

# The Role of Women in Educational and Welfare Policy in South Tyrol during Fascism

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## **Brief historical introduction**

In October 1922, when Fascism came to power, the territory of South Tyrol had only belonged to Italy for a little over three years, since the end of the First World War. The Treaty of Saint Germain, on 10 September 1919, had internationally sanctioned the annexation of South Tyrol to the Kingdom of Italy. Until then, the territory had been part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and was inhabited by an almost exclusively German-speaking population and a small Ladin minority. These were about 220,000 inhabitants who found themselves, against their will, living in a new state in which they were a linguistic minority. The South Tyrolean leadership asked the Italian government for extensive autonomy in the political, administrative, linguistic, cultural and social spheres. The government of the time, which was of liberal inclination, acted with a certain caution and initially seemed to indulge the demands of the local population by offering linguistic and cultural guarantees. The situation changed radically with the advent of fascism, which immediately oriented its policy towards a rapid and drastic Italianisation of the territory and its inhabitants. Its aim was to incorporate the new province into the Italian national fabric in a short amount of time.

## **Educational-assistance role assigned to Italian women**

With the advent of fascism, the Italian women who moved to South Tyrol in those years were also called upon to participate in this project of linguistic penetration with well-defined tasks and functions in the field of education and welfare. In particular, they were pedagogues, inspectors, headmistresses, schoolmistresses, but also doctors, nurses, sanitary supervisors, volunteers and trustees of the fascist party who operated above all within two fascist women's organisations. These were the

ONAIR (*Opera nazionale di assistenza Italia redenta*), set up to help women and children in difficulty who lived in the *terre redente*, as the regions annexed to Italy after the First World War, Venezia Tridentina and Venezia Giulia, were called; the ONMI (*Opera nazionale maternità e infanzia*), set up by the fascist government in 1925 with the task of looking after mothers and children so as to ensure the demographic development of the population. and the *fasci femminili*, a women's organisation of the fascist party.

The present paper focuses on the activities carried out by these bodies, in particular on the ONAIR, since, due to the centrality that the fascist government assigned to it in the pre-school and welfare spheres, it was certainly the most incisive and the one with the greatest diffusion in the territory. All quotations have been translated from Italian by the author.

## ONAIR and its appearance in South Tyrol

When fascism came to power, ONAIR was already present in South Tyrol. It had been set up in 1919 by Duchess Elena d'Aosta<sup>1</sup>, who had decided to intervene in favour of the redeemed lands – Venezia Tridentina and Venezia Giulia – to help them recover from the serious damage they had suffered as a result of the First World War with a project of assistance in the educational and hygienic-sanitary field in favour of women and early childhood. Elena d'Aosta, president of the organisation, used her dense network of acquaintances from the aristocracy and upper middle class to raise funds to be donated to the redeemed lands annexed to Italy. It was therefore initially a philanthropic work that was however given an organisational structure that allowed it, and later allowed it, during fascism to operate incisively and effectively. The regional committees of Trieste for Venezia Giulia and of Trento for Venezia Tridentina were set up to provide for the concrete implementation of the Opera's aims; they were presided over by a regional inspector and employed volunteers. In its first year of activity (1920) in Venezia Tridentina, the ONAIR turned its attention exclusively to the territory of Trento, in particular to the areas destroyed by the war, with interventions that had the character of emergency relief: the distribution of blankets, clothing, sanitary material, food and the restoration of orphanages, hospitals and kindergartens.

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1 Elena d'Aosta or Helena of Orleans (1871–1951) was the wife of Duke Emanuel Philibert of Aosta. Raised in England, London, she was a woman of strong personality, cultured, cosmopolitan, Catholic, fervent nationalist and dedicated to charity work. She was a Red Cross nurse in the Libyan War of 1911, and, during the First World War, she was Inspector General of the Red Cross Volunteer Nurses, earning a silver medal for military valour. She later joined D'Annunzio's Fiume enterprise. Her relations with Mussolini were also excellent.

