

Working together for our children's future: Ada Gobetti's promotion of the personal and the political in Italian female resistance groups, 1943-1945

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"I never said, 'I'm doing it for myself, for my future.' At best I said, 'let me save this one, he's a mother's son just like mine,' my hope being that somebody would treat my own with the same care."¹

Acting against social injustice was the motivation of many female interviewees when they joined the Italian Resistance in 1943. In contrast, male resistance members of the Italian Partisan movement commonly justified their resistance actions in political terms.² Regardless of whether they engaged in armed or civil resistance, all Italian partisans were fighting to drive out the World War II German Nazi-fascist occupiers of Northern Italy and Mussolini's Nazi-fascist Republic of Salò. At the height of the Italian Resistance, in early 1945, an estimated 120,000 women participated in resistance activities.³ Women's roles included armed resistance, providing shelter and clothing to deserting Italian soldiers, delivering messages, newspapers, propaganda and weapons, nursing the sick and wounded, knitting garments, supplying partisan bands with food and clothing, and joining female resistance organisations.⁴ Historians have recently recognised a need for the dominant 'masculine' historiography of the resistance to recognise the role women partisans in the 'unarmed resistance', including the achievements of Women's Defence Groups

¹ Victoria de Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women: Italy, 1922-1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), p. 285.

² Perry Willson, *Women in Twentieth-Century Italy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 105.

³ Ada Gobetti, *Partisan Diary: A Woman's Life in the Italian Resistance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 14.

⁴ Willson, *Women in Twentieth-Century Italy*, p. 105.

created during the resistance.⁵ In 1943 anti-fascist female resistance organisations were created, including the Women's Defence and Assistance Groups (Gddd) by Communist party women, and the affiliated Women's Movement of 'Justice and Liberty' (Mfgl) by Action Party women. The Action Party was formed in 1942 by the militant anti-fascist 'Justice and Liberty', a movement originating in the 1920s.⁶ Both the Gddd and Mfgl were founded by collaborative females to co-ordinate, strengthen and enhance the collective efforts of Italian women working towards liberation and beyond.

In comparison with the wider European feminist movement, the Italian feminist movement has been perceived as stalling during the time Mussolini rose to power in 1922 until the German Nazi-fascists were expelled in 1945.⁷ During Mussolini's rule, women were encouraged to join fascist women's groups of the Fasci Femminili (FF).⁸ These mass female organisations were subject to state regulation and surveillance, and mobilised administrative and welfare activities of mostly middle class women.⁹ Female identification with an idealised traditional domestic role of women as wives, mothers and future mothers, occurred in Italy in the uncertain economic and political times of the fascist and resistance periods.¹⁰ For example, members of the FF Section for Female Workers and Outworkers, were subject to propaganda combined with practical training on domestic and maternal skills.¹¹ The subsequent resistance period has been described as a turbulent time when goals of liberation and communal solidarity took precedence over individual rights for women.¹² It has logically been argued that due to conflict and chaos,

⁵ Anna Bravo, "Armed and unarmed: struggles without weapons in Europe and in Italy," *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 10(4) 2005: p. 474.

⁶ Jomarie Alano, "Armed with a Yellow Mimosa: Women's Defence and Assistance Groups in Italy, 1943-45," *Journal of Contemporary History* 38 (2003): p. 616; Charles Delzell, *Mussolini's Enemies: The Italian Anti-Fascist Resistance* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961), p. xxii.

⁷ Willson, *Women in Twentieth-Century Italy*, p. 79.

⁸ Perry Willson, "Italian Fascism and the Political Mobilisation of Working-Class Women 1937-43," *Contemporary European History* 22 (2013): p. 65.

⁹ Perry Willson, "Women in Fascist Italy", in *Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany: comparisons and contrasts*, ed. Richard Bessel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 80; Willson, "Italian Fascism and the Political Mobilisation of Working-Class Women 1937-43," p. 78.

¹⁰ Koonz, "The 'Woman Question' in Authoritarian Regimes," p. 484.

¹¹ Willson, "Italian Fascism and the Political Mobilisation of Working-Class Women 1937-43," p. 71.

