

Violence against Women and the Racist Discourse during the WWI in Italy

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1. The War and its Victims

In September 1917, Luigi Maria Bossi, gynecologist and then president of the National Federation of Anti-German Leagues, published the book *In difesa della donna e della razza* [For the defense of women and race]¹. The words ‘difesa’[defense] and ‘razza’[race] can remind us of the infamous Fascist era anti-Semitic magazine, *La difesa della razza* [The defense of the race]. As same as its successor, Bossi’s book contained racist phrases, such as ‘[a particular race] is not only politically and socially, but also anthropologically the enemy of human beings’². In this case, however, the accusation was aimed at the ‘razza tedesca’ [German race]. The historical context surrounding his argument was clearly World War I, which had brought conflict of unparalleled scale and damage to Europe. Italy entered the war in 1915, betraying its alliance with Austria and Germany. In analyzing the chapter of the book discussing abortion rights, I will argue that an early racism was born under the influence of positivism, its rhetoric entangled with nation and gender towards the end of the war³.

In the preface of his book, Bossi expressed outrage at the violence perpetrated by German soldiers, especially against women.

I have documented, discussed and called to discuss in this book...one of the most repugnant and underhanded crimes...I refer to the predetermined, systematically and cold-bloodedly organized

¹ Luigi Maria Bossi, *In difesa della donna e della razza. Polemiche – Discorsi – Referendum contro l’egoistico, rovinoso Neo-Malthusianismo contro l’infamia dell’Antiuomo tedesco*. Milano, Dr. Riccardo Quintieri, 1917.

² Bossi, ‘Lettore amico e nemico’ in *In difesa*, pp.ix-x.

³ Many histories of WWI refer to Bossi’s book. Here, I mention only Barbara Montesi’s article, “Il frutto vivente del disonore”. I figli della violenza, l’Italia, la Grande guerra’ in Marcello Flores (a cura di), *Stupri di guerra. La violenza di massa contro le donne nel Novecento*. Milano, Franco Angeli, 2010. She approached the same argument, focusing on woman novelist Annie Vivanti’s work *Invasore*. Vivanti draws two cases: a married woman seeking abortion, and another who lost her fiancé by choosing to bear the enemy’s child. Montesi emphasizes that Vivanti treated and reconciled both cases respectfully, which Bossi, her friend, disliked (pp.72-3). Vivanti responded to Bossi that a woman has the right to free herself from a ‘harmful germ’ of life imposed by an enemy’s violence as he has the right to extinguish fire in his house or remove cancer from his body. No alternatives were explored in this exchange. Bossi, op.cit., p.109.



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incredible violence committed by warmongering Germanism against the women of invaded countries by their barbarous herd⁴.

As a gynecologist, Bossi had great affection for the women, ‘especially in their sublime, pure and sacred mission as mother’ and said that men had a duty to respect, love and protect women⁵. This affirmation displays ‘feminist’ leanings. However, Bossi’s anger stemmed from a different place.

Healthy, conscious, and advanced gynecology is the primary – and almost essential – basis for eugenics, I would say. To create man who is strong, healthy, balanced, useful to himself and to the national collective...it is necessary for his creator to be healthy and balanced as well. It is also necessary that the act of creation is achieved in psychic, moral, and physical balance⁶.

If not so,

From the sexual violence of the chaotic German army, it is not possible but to birth atavistically delinquent beings, because the predetermined German crime is that much more hateful and irredeemable⁷.

He devoted a large part of his book to a discussion – which he had previously initiated in a newspaper column – about framing the abortion rights of women who had become pregnant as a result of sexual assault by German soldiers⁸ in terms of protecting the race/nation. The book contained reprints of his arguments, a questionnaire he put to readers, and their responses.

2. The Collectivity of Harm

Violence against civilians, including sexual violence against women, committed by occupying forces has accompanied wars throughout history in various forms, but according to Alberto Banti, had not been the subject of profound politico-diplomatic discussion before World War I⁹. A few weeks after war erupted, the belligerents began to blame each other for sexual violence committed by their soldiers. Germany blamed Russia, Germany blamed Britain and France, Russia blamed Germany and Austria, France and Belgium blamed Germany, etc.¹⁰.