It was not until 1921 that ONAIR also began to take its first steps in the province of Bolzano–Bozen to take care of pre-school institutions in the Italian language. The establishment of Italian kindergartens initially responded to the need to provide linguistic and cultural support for the children of Italian families who had mostly come to South Tyrol after the annexation.

## The spread of Italian ONAIR kindergartens and the training of teachers

With the rise to power of fascism and the consequent political intent to transmit an Italian »national consciousness« to the new province, the activities of the ONAIR also underwent a strong acceleration and became the operational arm of the government in South Tyrol in the pre-school, extracurricular and welfare sectors for mothers and children.

The first interventions were aimed at the establishment of Italian kindergartens in the area and the training of the teachers who came to South Tyrol in those years and were destined to work in the Italianised kindergartens. In September 1923, less than a year after the rise to power of Fascism, the ONAIR, on behalf of the Ministry of Education, organised a specialisation course for kindergarten teachers in Brixen-Bressanone »with the special intention of preparing the kindergarten teachers for the task of the kindergarten in South Tyrol«. <sup>2</sup> The course director Amelia Agresta Guli made no secret of the »special intention«, stating in her report that: »the material conquest of the territory must be followed by the moral conquest of the inhabitants, and that this alone is the truly lasting«. <sup>3</sup> The primary objective therefore to »help the very Italians in the new provinces to free themselves from the Austrian varnish and to orient their mentality and interests towards Italy«. <sup>4</sup> In order to achieve this goal, the kindergarten teachers were immediately identified as the figures who were to replace the »German mothers« in the linguistic and cultural education of the future South Tyrolean generations. The Italian kindergarten teachers were therefore expressly asked to »find in their instinct of motherhood, in their ideality of good, in their patriotic feeling the strength to be the true mothers.«

This concept was clearly expressed by the director of the training course in the concluding part of her report in which she stated

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- 2 Opera nazionale di assistenza all'Italia Redenta. Relazione e rendiconto 1923, Stab. L. Sallomone, Rome 1924, p. 21.
  - 3 Amelia Agresta Guli, Report of the advanced training course for kindergarten teachers in South Tyrol, in ›Schola‹, a. I, no. 1–2, November–December 1923, p. 14.
  - 4 Ibid., p. 16.

»Given the special conditions of the new provinces [...] not only do we need better, more cultured, more aware schoolmistresses: we need schoolmistresses who are an effective means of pacification and Italianisation.

The Italian schoolteachers [...] had to understand the delicacy and difficulty of their mission and at the same time feel all their pride: in fact, they are entrusted with the sacred task of contrasting the words of hatred and mockery for Italy, which the children may hear from their mother's mouths, with words of love and reverence; with their faith, with their intelligent goodness, they must be able to influence more than mothers, more than families.«<sup>5</sup>

With this clear aim in mind, ONAIR in the following years moved far and wide throughout the province, creating a dense network of Italian kindergartens and helped to close German ones. By 1924, there were already more than 30 Italian kindergartens, and, with a few exceptions, they were well attended. In order to convince German families, especially the poorer ones, to send their children to these new Italian facilities, free meals were introduced, which were apparently particularly popular.

Furthermore, in order to reform the kindergartens (the declared objective was to fight »against the custom of considering kindergartens as custodial homes rather than real educational institutions«<sup>6</sup>) and to better train the new teachers, who were about to face a job that was not easy, ONAIR invested heavily in the promotion of pedagogical methodologies considered innovative at the time and organised special training courses in which didactic methods were presented that were to favour the language learning of boys and girls.

## Sisters Rosa and Carolina Agazzi and their teaching method

In the autumn of 1924, two nationally renowned pedagogues, sisters Rosa and Carolina Agazzi, were called to work directly in South Tyrol. Through the intercession of the ONAIR, the two teachers obtained a secondment to Bolzano-Bozen from the municipality of Brescia, with the task of inspecting and controlling all kindergartens in the city. In the South Tyrolean capital, Rosa Agazzi was also assigned to manage the »Principessa Mafalda« kindergarten, where a permanent training school had been set up in which, under the guidance of the two pedagogues, all new teachers destined for Italian kindergartens in the province could learn their teaching methods. This was a method that the Agazzi sisters had developed on the basis of their

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5 Ibid., p. 18.