¹² Koonz, "The 'Woman Question' in Authoritarian Regimes," p. 484.

combined with long-standing subordination of feminist goals to more immediate exigencies, anti-fascist female resistance did not constitute a formulated response to “Fascism’s misogyny”.¹³ Similar historiographical arguments have arisen, that female critiques of male supremacy and gender constructions did not arise as a consequence of female resistance.¹⁴ This view, that feminist goals were lost in the urgency of resistance tasks,¹⁵ has relatively recently been challenged. Research on official documents of the Italian Gddd, including interviews and archival sources, indicate that post-war advances for women, such as being granted the right to vote in 1945,¹⁶ were due to the Gddd’s “significant impact on individual and collective women’s consciousness and their perceptions of gender.”¹⁷ The promotion of the personal and the political self-understanding in female Gddd members will be argued in this essay. Evidence will be obtained from a firsthand account kept by a highly active Gddd leader, Ada Gobetti, largely written during the Italian Resistance. It is expected that a close analysis of Ada’s diary as a case study may indicate possible motivations of Ada, and other women, for joining the Resistance and the Gddd, and also whether their feminist consciousness was raised through anti-fascist activities.

Ada Gobetti (1902–1968) was a women’s rights activist, politician, educator and translator. Ada’s activities, values and political views are recorded in her autobiographical memoir *Partisan Diary: A Woman’s Life in the Italian Resistance*.¹⁸ *Partisan Diary* was first published in Italian in Turin in 1956, before being published again in 1996. In 2014 an English translation by Jomarie Alano was published. Ada’s diary describes in rich prose her partisan experiences, successes and reflections, and the partisan activities of her eighteen-year-old son Paolo, her second husband Ettore Marchesini, and many other colleagues and friends. It is set in northern Italy, in the area surrounding homes occupied by Ada and her family in Turin and Meana, in the

¹³ Willson, “Women in Fascist Italy,” p. 84.

¹⁴ De Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women*, p. 285.

¹⁵ De Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women*, p. 283.

¹⁶ Alano, “Armed with a Yellow Mimosa”, p. 628.

¹⁷ Jomarie Alano, “Armed with a Yellow Mimosa,” p. 617.

¹⁸ Ada Gobetti, *Partisan Diary: A Woman’s Life in the Italian Resistance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

Piedmont region. This region is surrounded by the Alps and has borders with France with Switzerland. Ada's communications within partisan circles and her travels for the anti-fascist cause were extensive. A strong maternal love and compassion for others is evident in Ada's writing, together with her incredible memory for detail and a staunch pragmatism.

Ada Gobetti immediately started partisan activity when the German occupation began. For Ada, stepping into this role was a natural extension of her previous anti-fascist resistance during Mussolini's twenty-year rule. Her anti-fascist political stance originated in the 1920s whilst witnessing the Italian fascist state initiate totalitarian control over the citizens and workers of Turin. A further influence on Ada's anti-fascism was her late husband Piero Gobetti. Piero, an intellectual with liberal-democratic principles, had published articles that militantly protested against fascism. Within two years of being attacked by a squadron of Fascists outside his Turin home in 1924, Piero died as an exile in Paris in his early twenties.¹⁹ Ada and her teenage son Paolo were therefore politically and personally motivated against fascism well before the Nazi occupation. Her diary is sprinkled with many references to motherhood and her own maternal instincts. For example, whilst watching houses being burned by Germans, Ada considered the pain aroused in children at the scene to be an "unpardonable offense".²⁰ When caring for a young partisan called Sergio, Ada remained by his bedside thinking about his mother and "the cruelty of this war that even puts children at risk".²¹ Invasion of Italy by the Nazis brought a new fascist enemy for Ada to resist, and she was determined to protect families including her own. She did so by transforming her personal determination into a political quest that involved setting up the Mfgl and later joining the Gddd, whilst also working closely with male resistance leaders, travelling, attending meetings, translating, report writing, and recruiting new female supporters.

¹⁹ Gobetti, *Partisan Diary*, p. 4.

²⁰ Gobetti, *Partisan Diary*, p. 156.

²¹ Gobetti, *Partisan Diary*, p. 141.

In December 1943 Ada was asked to work in the Gddd (Women's Defence and Assistance Groups) by a communist woman named Rosetta. At this time, Ada had concerns about including the words 'assistance' and 'defence' in the organisation's title. She thought it would be simpler to name it 'volunteers for liberty'. However, after reading a draft leaflet Ada understood why women's rights were not specifically addressed:

I began to understand what "work among women" might mean today. It is a question of speaking a language that would best appeal to women's qualities because, while affirming a theoretical equality, it was necessary to recognise the existence of profound differences that create diverse sensitivities, interests, and impulses.²²