In 1916, when Bossi addressed his argument to the socialist-interventionist newspaper *Il Popolo d'Italia*, founded by Benito Mussolini, Italy had not yet recorded a case of war rape. In the introduction of the chapter written in summer 1917, Bossi referred to testimonies from occupied Belgium of forced labor, deportation, and sexual slavery at the hands of the German army.

All the women and girls who must serve officials and soldiers undergo a *speculum* examination to guarantee their general health for German purposes. The girls return from Germany only when they get

⁴ Bossi, op.cit., p.v.

⁵ *ibid.*, p.x.

⁶ *ibid.*, p.xiv.

⁷ *ibid.*, p.xv.

⁸ The Italian word ‘tedeschi’ is used, including all German-speaking people as well as German nationals. This included citizens of the Austrian Empire which Italy also fought. He later distinguished between these two groups.

⁹ Alberto Banti, *L'onore della nazione. Identità sessuali e violenza nel nazionalismo europeo dal XVIII secolo alla Grande Guerra*. Torino, Einaudi 2005, p.353.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, pp.354-55. It should be noted that the German report on violence committed by French and British armies concentrated on violence by colonial black troops against German women.

sick, pregnant, or are damaged by nervous disease. Some became mad and syphilis claimed numerous victims.¹¹

It was on this information that he called upon women, doctors, sociologists, jurists and intellectuals to consider the issue of abortion in the August 26, 1916 edition of *Il Popolo d'Italia*. He insisted that the violation of non-German women under German occupation was systematic and deliberate. Bossi surmised that the German army intentionally used sexual violence for various purposes, in particular:

[To] substitute for German prostitutes; to avoid the spread of venereal diseases; to diminish homosexuality, sexual degeneration... ; to maintain a rule of terror and savage physical dominion, as systematic as it is brutal and shameful retaliation, generating innumerable unhappy expectant women to whom the interruption of gestation will be prevented.¹²

These 'purposes' of wartime sexual violence seem strikingly similar to what we see in our time. But we should not assume a 'universal' intent behind this kind of violence. It can only be said that the discourse on wartime sexual violence was a construct of that point in time, and that universality was part of its self-description. In the quotation, we see that pregnancy resulting from violence is directly tied to the political function of domination, implying that the female body belongs not to the female, but to society. Bossi based his argument surrounding the right to abortion on the *collective* damage done to society by war-rape pregnancies, which he and others thought would be *proved* by science.

The theory that I maintain regarding morality is that the assaulted woman is condemned to horrible torture for nine months, regarding eugenics: that the child of such crime is often a harmful degenerate for society...it is to show the simple fact...one of the ugliest things of the so-called German civilization.¹³

Bossi's questionnaire asked readers two questions: 1) whether the women raped by the enemy in wartime had the right (not duty) to abortion, 2) what measures civilized people should use to stop the systematic violation of women by Germans¹⁴. In the next part some responses and their meanings will be considered.

3. What does abortion protect?

As seen above, Bossi's argument is a rather modest form of racism. However, while he appealed to racial and eugenic self-determinism and the societal good, he was also concerned for the agony suffered by victims. The responses to his questions were harsher. The first reply appeared in the August 27 edition of the paper, written by a Frenchman born in Lille.

[Those] dirty ones systematically and monstrously wanted to graft in the pure wombs of the beloved victims to corrupt the race! / Expel it! There can be no other relief, no other hygiene, no other morals: purify in the bathroom, discard in the outhouse!¹⁵

¹¹ Bossi, 'Per la difesa della donna e la razza', op.cit., p.1.

¹² Bossi, 'Il "referendum" del "Popolo d'Italia" di Milano' op.cit., p.91.

¹³ *ibid.*, p.92.

¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p.93

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What is impressive is that by using words like ‘graft’ and ‘corrupt’, the author Victor d’Ugente proposed a massacre of children, as if the results of violence could only be expunged with more violence.