6 Ibid., p. 21.

experience in a number of kindergartens in Lombardy since the end of the 19th century and that had gained public recognition nationwide, with resonance abroad as well. The pedagogical model was based on practical experience, the activity in the kindergarten was to evoke a model family environment, tidy, clean, loving, and supportive, where the boys and girls could move spontaneously and freely. Traditional lessons were kept to a minimum and ample space was given to family activities such as tidying up, setting the table, washing; dialogue, a sense of social responsibility and a sense of responsibility were also fostered by connecting older children with younger ones. Aesthetic education and expressive activities such as singing, music and spoken language exercises were also fundamental.

In the autumn of 1926 Rosa and Carolina Agazzi were laid off by the municipality of Brescia but continued to work in Bolzano-Bozen. In 1927 Carolina Agazzi left South Tyrol for family reasons, while Rosa stayed on to work for ONAIR, which appointed her general inspector of its kindergartens.

The Agazzi sisters played a significant role at the height of the fascist authorities' efforts to establish Italian kindergartens in the province of Bolzano-Bozen and to eliminate the German ones. The two teachers not only supported this process by spreading their teaching methods but also conducted inspection and control functions to ensure that the use of the German language was avoided in the kindergartens, particularly in the German kindergartens that were being nationalised.

As the number of Italian kindergarten teachers who moved to South Tyrol was growing, the German teachers who had taught in the kindergartens until the mid-1920s were gradually being dismissed. This was a far from painless process that took place from 1924 onwards when the German kindergarten teachers were replaced by Italian ones in the municipal kindergartens. Private kindergartens, on the other hand, were subjected to strict controls by ONAIR staff who had to ensure that the teaching language used was Italian, most of these kindergartens were closed.

## Sewing schools and home economics courses

From the second half of the 1920s onwards, the ONAIR's activities in South Tyrol not only increased in the management of kindergartens, but also developed in the extracurricular sector: after-school, rural schools, school canteens, Italian language courses and courses for adults were set up, including sewing schools and home economics courses in Italian, which were intended to prepare future mothers. These courses, attended by ›almost all non-native‹ pupils between the ages of 14 and 25, were particularly appreciated by the fascist regime because the girls attending them, alongside the art of ›good housewife‹, considered the first task of every woman, were

taught the Italian language and elements of Fascist culture in the hope of bringing future German mothers and their families closer to the new nation.

The Opera itself felt the need to give special mention to these courses in its reports, given their importance in South Tyrol:

»Particular mention must be made of the women's home economics courses, which replaced, with gradual transformation, the festive schools in Venezia Tridentina, taking on the character of vocational initiation with lessons in work, cutting, cooking, hygiene, practical counting applied to home economics, integrated in the alloglot areas with the teaching of the Italian language.«<sup>7</sup>

The Italian authorities also viewed such courses favourably because the »alloglot« girls, who attended them from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., were thus removed »from other undesirable influences of local religious orders«.<sup>8</sup>

## Social welfare and health care interventions

The ONAIR finally extended its action in the sanitary-assistance field by intensifying, and then making systematic in the 1930s, sanitary controls in its facilities. From the initial identification of children to be sent to the therapeutic vacation colonies<sup>9</sup>, it moved on to a more punctual health check aimed at identifying the weakest subjects in order to provide them with periodic restorative treatment and to get a picture of the health situation of those attending. To this end, a special doctor was hired in 1929 to take charge of the health surveillance service.