The leaflet was a form of propaganda about the need for women to work together during the crisis of occupation. The females exposed to this recruitment method were asked to personally identify with the need to help 'the boys in the mountains' by undertaking acts of unarmed 'civilian resistance'.²³ The female leaders of the Gddd were aware that compliance with a small personal request to assist the partisans had the potential to ultimately lead to a firm future political commitment. In this way, the leaders were seeking to merge an accessible personal perspective with their political goals over an extended period of time. The underlying political nature of Gddd activity is evidenced by Ada's discovery of the political power of the personal, and her description of women gaining a sense of empowerment through collective assistance:

Nothing convinces someone of the goodness of a cause more than working for it. A woman who has been indifferent up until now but who has made a pair of socks for the boys in the mountains – it will not be difficult to convince her to do this – will be committed and bound to her battle and will be predisposed to face much more serious responsibilities tomorrow.²⁴

²² Gobetti, *Partisan Diary*, p. 59.

²³ Bravo, "Armed and unarmed", pp. 468-484.

²⁴ Gobetti, *Partisan Diary*, p. 59.

Resistance co-operation between the female leaders of the Gddd was premised on the shared understanding that their personal and political views were synonymous. Each leader was affiliated with an existing Italian political party, for example Ada with the Action Party, and other women with the Communist, Liberal, Christian Democrat and Socialist parties.²⁵ Precisely because this was understood, the leaders consciously strove to ensure that each represented group had a voice in the Gddd, and that one party was not hegemonic, not even the largest anti-fascist Communist party.²⁶ Ada expressed a fervent hope that the women from various political groups could work together despite ideological differences, and continue to do so after liberation. Ada's collaborative political spirit was evident in her determination to consult with other leaders when writing official Gddd documents.²⁷ She maintained a personal belief that women must be able to freely express their opinions whilst working productively together, and not be confined by party propaganda or dogma.²⁸ It is likely that other Gddd leaders had equally firm personal opinions on political concepts such as democracy, justice and liberty. The tolerance of the varying political opinions between these women was often necessary in order to work cohesively on matters of common personal concern, such as humanitarian relief. In addition to helping victims of war, these women were concurrently attempting to create a supportive following to further their own personal and political ideals in a future post-liberated Italy.

During the course of her collaborative role during the Resistance, Ada occasionally encountered masculine resistance to her ideas and politics. When this occurred, Ada successfully employed the tactic of separating her personal and political goals in order to minimise any perceived threat due to her ambition. During Ada's expedition to Grenoble in France in December 1944, she had the following conversation with a French general:

²⁵ Gobetti, *Partisan Diary*, p. 203.

²⁶ Gobetti, *Partisan Diary*, p. 195.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Gobetti, *Partisan Diary*, p. 185.

I tried to explain that I wanted to establish connections with the French women in order to profit from the experience they had gained after the liberation, and to lay down the basis for collaboration in the future.²⁹

The general became agitated and exclaimed that she must not do this because diplomatic relations between France and Italy had not yet been established, thus preventing contact of a political nature between them. Ada asserted in her diary that this general had a “typically military phobia for politics”, and went on to explain to him in highly personal terms that she was only interested in discussing humanity, philanthropy, care for the wounded, babies and the elderly, and “nothing political, for heaven’s sake”.³⁰

Initially Ada did not consciously view her resistance efforts as contributing towards a European feminist cause. During her work with the Gddd she expressed doubts and admitted to having gaps in her knowledge of the women’s rights activism such as the history of the Italian suffragist movement.³¹ Over the course of the resistance period Ada’s consciousness of feminist solidarity expanded dramatically, as evidenced by her International Women’s Day entries in March 1945:

In the afternoon, there was a special meeting of the Gruppi di difesa [Gddd]. Tomorrow is 8 March, which, beginning in 1910, a group of women pioneers had chosen as “international women’s day,” and which must be equivalent to the workers’ holiday of the first of May. I confess that I had never heard of it, but the idea of affirming women’s wish for peace with a date seemed like an excellent idea...It is dangerous, but undoubtedly useful at this time, to give our women the feeling that they are not isolated, but ideologically linked to women of all of the other countries in the world, who are fighting with the same spirit and for the same goals.³²

Ada capitalised on the political strength that might be gained from unity and Italian women’s association with a wider feminist cause. In early 1945, after enduring a physically demanding and treacherous crossing over the Alps with her

²⁹ Gobetti, *Partisan Diary*, p. 257

³⁰ Gobetti, *Partisan Diary*, p. 258

³¹ Gobetti, *Partisan Diary*, p. 311.