A second reply had a similar but more ‘scientific’ and defensive tone. It was written by Francesco Maria Zandrino, journalist, primary school teacher, and secretary of the Anti-German League¹⁶. He had no doubt that the mass deportation and exploitation of young and even married women in France and Belgium was executed systematically and deliberately at the behest of the German emperor. These crimes were due to ‘the instinctive bestiality of their anthropological primordial tendency’, which clashed with modern scientific principles and also with ‘the sensibility of us, the southern people’¹⁷.

Criticizing the silence of female intellectuals¹⁸ who he believed should have responded to Bossi’s questions more actively, he argued the criminality of the German soldiers’ actions. Deportation was criminal not only because it was forced, but also because in its process was ‘the intentional and vicious promiscuity which coerced pure and honest virgins and mothers into contact with prostitutes’¹⁹. Furthermore, conservation and propagation of the species was the ‘primal law of nature’, and to create a perfect life needed ‘two bodies of the same species, animated by psychological and physical consensus’, making the act of the German army one of maximum aggression ‘against nature or God’²⁰. It should be noted here that while blurring the border of race was considered a crime, leveling out the distinction between two types of women was also seen evil. Zandrino clearly went beyond supporting Bossi’s argument.

It is not that the women violated by enemy soldiers have the right to suppress artificially the result in their offended womb, but that civil society, and so too the state, has the absolute duty rather than a right to defend society, suppressing these German bastards in any case.²¹

The goal of abortion, according to Zandrino, was to protect society, not female rape victims.

Such collectivism – based on a positivist understanding of race – characterized the opinions and positions of the male discussants. Before wartime sexual violence crystallized from theory into reality, the same, albeit more abstract, discussion may have taken place. Add to that the weight of the collective framework, such as that of society, nation, and race (especially in wartime) and the path to such discourse seems inevitable.

One female intellectual objected. Anna Franchi was a writer working closely with the Socialists. She was also an ardent interventionist who collaborated to produce pamphlets promoting national bonds for the war, which some of the most famous female writers of that time contributed to. She described in them the image of women and mothers as the country’s final and strongest fortifications, along with hatred for the ‘bloody’ enemy²². Her letter of September 5 was not merely a qualified agreement with Bossi, but a reply to Zandrino’s provocative response. First of all, she refuted Zandrino’s distinction between female intellectuals and non-intellectuals, and claimed that only *mothers*

¹⁶ As seen in the texts, Both Bossi and Zandrino were staunch interventionists. But as the war went on, local patriotism became so intense that even they were accused as ‘Germanphil’. Angelo Ventrone, *La seduzione totalitaria. Guerra, modernità, violenza politica (1914-1918)*. Roma, Donzelli, 2003, p.IX.

¹⁷ Bossi. op.cit., pp.94-95. Note the use of ‘southern’. The author follows: ‘for those [southerners] the greatest good, which we will eternally guard with passion, and which sometimes drives us to crime, is to possess a woman sentimentally and sexually’. In bringing up the passionate southerner, ‘razza mediterranea’, the early racist discourse of Lombroso and Niceforo about southern Italy is resonant.

¹⁸ In fact only a few women participated in the dispute. Considering the relatively small positions which the female intellectuals had in that period, Zandrino’s criticism might not be adequate.

¹⁹ *ibid.*, p.96.

²⁰ *ibid.*, p.98. Zandrino’s position was more ‘fundamental’ than Bossi’s, but Bossi seems to agree with him because he quotes Zandrino in the introduction of his book.

²¹ *ibid.*, p.99.

²² Emma Schiavon, *Interventiste nella grande Guerra. Assistenza, propaganda, lotta per i diritti a Milano e in Italia (1911-1919)*, Firenze, Le Monnier, 2015, pp.201-2.

deserved to answer the question²³. Her conviction of German 'inferiority' and 'immorality' was no less strong than the other discussants, but her tone was rather more reserved.

When the honest woman, mother by nature, cautious custodian of the eternity of the generation, feels a tremble of new life in herself, she begins almost unconsciously acting to protect the baby who takes life from her own.... it is true that her maternal emotion is put into a greater suffering, not because the child is born from a man of another race, but because the baby is born from the most cold-brooded hatred, born in the violence used by a brutal man, in the moment of bloody arousal, born in a time of weakness, maybe in faint.... Yet...the true mother...when she stands in front of one of these cases of deficiency, still tries the more to protect her child even if he is weak or evil.²⁴

She declared that abortion was not an obvious response to pregnancies from wartime rape. The evil behind the pregnancy did not immediately justify a right or duty to abort.