From 1926 the Opera also began to take care of the welfare needs of mothers and children by taking over the management of the *Säuglingspflege*, a private association established in 1917 by a committee of German women with the support of a paediatrician, at the express request of the municipality of Bolzano-Bozen, to »do work to protect infants [...] made particularly necessary by the conditions of war«.<sup>10</sup> The

7 Opera nazionale di assistenza all'Italia Redenta. Relazione e rendiconto 1930, Ditta C. Colombo, Rome 1931, p. 47.

8 Opera nazionale di assistenza Italia Redenta. Bolzano-Bozen office. Institutions and their development from 1919 to 1937. Sewing Schools, p. 13, in APTn, Fondo Onairc. 207, Onair – Province of Bolzano-Bozen, file: Questione South Tyrol/Alto Adige.

9 Children were sent to these colonies, often near the seaside, for Tuberculosis treatment or general improvement of their health, accompanied by fascist indoctrination.

10 Letter-memorandum of the Infant Welfare Committee to the prefectural commissioner of Bolzano-Bozen, 12 December 1925, in ACBz, Serie Atti Generali, Faldone D-16, II, 1924/35, Cat. II, Class 2/3, file: Dispensario lattanti 1923–1929.

group of German women frowned upon the meddling of the ONAIR, protested vociferously and tried to oppose the new management, but were eventually forced to give way. Again, as had already happened to some extent with the German kindergartens, the ONAIR occupied an existing structure and helped to Italianise it. After the removal of the German ladies and the replacement of the German paediatrician by an Italian one, the *Säuglingspflege* became the first infant dispensary run by the Opera in the province of Bolzano-Bozen. These sanitary assistance structures, as is well known, were considered indispensable for guiding mothers to feed their infants correctly, a step considered fundamental in combating infant mortality. But in South Tyrol the dispensaries also took on a political value of national propaganda that placed mothers at the centre, as the medical director of the infant dispensary pointed out in a report:

»The Infant Dispensary was opened in Bolzano [...] by the O.N.A.I.R. after a long struggle with the German committee that had run it up to that time. It was an important achievement because of the propaganda medium it is, depending on who runs it. In fact, by taking care of the children with passion and love, one manages to win over the mothers and, having gained these, one can say that one has half-won, because they then tell their husbands in the family about any kindnesses used to their children and a little at a time they manage to change if not completely at least in part the preconceptions they may have against those who run the institution because they are affected by original sin, that is, they are Italians.«<sup>11</sup>

The focus was therefore on the mothers and the absolute importance they assumed in the process of national conquest, in this case not only for the dissemination of the language, but also for consensus-building purposes, i.e. to try to bring the population closer to the new Italian state through them.

After this first infant dispensary, the ONAIR opened others both in the capital and in the main towns in the province of Bolzano-Bozen. They availed themselves of the collaboration of paediatricians, also paediatricians, nurses, and health guards. The infant dispensaries not only provided preventive hygiene and health care, but in cases of particular hardship and poverty, they also provided for the distribution of provisions to needy families, distributing clothing, restoratives, medicines, and food. In the 1930s, the ONAIR also set up a number of maternal refectories and paediatric consulting rooms. Given its experience in the area, ONAIR continued its mother and childcare activities even after the establishment of the provincial federation of the ONMI (*Opera nazionale maternità e infanzia*) in 1927, which also

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11 Report on the infant dispensary by Dr Renzo Camelli, 15 October 1926, p. 1, in APTn, Onairc Fund, 206, Bolzano-Bozen Office, subfile: Reports year 1926.

included Rosa Agazzi and a representation of the *fasci femminili*. ONMI's areas of responsibility ranged from assistance to pregnant women, mothers in need, infants, and children from needy families; it also provided help for abandoned or delinquent children and young people. Initially, its action was mainly aimed at partially financing the welfare work of the ONAIR and other institutions in the area. In the 1930s, cooperation between the two institutions became closer, also on a managerial level, with ONAIR starting to set up its own institutions such as the Mother and Child Home, a number of paediatric outpatient clinics and organising the Day of the Prolific Mother on 24 December each year, as well as birth and nuptiality awards.

Thus, in the second half of the 1930s, ONAIR began to reduce its intervention in the health-welfare field by transferring the management of part of its facilities directly to ONMI, and on 31 December 1938 there was the definitive handover of all the health facilities, with the exception of those in Bolzano-Bozen. ONAIR, on the other hand, continued to manage the kindergartens.