³² Gobetti, *Partisan Diary*, p.310.

son Paolo and four male partisans, Ada made contact with women in liberated Grenoble. She exchanged ideas with them on the roles of women in Italian and French female resistance and liberation organisations. Given that the Allies were advancing rapidly towards Turin, discussion of the tasks that lay ahead post liberation were of particular importance to Ada:

For the first time during those meetings, I heard mention of subjects fundamentally similar to those that we wanted to encourage in Italy after the liberation: assistance to families of partisans and victims of war, milk for children, ravitaillement (the transport by truck of potatoes and cheese from certain isolated mountain regions of Savoy seemed to me to be an excellent initiative), defense of the values of the Resistenza, rapport with other women's groups, penetration into the masses of women who were still politically uninformed, and above all the battle to make understood, through initiatives that were even simpler and more banal, that politics are not intrigue or conspiracy, but an essential form of life.³³

Ada's activities in France appear to have been directed towards twin goals – planning for the humanitarian exigencies during and after the battle for liberation, and opening new channels for the collective voice of Italian women to contribute to a wider international feminist cause. The essential link between the personal and political as previously revealed to Ada by Rosetta, was a feminist perspective shared with the Union of French Women (Uff). After many years of the leadership and political potential of women being largely repressed under fascism, Ada was proud to have the recent anti-fascist achievements of Italian women recognised internationally when a story about the Gddd was published in *Femmes Dauphinoises*.³⁴ During the interview Ada told the French journalist “our Resistenza had not been born simply from an uprising of revolt against the invader, but had its roots in the twenty-year period of antifascism of many Italians.”³⁵ For Ada, this clarification was a critical political statement, and a marker of her personal identity as a progressive and political Italian woman.

³³ Gobetti, *Partisan Diary*, pp. 272-273.

³⁴ Gobetti, *Partisan Diary*, p. 272.

³⁵ Gobetti, *Partisan Diary*, p. 271.

Ada's personal feminist consciousness was heightened during her stay in Grenoble. Interconnections between women's personal lives, societal and political structures were discussed with French counterparts of the Gddd, and plans were laid down for future collaboration. Interestingly, Ada's diary does not record discussion at Uff meetings on the feminist goal of universal suffrage. This may have been a purposeful omission for male readers, or it may have been due to Ada focusing on more immediate tasks necessary to rebuild Italian society. However, Ada's affirmation of women being "theoretic equals" in this new society was clearly a priority.³⁶ Ada later publicly acknowledged that her feminist consciousness was definitely raised during the period of her diary, as indicated in a speech made by her in 1964 titled 'Why did we call them Women's Defence Groups?':

Many women arrived at the Resistenza with a more mature conscience...although I had an anti-fascist tradition behind...I arrived [at the Resistenza] immediately 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...³⁷

Ada's published diary is extremely detailed and compelling, and prima facie appears to be a very comprehensive account of actual events. It is an exciting heroic narrative of close danger and justice prevailing, however, it is not possible for this primary source to fully represent the beliefs and experiences of others included in the account. The reconstruction of parts of her diary four years after the events may not be entirely accurate due to the fallibility of memory,³⁸ and because the memoir was based on skeletal notes written in a tiny notebook in cryptic English.³⁹ The different historical context of reconstruction, in this case after the post-war governing anti-fascist coalition and Action Party demise,⁴⁰ may have inadvertently

³⁶ Gobetti, *Partisan Diary*, p. 59.

³⁷ Alano, "Armed with a Yellow Mimosa," p. 629.

³⁸ Gobetti, *Partisan Diary*, p. 43.

³⁹ Gobetti, *Partisan Diary*, p. 27.

⁴⁰ Gobetti, *Partisan Diary*, p. 11.

produced a re-elaboration of events based on collective memories.⁴¹ Both the subjective autobiographical form and the intended reader need to be considered when analysing this source. For example, it is likely that parts of the diary have been altered to emphasise certain thematic narratives, such as ‘good partisan’ versus ‘evil fascists’, heightened dangers, heroic deeds, steady partisan progress towards insurrection, productive Gddd activities, and the primacy of Ada’s maternal feelings during the period. If such emphasis or bias exists, it may be for the purpose of entertaining Ada’s contemporary reading audience. An autobiographical text can itself be construed as a political statement. Ada’s personal self-construction may have been created to advance her political aims and imagined feminine ideal.⁴² The source may be interpreted as a justification of all partisan undertakings, together with the aims and activities of the Gddd.

