlerian invasion makes a life that is already so difficult unbearable. It multiplies suffering and threatens new destruction. And a terrible winter is at the door. In the cities devastated by Hitler and Mussolini's war, houses have not been repaired and lack of fuel for heating and worn-out clothing and shoes expose us to the cold and to foul weather. Prices are rising dizzily . . . the barbarians steal and lay waste, ravage and kill. We cannot give in. We must fight for liberation.¹⁰

The *Gddd* used consciousness-raising, gender-specific rhetoric to incite participation by all women in their current activities and to remind them of their role in constructing a freer and more equitable postwar Italy: 'The women of Italy, companions in battle, are marshalling for the fight which the Italian people are conducting to save themselves from utter devastation and to hasten liberation, to reconstruct a country that is worn out, ruined by the fascist war, in order to build a new society under the sign of liberty, love and progress.'¹¹

9 'Appello agli Italiani: "La Germania hitleriana si è avventata sulla nostra patria", 7 October 1943' (Call to the Italians: Hitlerian Germany has Menaced our Homeland, 7 October 1943) in Giuseppe Bonfanti (ed.), *La Resistenza: documenti e testimonianze di storia contemporanea* (The Resistance: Documents and Testimonies of Contemporary History) (Brescia 1976), 84–5.

10 'Atto costitutivo programma d'azione dei Gdd, 11/43' (Charter and Programme of Action of the Women's Defence Groups, November 1943) in *I Gruppi di difesa della donna* (Rome 1995), 49.

11 'Atto Costitutivo', op. cit., 49.

According to Ada Gobetti and Bianca Guidetti Serra, the *Gddd* succeeded in attracting women from all walks of life — educated and uneducated; housewives, workers, clerks, intellectuals and peasants; those with strong political views and those without any political affiliation — bringing together ‘on one plane of absolute equality in danger and abilities . . . all women who wanted to fight for the liberation of Italy’.¹² Perhaps one reason stemmed from the nature of the *Resistenza* itself, which historian Anna Bravo said ‘acted like a complex matrix that brought together several sentiments: weariness of war, hatred for the Germans and the fascists; solidarity toward those who were in danger, and motivations that were purely political.’¹³ While it is true that the women of the *Gddd* were united in their desire to defeat the nazi-fascists, many would have to let go of former beliefs and modify personal allegiances in order to achieve solidarity in the political sense. The *Gddd* provided a point of convergence of past, present and future issues that concerned Italian women in 1943: past resentment toward a government and a society that placed women in a secondary position with respect to men; present anxieties over food and fuel shortages and the safety of husbands, fathers, brothers and sons; and future goals of emancipation and a larger role for women in the Italian political process. Their aspiration to complete political solidarity, however, was never realized.

The *Gddd* proposed a wide range of activities, appealed to a broad diversity of talents, offered participation on a large number of levels and encouraged activity in a variety of accessible venues. Their charter insisted that ‘Italian women must not put off liberating action’ and referred to the ‘common need that there be bread, peace and liberty’. It encouraged strikes, work stoppages, mass demonstrations and violent action. The charter also enumerated several immediate goals — an increase in food rations; lodging for families who were bombed out; heating fuel in anticipation of the fifth winter of war; clothing and shoes, particularly for children and prisoners; and hot school lunches. Organizers appealed to mothers: ‘One litre of milk, one piece of bread, one kilo of coal extorted from the enemy can mean the health of an Italian child.’ They also outlined the demands of working women, many of whom toiled for long hours in the factories of northern industrial cities such as Turin and Milan. Writers of the charter, while addressing the immediate need for increased salaries for women who were supporting entire families, also sought permanent changes in the workplace that would improve the lot of female workers long after the war was over:

They want equal pay for work equal to that of men; vacations that are sufficient and assistance during the period that precedes and follows childbirth; the chance to raise their own children, to see them learn a profession, and to know how to secure their own future; to

12 Ada Marchesini-Gobetti, ‘Ramoscelli di mimosa per la festa dell’ 8 Marzo’ (Twigs of Mimosa for the Feast of 8 March), *Paese Sera* (7 March 1951), 5. Bianca Guidetti Serra, interview by author, Turin, Italy, 13 October 2000.