Alongside the ONAIR and the ONMI, the *fasci femminili* (women's fascies) also played an important role in social welfare from the end of the 1920s onwards.

### **The establishment of the *fasci femminili* (women's fascies) in the Province of Bolzano-Bozen**

The women's fascies were established in the province of Bolzano-Bozen in 1928, on the initiative of the provincial party secretary, Alfredo Giarratana, who appointed Giuseppina Sacchi as delegate of the provincial women's fascies. The action of the South Tyrolean fascist women was characterised by total adherence to the party directives: from the very beginning, the role they chose to play was marginal, subordinate to that of the men and mainly limited to welfare work, as evidenced by the programme set out by Giuseppina Sacchi when she took office

»Not outward manifestations, not processions, not politics: but the organisation of charitable works in union of purpose with the other organisations operating in the province such as maternity and childhood, school patronage, the national opera Italia redenta etc. Women must conduct their activities in the field of femininity and stop there. Without encroaching on their action, the sometimes-crude efforts of men can thus be completed.«<sup>12</sup>

The women, about twenty in number, who adhered to the founding act of the women's fascio in Bolzano-Bozen, which took place on 26 January 1928, mostly

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12 La costituzione del Fascio Femminile, ›La Provincia di Bolzano‹, 27.01.1928, p. 2.

belonged to the families of notables, who had recently arrived in Bolzano-Bozen to occupy important positions in the public and party fascist bureaucratic apparatus.

This close link with the power figures of the local fascist apparatus also explains the reason for the frequent turnover of people within the women's organisation, as the fascist women followed the political and professional destinies of their husbands or family members, who stayed in Bolzano-Bozen for a few years before being transferred to other Italian cities.

Their task, as mentioned, was above all to support welfare work and fascist propaganda. Giuseppina Sacchi in the first assembly held on 1 March 1928 stated that:

»All members must have as their first aim that of giving the widest possible cooperation to the works of Italianisation and pacification that of helping with all their activity the development, progress and success of charitable initiatives.«<sup>13</sup>

The aim was therefore to promote, through charitable works, the Italianisation of the territory. With this in mind, the action of the women's fascist organisation moved in synergy with the primary aim of fascist policy in the province of Bolzano-Bozen: the nationalisation of the local population. This direction constantly characterised the actions of the local fascist women's organisation over the years, as well as the various sections which, at the urging of the Bolzano-Bozen federation, were gradually being set up in the other towns in South Tyrol.

## The activities carried out by the women's fascies

The activities of the women's *fascie* were mainly centred on the organisation of mountain and sea summer camps, the fascist Befana (a witch bringing Christmas presents on January 6<sup>th</sup>), the white ribbon and other welfare work.

In 1928, following directives from the national party secretariat, the provincial fascist federation in Bolzano-Bozen was given the task of directly taking care of local initiatives concerning the sea and alpine colonies. This task was partly delegated to the local women's fascies for whom the organisation of colonies for ›needy children‹ became one of the main welfare and educational activities. Fascist women promoted the organisation of numerous mountain and sea colonies. Prominent among the mountain colonies was Plancios, destined to become the flagship of the regime's alpine colonies. The women's fascies also collaborated in the organisation of the seaside colonies (Venice, Riccione). In the 1930s, the fascist party assigned the organisation of the colonies to the Eoa (Ente opera assistenziale), but this did not reduce the commitment and work of the party's women's delegation, which was called upon

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13 12 The first assembly of the Fascio Femminile, ›La Provincia di Bolzano, 02.03.1928, p. 2.

to collaborate with this new body. From the words used by Giuseppina Sacchi, in her report on the activities conducted in 1931, when describing the effort put into the organisation of the colonies, the great amount of work that fell on them shines through:

»This year, this Delegation was entrusted with the task of organising the maritime care shifts for the entire province by the Opere Assistenziali. It was hard work for four months in a row, including collecting and examining applications (far more than the 600 that could be accepted), medical examinations, collecting modest donations from wealthier families; the vigilant and loving accompaniment to Venice, thanks to which there was never the slightest inconvenience, then the paperwork with the railway, the choice of guards at the seaside, the selection of children from the various towns and finally the numerous letters with the Hospizio Marino Veneto, the families, the directors of the Red Cross, the Sick Fund and the various committees of the Opera Naz. Balilla<sup>14</sup>, concerning the little guests. Comforting to so much work were the numerous expressions of gratitude received from the benefactors, both on behalf of the Party hierarchs and for us modest co-workers.«<sup>15</sup>

Here again, one can see the attitude of absolute subservience of fascist women to the party and hierarchs, at whose orders they stood as obedient ›soldiers of the idea‹.<sup>16</sup>

Another activity in which the women of the women's fasces played a leading role was the fascist Befana, which over the years was transformed from the initial simple and cheerful celebration to ›cheer up poor children with a few baubles‹, to a real welfare work to support families in serious economic difficulty. Gifts, over the years, became less and less standardised, to meet the needs expressed by poor families. Clothes, shirts, shoes were included in the gift packages, chosen in a targeted and individualised manner, based on the indications of the families. Sometimes uniforms of balilla and piccole italiane were also donated, together with a toy and an assortment of sweets and fruit. The fascist ›Befana‹, besides being a charitable work for poor boys and girls, was an extraordinary instrument of fascist and national propaganda, hence the party's strong interest in extending it to a very wide range. In localities where the women's fasces were present, they were the driving force, in other localities it was mostly the schoolteachers who carried out the initiative, supported

14 Opera nazionale Balilla (ONB) was an Italian Fascist youth organization functioning between 1926 and 1937, when it was absorbed into the Gioventù Italiana del Littorio (GIL), a youth section of the National Fascist Party.

15 Report on Women's Federation activities – Year IX. General Assembly written by Giuseppina Sacchi, 4.11.1931, in ACS, P.N.F., various services, series I, envelope: 534, file: 9.15.5, Bolzano-Bozen Federation, Women's Delegation.

16 14 Term taken from the title of Helga Dittrich-Johansen's book, *Le ›militi dell'idea‹. Storia delle organizzazioni femminili del Partito Nazionale Fascista*, Florence: Leo S. Olschki 2002.

by the school patronage. It was organised in public places following a regime ritual in the presence of local and fascist authorities. It was attended by the mayor, the federal secretary with representatives of all party bodies and the various fascist corporations, military, judicial and school authorities, and representatives of the various charitable associations. Also always lined up with the authorities were departments of *balilla* and *piccole italiane* banners unfurled.

Among the activities of the women's *fascies*, which in turn combined welfare and propaganda purposes, was the white ribbon initiative. The white ribbon was hung by fascist women on the doors of houses to announce the birth of a baby boy or girl and had the function of paying homage to the newborn and at the same time giving value to motherhood. Soon the white ribbon was transformed from a symbolic gesture into a welfare activity for the benefit of the poorest families. The women's *fascies* in the various localities appealed to wealthy families to contribute small donations, so that the white ribbon could be accompanied by a material support, be it a layette for the baby or a sum of money, in needy families. The white ribbon initiative dovetailed well with the regime's demographic policy directives and at the same time encompassed a propaganda action in favour of the regime, which was considered all the more effective the more fascist women, with their charitable acts, succeeded in approaching poor ›alloglotte‹ families and showing them the ›generosity‹ of the Italian nation by aiming to ›win them over‹ to fascism. This is how the local fascist newspaper ›La Provincia di Bolzano‹ quoted the white ribbon initiative:

»This initiative, the great importance of which cannot escape those who follow the demographic movement a little closely, will allow an ever-livelier penetration among the people. The homes of the poorest will be opened to the augural visit of our fascist women, who will bring into them the fraternal word, an act of love. It is in the symbol of the Littorio, which is the exaltation of goodness, kindness, charity, that the women of our women's *fascio* will be the gentle missionaries of the great idea, they will bring among our people, good, honest and hard-working, the throb of life that animates the great Italian nation at the orders of its Duce.«<sup>17</sup>