An idealised image of the resistance period is apparent in this source because horrific war experiences of women resistance fighters are not detailed or emphasised, notwithstanding that over eight thousand Gddd members were killed in combat, arrested, tortured, or deported to Germany.⁴³ In contrast, other sources claim that to punish male partisans, female fighters were singled out for especially brutal treatment by Mussolini’s anti-partisan ‘Black Brigades’.⁴⁴ Similarly, Ada’s account does not record political related tensions or violence between partisan bands unlike some secondary sources.⁴⁵ Nazi reprisals inflicted in villages for partisan activity, like the burning of certain houses in Susa, are framed as entirely the fault of the German occupiers.⁴⁶ It is necessary to keep these sources of author bias in mind when examining Ada’s activities and potential motivations for choosing to have her memoir published. Ada’s ideological views on justice and liberty are

⁴¹ Elda Guerra, “Memory and Representations of Fascism: Female Autobiographical Narratives,” In *Italian Fascism: History, Memory and Representation*, edited by Richard Bosworth and Patrizia Dogliani (New York: Palgrave, 1999), p. 197.

⁴² Robin Pickering-lazzi, “The Politics of Gender and Genre in Italian Women’s Autobiography of the Interwar Years,” *Italica* 71 (1994): p. 177.

⁴³ Alano, “Armed with a Yellow Mimosa,” p. 616.

⁴⁴ Eric Dorn Brose, *A History of Europe in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 250.

⁴⁵ Delzell, *Mussolini’s Enemies*, p. 292; Philip Morgan, *The Fall of Mussolini: Italy, Italians, and the Second World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 189-190.

⁴⁶ Gobetti, *Partisan Diary*, p. 159.

repeated throughout the text, together with her feelings of solidarity and “profound sense of fundamental fraternity” with others fighting the anti-fascist battle.⁴⁷ As a new vice mayor of Turin representing the non-communist Action Party immediately after the war, Ada had a vested interest in upholding the idealised values, activities, reputation and legacy of not only the Gddd, but also the ‘Justice and Liberty’ partisan bands of the Piedmont region.

Women in the Nazi-fascist occupied regions of Italy were subject to significant war-time uncertainties and deprivations. The nationalistic cause of the Italian Resistance appealed to women prepared to join an armed or civilian fight against a foreign invader, to women who were ideologically anti-fascist, and to less political women who simply wanted to assist male partisan relatives in any way possible. The largest clandestine female anti-fascist organisation, the Gddd, offered a collective means of resisting Nazi-fascism to women who joined the partisan battle, had a membership of approximately 70,000 women in 1945.⁴⁸ A prominent Gddd leader, Ada Gobetti, sought to guide women to the realisation that their personal reasons for joining the Gddd may lead to a strong political commitment in the future. Ada’s own journey, as detailed in her personal diary, reveals that her firm personal anti-fascist beliefs began in the 1920s and developed in a public political arena thereafter. During the twenty-month resistance period, a strategy employed by Ada when pursuing political aims was the practice of tolerance of the various anti-fascist political streams. In moments of political tension with other female Gddd leaders, or suspicious males, Ada sought to separate divisive political views from common personal goals so that productive co-operation would not be impeded.

Based on numerous maternal references in her diary, Ada’s primary personal aim appears to have been securing freedom and justice for all children of Italy. Due to the inherent connection of this aim with the political, Ada also furthered the European feminist goal of female emancipation. Whilst working with the Gddd, Ada became aware of the personal-political convergence of women’s valuable resistance

⁴⁷ Gobetti, *Partisan Diary*, p. 159.

⁴⁸ Alano, “Armed with a Yellow Mimosa,” p. 616.

activities with their implicit affirmation of gender equality. Further, Ada's feminist consciousness was raised to the point where her post-war aims included the empowerment of women through undertaking key roles in rebuilding a just and equitable Italian society. Ada's brave resistance activities and writing, the establishment of popular women's groups, and her post-war continuation of women's rights activism, all promoted the importance of personal and political connections and self-understanding for women. These activities have granted tangible legacies to the histories of both the Italian Resistance and the European women's movements. Most importantly, through the personal interactions and collective political voice of present day Italian women's groups, including the largest Union of Italian Women (Udi) that was officially formed in 1945 and is effectively a post-war national Gddd,⁴⁹ Ada's ideals of justice, liberty, fraternity and equality continue to be pursued in Italy today.

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⁴⁹ Alano, "Armed with a Yellow Mimosa," p. 628.

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