13 Anna Bravo, introduction to *I Gruppi di difesa della donna*, op. cit., 7.

participate in professional instruction and to not be employed in factories and offices only in unskilled jobs; the chance to perform any kind of work and pursue learning in any school, with merit the only criteria for choice; to participate in the life of the company, in unions, in co-operatives and in local and national elective bodies; and democratic organization and mass control of local and national institutions of assistance for women and children and of the factories.¹⁴

Finally, the charter addressed the future: 'Italy liberated from the foreign invader, Italy redeemed from fascist oppression, must be the homeland of the people who inhabit it, who work there and build it. . . . In this new Italy women must live and collaborate toward a better life and [must be] made free and secure in their future.'¹⁵

Throughout their eighteen-month existence, the *Gddd* believed that women had a unique role to play in the *Resistenza* and afterwards. Their message reached women in many different ways: directives sent from the National Committee to the various Groups; reports transmitted from local and regional Groups to the National Committee; memoranda issued by Sectors and Committees; broadsheets posted in public places; leaflets stuffed into purses and mailboxes or left on buses and trams, and notices put up in factories. In all these activities, the women braved extreme danger, worked despite hunger and cold, and faced the possibility of arrest, torture or execution. Moreover, they had to operate in complete secrecy at all times.

Broadsheets tended to address the women of a particular locality, such as one urging women from Turin and the surrounding Piedmont area to join the battle for liberation:

Piedmontese women! Women of all classes! United in the struggle, let us render ourselves worthy by example, by assistance, and by sacrifice, of the heroic partisans who with arms in their hands are defending our land from the nazi and fascist barbarians. Let us develop and bring others into the *Gddd*.¹⁶

Another encouraged the women of Florence to 'come down onto the streets and piazzas in crowds and demand what every human being has the right to demand'. A third implored the women of Rome to 'descend in unified masses on the neighbourhoods where round-ups are being carried out' in order to defend their men.¹⁷ Given the strong regional differences in Italy, such appeals to women of a specific province or city addressed the distinct needs of that locality and gave them a point of reference even if they could not identify with Italian women in general. Moreover, these broadsheets vied with the nazi-

14 'Atto Costitutivo', op. cit., 49–50.

15 Ibid., 50.

16 File 2853, 'Appello alle donne Piedmontese per il rafforzamento dei Gruppi di difesa della donna e l'aiuto ai partigiani' (Call to the Piedmontese Women for the Reinforcement of the Women's Defence Groups and for Aid to the Partisans), Turin, n.d., Fondazione Giangiacomo Feltrinelli, Milan. Original location: Archivio del Partito Comunista Italiano, Rome.

17 Fasciolo 14, 'Gruppi di difesa della donna', Fondazione istituto Gramsci, Rome.

fascists for control over female public opinion, serving as a constant reminder of their dissenting voice.

Some messages spoke directly to housewives and mothers. In November 1944, the National Committee issued a directive urging 'all women, housewives . . . etc.' to action, since everyone was 'suffering from the restrictions imposed by the nazi-fascists'.¹⁸ In December 1944, housewives from Sector V in Milan announced: 'Everyone must make it their duty to recruit housewives, artisans, etc. into the *Gddd*, in order to militarize as many women as possible.' Their goals included 'instigating demonstrations for sugar, salt, milk and fuel' and 'identifying stockpiles of foodstuffs and fuel in order to confiscate them'. They hoped to 'attract mothers by interesting them in the safety of their children, asking that all schools be [located] far from military objectives'. They also tried to persuade mothers not to enrol their children in the *Balilla*, a fascist youth organization, and pledged to continue their work of 'assistance to victims and to the freedom fighters and their families'.¹⁹ On 18 January 1945, a group-wide directive appealed to women to fight food shortages through mass demonstrations:

While foodstuffs are disappearing from circulation they [the nazi-fascists] try to uphold the rumour that the food is missing because it is going to the mess halls. No! The food is missing because it is going to Germany

. . . Milk, sugar, salt, bread, wood, etc. are lacking. We need to present ourselves en masse before the mayor's office, before the prefecture, etc., to protest; we must demand that the ovens be ready to make bread and that housewives are not forced to spend hours in line in the snow.

While in line we must not wait passively for hours, but we must seize the occasion when a big crowd of women is gathered to instigate vigorous demonstrations.²⁰

In the same month, a directive to the Sector Committees of the *Gddd* in Milan stated: 'Our existence and that of our families is at stake; Italian women must show that they have blood in their veins and that they are not disposed to let their families die of hunger and cold.'²¹

While on the surface these appeals might seem to address only current needs for food and fuel, their rhetoric attacking Italians as well as Germans had political ramifications. Typically, the prefect and mayor of occupied cities and towns were Italian officials acting in collaboration with the Germans. By using the term 'nazi-fascist', *Gddd* leaders emphasized that Italians contributed to food shortages, essentially starving their own people. These appeals called on women to assume a political role by presenting their demands before Italian

18 'Prepararsi al duro inverno, 11/44' (Prepare for a Hard Winter, November 1944) in *I Gruppi di difesa della donna*, op. cit., 77.