With various spirits, various thoughts, some women would like to counterpose a crime against a crime, while others would give the great sacrifice of their lives, would measure all the fear of their anxious maternity, and would not resort to the crime. Rather, she would protect the innocent «bastard», an impure fruit of monstrous mating...²⁵

It is very interesting that identifying women as 'mothers by nature' or 'true mothers' functions here to relativize the 'collective' interpretation of the damage, while also raising the possibility of 'various' opinions among the women.

Zandrino condescendingly replied to Franchi. He reiterated that the right of abortion belonged to society and the state, and also disagreed with Franchi as to the violated Belgian and French women²⁶. As with his earlier letter, his writing was collectivist and male-centric.

But do you [Franchi] want to tell me that the day will come when ... fathers, husbands and brothers will come back home to find the bastards of the Germans at their feet?... what invocations and comforts will be given to the heroes who find their home alienated by the presence of the living result of their dishonor?²⁷

His sympathy for his male compatriots led him to conclude that a woman who refused to abort wronged the men of her society, and so her society itself. This collectivism clearly superseded some individual rights.

To suppress individual life, to violate the right to property, personal freedom, and to oppress the thought of the individual are crimes less serious than to violate the law of life, which is the law of excellence; God himself.²⁸

²³ Bossi, op.cit., p.101. And as we see later, the term 'mother' encompasses all women capable of childbirth, including women without children.

²⁴ *ibid.*, pp.101-2.

²⁵ *ibid.*, p.102.

²⁶ *ibid.*, p.104.

²⁷ *ibid.*, p.105.

²⁸ *ibid.*, p.106. This affirmation reflected the totalitarian atmosphere in which this kind of debate took place. Ventrone, op.cit., p.167.

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He also linked women and products as objects of conquest, using as precedence the Austrian Emperor's 'permission' to invade the 'wine and women of Veneto' as well as the Trentino area. The *objectification* of women is also seen in the October letter of Lorenzo Cenni, self-described as 'not a doctor nor a sociologist, not a jurist nor an intellectual', who somewhat arrogantly suggested categorizing the victims.

Thus the violated and pregnant women in war should be divided into three groups: voluntary women who have neither right nor duty of abortion; passive, more sensitive and weaker women, who have only the right of abortion; and the stronger who never surrendered, but... got pregnant by much more contemptible and coercive means, have the duty - beyond mere right - of abortion.²⁹

Cenni would deny abortion rights to women who 'voluntarily' followed the enemy as if this would punish them. The significance of the expression 'not the right but the duty' which appeared in Bossi's questionnaire is now explicit. It referred not to relief for suffering women, but to ideals of collective-masculine perfection which superseded individual women's opinions and emotions. The intent was to deprive women of control over their own actions and bodies in the name of protecting society³⁰.

Franchi resisted. She replied again to Zandrino on September 23 in *Il Popolo d'Italia*. This reply was not reprinted in Bossi's book. Franchi's second letter set out her 'feminist' position more clearly than her first. While she recognized that Zandrino's critical attitude toward her had flowed 'out of [his] heart, [his] memories, [his] studies and [his] observations', she shifted focus to those she thought more deserving of concern.

No, at this moment, there is nobody but the women who are suffering, whose hearts are torn between expectations, who feel the heart beat every time the bell rings, and whose hairs have been turned white by the burden of thought; there are only women-mothers (therein also the women who don't have children, because maternity belongs to all healthy women), and for them, for these modest heroines, and for those who are most tragically harmed, for those unfortunate women we write...I beg you men...not to drag this question to the public.³¹

She continues with irony.

Will they still want that women should give such a serious answer...which could change a centuries-old law with a single blow? But don't they know that while women are believed to be able to make bullets, they are excluded from the Commission for the vigilance of orphans³²? ...Wait and see that mothers cry in silence, concentrate with pride in duty, with willful, great tolerance, and silent heroism. We should forbear the conduct of such a ridiculous opinion poll.