Finally, especially in the South Tyrolean capital, the women of the women's *fascies* actively collaborated with the party in organising welfare work to identify poor families to whom food vouchers could be provided. These various activities, which engaged the women of the women's *fascies* throughout the year, required a considerable organisational effort and were considered important because they were functional, as mentioned above, to the broader project of Italianisation and fascism's search for consensus. In this regard, let us see the words used in a report on the Plancios colony,

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17 The ribbon at the cradles, ›La Provincia di Bolzano‹, 14.02.1930, p. 3.

near Brixen, by the school patronage that organised the colony together with the women's fascies:

»the material benefits were surprising [...]. But even more than the material benefits, it is perhaps appropriate to take into account the moral benefit brought by the stay in the colony, especially to the children who were alligned. [...] The non-native-speaking children, removed from the often pernicious influence of the family, had the opportunity in the colony to perfect their language, to learn to love Italy, to feel they were members of one big family, to learn with what care the homeland cares for its neediest children.«<sup>18</sup>

Apart from the propaganda proclamations extolling the successes of the various initiatives promoted by fascist bodies and organisations, it must be said that in reality the efforts made by the government in the welfare and educational spheres did not have the desired effects. At least they did not succeed in the work of ›moral conquest of the inhabitants‹, considered to be the ›only truly lasting one‹ as the director of the 1923 training course for kindergarten teachers, quoted at the beginning of this paper, had stated. Nor did they succeed in the conquest of the South Tyrolean mothers, a goal that fascism looked to with great interest.

## The resistance of South Tyrolean women

It is well known that one of the most strenuous forms of civil resistance to the Fascist government's measures aimed at the nationalisation of the territory, such as the ban on the use of the German language in schools, involved South Tyrolean women, who vehemently opposed the risk of seeing the cultural and linguistic identity of their sons and daughters undermined. When the so-called Gentile reform was published on 1 October 1923,<sup>19</sup> which effectively sanctioned the closure of German schools, leading South Tyrolean politicians and cultural figures appealed to women to take action in defence of the German school. Canon Michael Gamper, a journalist and leading figure in the defence of the linguistic and cultural identity

18 La Colonia Alpina del Patronato scolastico di Bolzano-Bozen, report by Attilio Menapace, 27 April 1928, in ACS, P.N.F., Servizi vari, series I, envelope: 533, file: 9.15.1, Federazione di Bolzano, Fasci femminili.

19 17 Giovanni Gentile, philosopher, was Minister of Education during Fascism from 1 November 1922 until 1924. He implemented a school reform that came into force in 1923. The decree of 1 October 1923 stipulated that, starting in the school year 1923/24 in all first classes of ›alloglotte‹ (non-Italian-speaking) schools, teaching would be in Italian. In the year 1924/25 it was also extended to the second classes and so on for all subsequent classes until the complete Italianisation of primary schools. The reform effectively abolished the German schools in South Tyrol.

of the South Tyrolean population during the Fascist period, raised the alarm in his newspaper, the ›*Volksbote*‹, emphasising the conflict that would open up between ›South Tyrolean mothers‹ and the school world over the different language used in the education of the new generations, and called on the mothers to protest and mobilise:

»Today is about the fight for the maintenance of the German school. In these circumstances the woman cannot be absent. [...] The child's soul depends on it. And to protect it, the mother is the first to be called upon.«<sup>20</sup>