19 'Casalinghe del V Settore di Milano, 12/44' (Housewives of Sector V of Milan, December 1944) in *I Gruppi di difesa della donna*, op. cit., 80.

20 'Salari, indennità, viveri, 18/1/45' (Salaries, Compensation, Foodstuffs, 18 January 1945) in *I Gruppi di difesa della donna*, op. cit., 80.

21 'Il Carbone e il Lardo, 1/45' (Coal and Lard, January 1945) in *I Gruppi di difesa della donna*, op. cit., 92.

officials, thus exerting pressure on local government. They encouraged women to act collectively, leading them from private concerns for their individual families to public protests as groups of women.

Bianca Guidetti Serra's book *Compagne* dealt primarily with another category of women who became active in the *Gddd* — women of the proletariat who toiled in the factories, worked as shop-girls or clerks or laboured at home as tailors, dressmakers or embroiderers. She argued that the contribution of these women to the liberation was neither isolated nor accidental; many came from families with a tradition of social activism. Of the 51 women from Turin she interviewed, most were communists. Poor and relatively uneducated, these women suffered because of low salaries, long hours and a sometimes dangerous work environment. They did not receive the same compensation as men for the same work, even if they were heads of households. Moreover, their bonus for the birth of a child was lower (Table 2).²²

TABLE 2
Standard for the birth allowance 14 April 1939

Category of skill of the insured	Amount of allowance (in lire)	
	Men	Women
Employees/clerks	1000	700
Labourers, excluding agricultural workers	700	500
Agricultural workers and those belonging to sharecropper and farming families	500	400

Some recalled the activism of pre-fascist times, particularly September 1920, when workers occupied the factories in Turin and Milan. Others participated in strikes on 5 March 1943 that began in Turin and soon spread to other northern cities. By forming groups within the *Gddd*, these factory workers could fight to improve working conditions for women, relying on traditional mechanisms for opposing management such as the work stoppage and the strike, while openly demanding specific changes for the female workforce. One *Gddd* Committee encouraged female factory workers to fight the ten lire reduction in pay instituted by the nazi-fascist bosses, citing the example of women from the Bertelli factory who stopped work for one hour in protest: 'This is the moment for the *Gddd*. This is the moment when our young but strong organization can demonstrate that it is up to performing its duty of leading all Italian women workers.'²³

According to Guidetti Serra, the *Gddd* also demanded that they be represented in the Committees of Agitation, underground unions that sprang up in the factories when the Germans took over. An article in *Noi donne*, official

22 'Article 23, *Regio decreto legge* (Royal Decree Law) 14 April 1939' in *Donne e Diritto: Due secoli di legislazione* (Women and the Law: Two Centuries of Legislation) (Rome 1988), 1479.

23 'Salari, indennità, viveri', op. cit., 80.

newspaper of the *Gddd*, stated: 'Our goal is that in every Committee of Agitation, in every Committee of National Liberation, there be one of our representatives.'²⁴ Guidetti Serra became such a representative. The Committees of Agitation served an important function not only in stirring up resistance in the factories, but also in slowing the German war effort. The Germans, who had taken over management of many factories, wanted production to continue in places like Fiat in Turin so that they could manufacture cars and other equipment to send to Germany.²⁵ (Allied Control Commission records indicate 'the Fiat works were making five hundred cars a month for the Germans'.)²⁶ Women's influence on the Committees of Agitation also proved fruitful for concerns particular to women. The Piedmont Committee of Agitation, for example, agreed that widows and other women who had people in their care should receive 'head of household' status. The women viewed this decision on the part of the male-dominated Committee as 'a victory for the feminine masses' that clearly indicated 'the weight and influence that the Piedmontese women exercised on clandestine organizations in the fight for liberation'.²⁷

The National Committee of the *Gddd* urged the women of Italy to unite with women in other countries in the cause of peace and justice by observing International Women's Day on 8 March 1944, the first time this occasion had been celebrated in Italy in more than 20 years: 'Celebrated for the first time during the 1914–1918 war, this day has been a cry of protest launched by thousands and thousands of women who are united so that the world will not ever have to repeat the horrors and the carnage.'²⁸ They suggested that the day be commemorated by meetings at which the meaning of the day would be illustrated; by demonstrations against hunger, cold and violence; by increased efforts to recruit more women into the *Gddd*; by displaying photographs of heroines who had 'fallen for the liberation of the Homeland' and by pilgrimages to the graves of these women, where flowers and tricolour flags would be placed on their tombs.²⁹ A broadsheet addressed to Piedmontese women encouraged them to celebrate this feast because it was a day when women of all civilized countries celebrated 'their conquests in social, political and economic life'. Then it went on to say that by taking part in the war of liberation, Italian

24 'Lo sciopero a Milano' (The Strike in Milan) *Noi Donne — Edizione Torinese* (November 1944).

25 Bianca Guidetti Serra, interview by author, Turin, Italy, 13 October 2000.

26 Letter from No. 5 Detachment, No. 1 Special Force, to the Commander of No. 1 Special Force regarding a report received from the British Liaison Officer in Southern Piedmont who visited Turin on 17 November 1944; Declassified; Record Group (RG) 331 (Allied Operational and Occupation Headquarters, World War II), Indicator 10,000 (ACC Headquarters), Sub-indicator 125 (Patriots Branch); National Archives at College Park, Maryland (NACP).

27 *La Difesa della Lavoratrice: Organo dei Gdd Torinesi* (Defence of the Female Worker: Organ of the Turinese Women's Defence Groups), 29 January 1945.

28 '8 Marzo giornata di lotte per le donne' (8 March, A Day of Battles for Women), *La Difesa della Lavoratrice — Edizione straordinaria* (8 March 1945).

29 L'8 Marzo nelle zone ancora occupate, 2/45 (8 March in the Areas that are Still Occupied, February 1945) in *I Gruppi di difesa della donna*, op. cit., 98.

women 'entered the political life of the country'.³⁰ The celebration of 8 March, made more poignant by the symbolic yellow mimosa flowers and tricolour flags that accompanied it, served as a consciousness-raising function for many women who had never commemorated the occasion before. In addition, the feast emphasized solidarity with women throughout the world and empowered the women of Italy with the strength that such awareness provided.

On 27 July 1944, the CLNAI formally recognized the *Gddd*. In a letter to the CLN of Milan, the Provincial Committee of the *Gddd* of Milan wrote: 'The approval and recognition on the part of the CLNAI is a coveted reward for the efforts that the young organization has been making to mobilize the feminine masses in the insurrectional fight, to chase away the Germans and the fascists from Italy.' The Provincial Committee added: 'In the last two months our members have more than doubled and numerous new Groups have emerged.' It used the occasion to ask for 'concrete help' in the form of 'a monthly subsidy . . . for technical equipment and typing materials'. It emphasized the important activities of the women, who were 'organizing themselves in the struggle'. Most importantly, the Provincial Committee demanded more than mere recognition: 'In consideration of the development reached by the organization, this Provincial Committee deems it opportune that it be represented by its delegates at the heart of the CLN.'³¹ On 16 October 1944, the CLN responded with the 'Act of Recognition of the *Gddd*', stating that it appreciated the results obtained up until then 'in the field of mobilization of women for the fight for national liberation' and recognized the *Gddd* as 'a member organization of the Committee of National Liberation'.³² In January 1945, the national management of the *Gddd* used such recognition to encourage women living in areas then controlled by the partisans to continue their fight: 'The unified activity performed by the *Gddd* that has merited their recognition by the CLNAI as an organization of the masses must not cease in the liberated areas, but must reinforce itself with new possibilities for work and for expansion.'³³ Such directives show that the women's organization planned to have a role after liberation.

The *Gddd* also made direct contact with the women of France. Ada Gobetti, who learned French as a young girl (before the fascists discouraged foreign language education in the schools), set out on a mission to Grenoble, where she contacted the women of the *Union des femmes françaises* (Union of French Women or *Uff*). On 2 March 1945, she wrote to the *Gddd* that the results of

30 Personal papers of Bianca Guidetti Serra.

31 'Riconoscimento da parte del CLNAI, 2/8/44' (Recognition on the Part of the CLNAI, 8 August 1944) in *I Gruppi di difesa della donna*, op. cit., 58.

32 'Atto di riconoscimento dei Gruppi di difesa della donna, 16 ottobre 1944' in Gaetano Grassi and Guido Quazza (eds), *Verso il governo del popolo: Atti e documenti del CLNAI, 1943/1946* (Toward a Government of the People: Acts and Documents of the CLNAI, 1943/1946) (Milan 1977), 195.