The South Tyrolean mothers responded to the appeal in large numbers by demonstrating in front of the Bolzano-Bozen sub-prefecture; they then sent letters of protest to the national authorities and promoted a collection of signatures in all South Tyrolean localities for the preservation of the German school, which were delivered to Rome by a delegation of three South Tyrolean ladies, who called themselves ›Atesine Mothers‹, at a meeting with Minister Giovanni Gentile and the Chief of Cabinet of the Prime Minister. Women's committees also addressed Queen Helena and her son, Prince Umberto. Since the requests and protests made had no effect, and in fact, in response, on 3 May 1924, the superintendent of education in Trento issued a decree that de facto eliminated the German kindergartens after the schools, the local political authorities decided to change strategy and, in the following months, publicly urged the South Tyrolean mothers to regularly give German lessons in their homes, in the ›*Stube*‹,<sup>21</sup> to their sons and daughters and to those of neighbouring families unable to do so. This appeal was also promptly taken up: South Tyrolean women made an important contribution to the organisation of a private and clandestine network of German schools, held in the privacy of their homes, with mothers, sisters, or teachers expelled from Italianised schools, giving lessons. These schools took the name *Katakombenschulen* and were strictly forbidden and harshly prosecuted by the regime.

## Conclusion

It can be seen how the strenuous effort to safeguard their mother tongue in the face of fascism's attempt to undermine the German cultural and linguistic identity of the younger generations was entrusted by the local population to South Tyrolean mothers. At the same time, the Fascist government in turn relied on women to impose the

20 »Lasset uns die deutsche Schule!«, *Volksbote*, 8.11.1923.

21 South-Tyrolean term for living room.

assertion of a new Italian mother tongue and, in the absence of Italian mothers, assigned this task to Italian schoolteachers, in particular kindergarten teachers who, as we have seen, were to replace the ›real mothers‹ in the process of Italianising the new generations. We can therefore state that in the climate of tension that was being experienced in the area, where there was a clash between two nationalisms: the German nationalism that aimed at its own preservation and the safeguarding of its identity, and the Italian nationalism that aimed to assert itself through a process of assimilation of the local population, women were called upon to play a very important role on both fronts. Precisely because of the important task entrusted to them, it should be emphasised that in South Tyrol, compared to the rest of Italy, the fascist policies that promoted the diffusion of the mother model were constantly intertwined with the question of language and with nationalist arguments, enriched by the mother-tongue aspect: The mother, in addition to being the guarantor of the ›lineage‹ as procreator, came to assume, in the South Tyrolean reality, a high social and national value, also symbolic, since she was considered the custodian of the mother tongue to be passed on to future generations, which is precisely why it was important for fascism to ›conquer‹ mothers. But in spite of the spread of educational and social welfare structures such as ONAIR and ONMI, which worked in favour of the younger generations and mothers, and in spite of the activity of party organs such as the women's fasces, which were in turn engaged in charity work for poor families and nationalist propaganda, fascism did not succeed, if only to a small extent, in achieving its goal. Certainly, there was a widespread learning of the Italian language by the younger 14 generations of pre-school and school age, but the operation of nationalising the territory was not successful, just as the German mothers were not ›conquered‹. The reports periodically drawn up by the health directors of the ONAIR dispensaries, although full of data on the activities carried out, on the number of visits and consultations made, on the care provided, on the benefits bestowed, also repeatedly highlighted the problems linked to the political situation; They complained about the difficulties in finding widespread acceptance and denounced the persistent mistrust, if not outright hostility, of the South Tyrolean population towards the services provided. Dr Camelli, head of the infant dispensary in Bozen, had this to say on the subject:

»South Tyrol in general and Bolzano in particular is quite reluctant to see the good side of child prophylaxis, also because the delicacy of the political situation gives, whether one wants it or not, that sense of unease, artfully supported by the offi-

cially ceased Pan-Germanist congregations, but which in the shadows work assiduously against everything that serves Italian penetration.«<sup>22</sup>

With regard to the institutions that developed in South Tyrol during the Fascist period to implement policies in favour of mothers and children, it is interesting to note that the ONMI continued to manage health care facilities even after 1945 until 1975, when the institution was dissolved. ONAIR also continued to run nursery schools until the 1970s. In the latter case, the peculiarity of the acronym should be noted: after 1945, the name changed from ONAIR to ONAIRC from *Opera nazionale assistenza Italia redenta* to *Opera nazionale asili infantili regioni di confine*.

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