33 'Nelle zone controllate dalle forze partigiane, 1/45' (In the Areas Controlled by the Partisan Forces, January 1945) in *I Gruppi di difesa della donna*, op. cit., 90.

her trip were satisfactory both from an informational point of view and in terms of propaganda. Gobetti noted that of the many women's groups in France, the *Uff* most resembled the *Gddd* because of their 'completely new and revolutionary character'. She attended meetings held by the French women who sought her advice and invited her to speak. After her meetings in Grenoble, Gobetti wrote to the national secretary of the *Uff* in Paris, explaining the activities of the *Gddd* and paving the way for 'close co-operation in the future'.³⁴

The claim to unity and non-partisanship on the part of the *Gddd* was more of an ideal than reality. As time progressed, the strong communist presence in the *Gddd* caused women members who were not communists to form organizations affiliated with their parties and create their own newspapers as a way of asserting their individuality. The *Movimento femminile 'Giustizia e Libertà'* (Women's Movement for 'Justice and Liberty' or *Mfjgl*), founded by Action Party leaders Ada Gobetti, Frida Malan, Silvia Pons and Ada Della Torre, was one such organization. Malan, who worked with Gobetti on *La Nuova Realtà*, wrote of the secret meetings they held to discuss problems of women and to prepare them for the time of liberation:

For me, that period was worth ten lives for what I learned
 . . . The *Resistenza* was not only a heroic period for men and women who consciously enrolled in the partisan army, but was also a school for civic education
 . . . everything that was finest in each one of us appeared during that period. This explains why even in the field of feminist claims to rights, everything that has been achieved up to now in our country was already thought about, discussed, wished for and proposed by women who at that moment in many different ways concerned themselves and worried about the situation while always keeping the future in mind, and for whom the period of partisan struggle was only a conscious, intelligent and courageous preparation.³⁵

Malan participated in the demonstration staged by the *Gddd* at the funeral of the Arduino sisters. Gobetti became a member of the secretariat of the *Gddd* in Milan during the summer of 1944. As membership of the *Gddd* increased throughout the *Resistenza*, much of this success was in part due to its ability to maintain a federation of loosely-connected and diverse groups rather than insist on a rigid hierarchy or commitment to a single ideology, as recognition by the CLN might imply.

Guidetti Serra, who studied five clandestine women's newspapers printed in Turin during the *Resistenza*, said that they reflected both the opinions and the courage of the women who created them (Table 3). She described the difficulty of printing, which had to be done at night, in abandoned buildings, without heat or light, and with whatever equipment they could find. Moreover, they

34 Ada Gobetti, Grenoble, to her colleagues in the *Gddd*, 2 March 1945, Centro studi Piero Gobetti, Turin, Fondo Ada Gobetti.

35 Frida Malan, 'La Donna nella Resistenza' (Women in the Resistance) in *Aspetti dell'attività femminile in Piemonte negli ultimi cento anni: 1861-1961* (Aspects of Women's Activity in Piedmont in the Last One Hundred Years) (Turin 1963), 3-4.

TABLE 3
Clandestine women's newspapers in Turin, 1944–45

Name	Date of first issue	Affiliation
<i>Noi Donne</i> (We Women)	May 1944	<i>Gddd</i>
<i>La Compagna</i> (The Comrade)	August 1944	Socialist Party
<i>La Difesa della Lavoratrice</i> (Defence of the Woman Worker)	October 1944	<i>Gddd</i>
<i>In Marcia</i> (On the March)	November 1944	Christian Democratic Party
<i>La Nuova Realtà</i> (The New Reality)	February 1945	Women's Movement for 'Justice and Liberty'

worked amidst frequent bombings and were often hungry.³⁶ Articles demonstrate that women looked beyond their current circumstances to a postwar Italy in which they would make a significant contribution. In the first issue of *La Nuova Realtà*, an article entitled 'La donna e la nuova vita' (Women and the New Life) spoke of women's responsibilities with respect to the 'serious and delicate task of reconstruction'. Writers encouraged women to look beyond personal egotistical interests, stating that nothing was more important than 'the formation of a political consciousness in each one of us'.³⁷ A teacher writing for *In Marcia* discussed women's role in the postwar world: 'A huge effort awaits us all after the war . . . but more than anything [it is a question of] reconstructing the Italian people.'³⁸ As Guidetti Serra pointed out, the newspapers reflected women's twofold struggle: the fight for the liberty of Italy and the fight for the liberty of women.³⁹

On 7 April 1945, the Psychological Warfare Branch of the Italian Theatre Headquarters issued a report whose purpose was to 'give a picture of the clandestine newspapers printed and circulated in enemy-occupied Italy'. The report recognized *Noi Donne* as the newspaper of the *Gddd*, stating that 'publications relating to women and to feminine partisan activity as a whole' also had a place in occupied Italy. The article summarized the work of the *Gddd* as of December 1944:

The organization, from the first small initial nucleus, had gathered in about 30,000 women, and this figure was still steadily increasing . . . The members are of all political trends and of every religious creed . . . have been present in all the struggles, strikes, and agitations against the raids and deportations on the part of the nazis, and have reacted in every way against all forms of enemy violence. . . . The Women's Defence Groups work in aid of thousands of families who have suffered through the reactionary movement.⁴⁰

36 Bianca Guidetti Serra, interview by author, Turin, 23 October 2000.

37 'La donna e la nuova vita', *La Nuova Realtà*, 27 February 1945, 1.

38 'Ricostruire' (Reconstruct), *In Marcia* (November 1944).

39 Bianca Guidetti Serra, 'Quello che scrivevano le donne della resistenza sui loro giornali' (What Women in the Resistance Wrote in their Newspapers) in Laura Derossi (ed.), *Il Voto alle donne, 1945* (Milan 1998), 102.

40 Supplement to Special Report on Clandestine Press in Enemy-Occupied Italy Dated 13

This report, part of the records of the Allied Control Commission, shows that British and American officials were aware of the contributions which women in the *Gddd* were making to the *Resistenza*. Moreover, the circulation of *Noi Donne* must have been sufficiently large to attract the attention of the Allied military organization.

Keeping women active in areas under partisan control was another concern for the *Gddd* by January 1945. The National Committee issued a lengthy directive aimed not only at drawing in more women to participate in the actions of the *Gddd* but also at preparing a place for women in postwar politics. Leaders encouraged 'female participation in the administrative organs of government' through 'the promotion of public assemblies and meetings' where the 'aspirations and needs felt by women' would be 'set forth and made visible'. This was done as a 'way to popularize the programme and activities of the *Gddd*' in order to 'affirm publicly' their wish to 'elevate the social and cultural level of the Italian woman by putting her on a level to perform the tasks assigned to her tomorrow by the democratic government of the country.' The National Committee declared:

Our directors must take on the task of regrouping the feminine masses in the *Gddd* with the intention of bringing them to a clearer political consciousness and to an active interest in all of the questions that concern them particularly, as women, mothers, workers, etc., and in a general way as Italians in the fight against the same nazi-fascist oppressors.⁴¹

A questionnaire mailed to the provincial managers of the *Gddd* by the National Committee in Milan gives us some idea of the organization of the *Gddd*, the grassroots nature of their formation and the problems they encountered. The National Committee stated that they were 'learning every day about the existence of new local organizations', an indication that groups formed spontaneously, often without a directive from the national organization. Questions concerned relationships with 'anti-fascist political currents' and local CLNs; communication between the provincial management and individual groups; newspapers published by the local groups; the collection of membership fees and the approximate number of women influenced by the *Gddd*.⁴² Problems centred on difficulties in managing the unwieldy and growing organization. Documents from the file on the *Gddd* at the Gramsci Institute in Rome reveal that some committees within the *Gddd* were organized according to task, such as the *Comitato fucilario* that took in the wounded and buried the bodies of victims; others, like the *Comitato dei gruppi femminili Giustizia e Libertà* were arranged according to political persuasion.⁴³

February 1945; 7 April 1945; Italian Theatre Headquarters Psychological Warfare Branch, Unit 12, APO 512; Declassified; RG 331, 10,000/125; NACP.

41 'Nelle zone controllate dalle forze partigiane', op. cit., 90.

42 'Questionario sui Gdd, 1/27/45' (Questionnaire concerning the Women's Defence and Assistance Groups, 27 January 1945) in *I Gruppi di difesa della donna*, op. cit., 83.

43 Fasciolo 14, 'Gruppi di difesa della donna', Fondazione istituto Gramsci, Rome.

The very organizational structure of the Groups and their sub-units helped women to see their common problems and to become conscious of how they could derive strength from collective action.

In February 1945, a document issued by the *Gddd* announced that the government of free Italy recognized women's right to vote, stating that it was a right that they had 'earned by participating in all of the popular fights against Germans and fascists and taking an active part in the war for national liberation'. All women were included in the rhetoric: 'Workers, clerks, professionals, housewives, farmers, and all women will no longer only be executors of orders, but they too will collaborate with the State in all branches of its activity.' Women were charged with the resultant responsibility as well: 'But the acquisition of rights always carries responsibilities with it. The Italian woman must now prepare herself to perform new tasks that are awaiting her.'⁴⁴ In the document, the *Gddd* did not directly claim credit for achieving the right to vote for women. Instead, it emphasized the responsibility that voting entailed, thus instructing women to continue their fight for equal rights and prove that they would be a constant force to be reckoned with in the future.

In parts of Italy already liberated, the *Gddd* came under the rubric of the newly-formed *Unione donne italiane* (Union of Italian Women or *Udi*) whose mission to unite all Italian women demonstrated that their work had 'value not only during the fight for liberation' but would be continued and extended 'in the phase of democratic reconstruction of the country'. The formation of *Udi* provided a bridge between the *Gddd* and the postwar world, giving participants a women's organization in which they could continue their work after the liberation.⁴⁵ By February 1945, however, Christian Democratic women had formally withdrawn from the *Gddd*, under pressure from Church leaders. They gave their loyalties not to *Udi* but to another women's organization, the *Centro italiano femminile* (Centre of Italian Women or *Cif*). While fractures in the women's organizations precluded a unified front after the war, the establishment of the *Gddd*, *Udi* and *Cif* still enabled women to join together to express their political voice.

In 1964, Gobetti gave a speech entitled 'Why did we call them Women's Defence Groups?' at a convention celebrating the twentieth anniversary of the birth of *Udi*. A well-known women's rights activist by 1964, Gobetti had served as president of the Turin *Udi* after the war and as the *Udi* representative at women's conventions for peace in Paris in 1945 and 1946. Yet she admitted her naiveté regarding the problems of women when she first participated in the *Gddd*, and her 'almost negative reaction' to the words 'defence', 'assistance' and 'women' in the name of the organization:

44 'Il Governo dell' Italia Libera riconosce il diritto di voto alle donne, 2/45' (The Government of Free Italy Recognizes Women's Right to Vote, February 1945) in *I Gruppi di difesa della donna*, op. cit., 97.

45 'Nelle zone controllate dalle forze partigiane', op. cit., 90.

Many women arrived at the *Resistenza* with a more mature conscience. Although I had an anti-fascist tradition behind me . . . I arrived [at the *Resistenza*] intimately wanting. I had a fairly good intellectual preparation, but very little real experience. . . . With respect to emancipation, in those months I followed a path that was opposite to that pursued by many women; that is, I moved from an abstract and intellectual concept of equality and emancipation for women to an authentic and concrete understanding of that reality
 . . . In my abstract vision of reality I saw a single battle that brought together men and women for the same goals. . . . But it only took a few months, perhaps a few weeks, to understand very well the significance and importance of those words. . . . Why 'defence'? Precisely because as the specific creator of life, woman is more prone, even more than man, to defend it. Why 'assistance'? Because . . . fundamentally maternal, woman sees in the field of assistance one of her principal expressions. And why 'woman'? Because woman has in herself qualities, virtues and possibilities . . . that until then she was not aware of and that instead had to be developed in the great creative virtues of a different world.⁴⁶

Gobetti's words appear to echo de Grazia's observation that 'women were constrained to articulate their demands in terms of the roles in which they had been cast under fascist rule, as mothers, nurturers, and providers'.⁴⁷ Yet Gobetti argued that many used maternity to try to keep women 'in their place' during the war, or at least to return them to that place after the liberation. She warned of those who used maternity 'as a means to pull woman behind in the battle in order to shut her up in their world'. But she provided a new twist to the concept of maternity, claiming it as a value that women should give to society and as a way for women to enter the public sphere. As women essentially 'came out of themselves' in order to give life, they too would use this 'giving' quality to enter the world outside the home, give of themselves, affirm their gender and improve their society. Very soon after she became involved in the *Gddd*, Gobetti began to dream of a world where women's 'virtues could be truly affirmed' in which 'women's strength did not have to be spent in an effort to conform, make her equal to that of men, but . . . in accordance with these new strengths that were maturing in the heat of battle'. As an illustration, Gobetti compared two meetings she attended in March 1945. The first was with a group of anti-fascists who would be among the leadership of Turin after the war ended, whom she described as 'good people, very honest, able, incorruptible anti-fascists'. Yet she observed:

When we began to talk about problems we might encounter in the future, I saw come to the surface again the mentality of yesterday, the mentality of that world before fascism to which these persons were predisposed in their attitudes and in their ideas. They tended toward a return to yesterday, while we were all stretching toward the world of tomorrow.⁴⁸

Worried and disappointed, she set out for her other appointment with a female worker from the Mirafiori plant named Nuccia, who was to report to Gobetti about activities of the partisans in a valley outside Turin. Gobetti depicted Nuccia's 'eyes full of light' as she spoke:

46 Gobetti, 'Ma perchè li chiamammo Gruppi di difesa?', op. cit., 37–8.

47 De Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women*, op. cit., 278.

48 Gobetti, 'Ma perchè li chiamammo Gruppi di difesa?', op. cit., 38.

I heard in her words the world of tomorrow. She told me what she did and what she wanted to do . . . with that wish to give everything in order to receive everything and to receive everything to give everything again, that was in those days the strength and the beauty of our women.⁴⁹

Like Gobetti, Guidetti Serra also objected at first to the word ‘assistance’ in the Groups’ title. A young, militant communist who wanted to be at the vanguard of the fight for liberation in 1943, she had no interest in social welfare work. Many years later, she grew to appreciate the value of assistance, not only for the material comfort it provided to those in need but also for its role in attracting average women, particularly housewives, to the political activism of the *Gddd*.⁵⁰ Women who had never been involved outside the home could improve difficult conditions by acting collectively. Recognition by male-dominated organizations such as the CLN, the CLNAI and the Committees of Agitation during the *Resistenza* encouraged women to demand a just place in political and social organizations after the war. Thus, through activities related to the *Gddd*, women gained a sense of empowerment for the first time.

Many women who had been in the *Gddd* or in affiliated organizations such as the *Mfgl* during the *Resistenza* remained involved in politics and the fight for women’s rights after the war. In April 1945, members of the Action Party asked Gobetti to represent them as deputy mayor of Turin. Guidetti Serra, a distinguished attorney, brought the first case for equal pay for equal work to the civil court in Turin and became a member of the Turin City Council. She continues to write and practise law today. Malan also served on the Turin City Council and as President of the Regional Commission for Equal Opportunity in Piedmont. Participating in the *Resistenza* helped Malan to choose her life’s goals, one of which was ‘to study the laws in every field that prohibited women from so many things’.⁵¹ She told me that her time in the *Resistenza* was the most important in her life and that her tombstone would bear the words *Partigiana combattente*.⁵² On 2 June 1946, 21 women were elected to the constituent assembly, 11 of whom were members of *Udi*. By the 1950s, both *Udi* and the *Cif* had over one million members.⁵³

Although the evidence confirms that the *Gddd* had a significant role in preparing Italian women for political participation, several reasons account for their omission from most historical scholarship regarding postwar Italy and their near absence in the collective memory of the Italian people. First, with its strong communist presence, the *Gddd* suffered the fate of the *Resistenza* as a whole during the Cold War, particularly after the communists and socialists were expelled from the government in 1947 and former fascists

49 Ibid.

50 Bianca Guidetti Serra, interview by author, Turin, Italy, 23 October 2000.

51 Frida Malan, ‘Una generazione senza riposo’ (A Generation without Repose) in Derossi, (ed.), *Il Voto alle donne, 1945*, op. cit., 171.

52 Frida Malan, interview by author, Turin, Italy, 16 November 2000.

53 Jane Slaughter, *Women and the Italian Resistance: 1943–1945* (Denver, CO 1997), 125.

joined the ranks of the Christian Democrats in power. By reducing resistance to the nazi-fascists to a communist conspiracy, political leaders could avoid a thorough analysis of the complexities of the *Resistenza* and minimize its potential to effect lasting change in Italian society. Second, by encouraging Italian women to leave the public sphere and return to caring for their families, Italian politicians, Church leaders and even leftist party leaders could garner the support of traditional Italians who longed to return to the pre-fascist status quo. Third, while many women aspired to unified action, which members of *Udi* in particular thought was possible without forsaking party loyalties, their male colleagues held the power to impose political divisions. Therefore, they were able to minimize a collective female effort that might have given women a greater voice in Italian politics. Finally, although the democratic constitution of the new Republic of Italy, effective from 1 January 1948, guaranteed women equality, it did not succeed in translating that guarantee into practice. It took the women of *Udi* until 1958 to have a law passed closing state brothels and until 1963 to have another passed giving women access to all the professions.

On the eve of 8 March 1951, almost six years after the liberation, Ada Gobetti called on all the women of Italy to continue their struggle for peace and women's rights:

War is not inevitable. If women knew how to unite, as they knew how to unite in the battle for liberation, rising above any social, religious or political difference, to fight together against destruction and massacre and to work together in an industrious harmony, the face of the earth could well be changed. This is the call of 8 March: above any differences all unite to save the peace. May the gentle twig of mimosa the colour of the sun that will adorn the streets and the houses of Italy in these days remind women — and not only women — of this fundamental responsibility.⁵⁴

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54 Gobetti, 'Ramoscelli di mimosa per la festa dell' 8 Marzo', op. cit., 5.