Professor Bossi certainly knows well that a newspaper column is not enough, but that many pages are needed...³³

'A centuries-old law' reads on the one hand the long tradition of legal, religious and moral prohibition on abortion, and on the other, more generally, the respect for life.

²⁹ *ibid.*, p.114.

³⁰ Ventrone, *op.cit.*, p.174.

³¹ Anna Franchi, 'Per la difesa della donna', appeared on September 23, on *Il Popolo d'Italia*.

³² Legal protection of World War I orphans was made law in 1917, but discussion about the issue had already begun in 1916 in some municipalities, especially those near the war zone, such as communes in Veneto and Lombardia.

³³ Franchi, 'Per la difesa della donna'.

Franchi's contrast between women being allowed to make bullets but not care for orphans is striking. Reminding readers of the labor division between production and reproduction (with reproduction being imposed on the women, not of their own choice) may not have been Franchi's intent. Rather, it is better to remember that Franchi fought for women's emancipation. She had suffered betrayal by her husband, the resulting financial difficulty, and struggled to raise three sons by writing articles and novels³⁴. She believed that to be a proud protector of children (her own or others'), it was necessary to secure an autonomous space for women in which their individual opinions, emotions, and bodies were respected.

Only one letter supported Franchi's opinion, written by a French woman.

To take away the fruit of violence, that is to say, impose another torture on the victim...puts in danger the life of that woman, possibly shortens it – to break *a life* in her, not necessarily destined to be a disgrace of pain...These are matters to reflect upon deeply...Only after I consider them can I give my voice to the right to abortion.³⁵

Bossi ends the chapter by repeating his claim, and referring to another female interventionist writer Annie Vivanti's novel *L'invasore* [the Invader], which implied sexual violence committed by German officials on Belgian girls³⁶:

And in such conditions, the doctor, the sociologist, the legislator would have the right to deny them [the violated women in the war] their only cure, only possible salvation, the interruption of pregnancy?³⁷

At least Bossi argued from the standpoint of protecting the women and did not leave their suffering to a decision made purely in the name of society. However, he also thought the decision should be made by experts, not the women themselves.

4. Conclusion

From October to November 1917, Italy suffered total defeat by the combined Austro-Hungarian and German forces in Caporetto (now Kobarid in Slovenia), and withdrew from the River Isonzo to the River Piave. The withdrawal of the Italian army and subsequent occupation, lasting about a year until November 1918, resulted in tremendous civilian misery. The crimes recorded in the early weeks of occupation were almost all committed by the German army who spearheaded the occupation. The Austro-Hungarian army would later establish military authority and try to normalize relations between the army and civilians³⁸. After the battle of Caporetto, Italy could also claim the dubious honor of having experienced mass sexual violence. Women were at extreme risk of violence and sexual assault while foraging in the countryside, and even at home with their families and neighbors. Numerous women took shelter in the parochial churches³⁹.

Contrary to aforementioned opinion and Italian propaganda of the time, Daniele Ceschin, a major historian of the First World War in Italy, asserts that even though the violence against women was unrelenting, it could not be

³⁴ Maria Chiara Berni, 'Introduzione. Anna Franchi: Ritratto di una signora del nostro secolo' in *Il fondo Anna Franchi della Biblioteca labronica di Livorno*, pp. XI-XV. One of her main themes was the right to divorce.

³⁵ Bossi, op.cit., p.111.

³⁶ Montesi, op.cit., p.71.

³⁷ *ibid.*, p.122.

³⁸ Daniele Ceschin, 'Dopo Caporetto. L'invasione, l'occupazione, la violenza sui civili' in *Annali della Fondazione Ugo La Malfa*, XXVIII, 2013, p.177.

³⁹ *ibid.*, p.180.

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attributed to any predesigned plan or will to utilize sexual violence as an instrument of war. The violence stemmed more from the general confusion surrounding contact between the occupying army and the civilian populace, and the relative facility with which opportunistic soldiers could commit these acts during searches⁴⁰. Strangely, the newspapers that provoked debate on this issue in 1915-1916 kept silent about cases of violence against Italian women when they occurred⁴¹. Crimes and human rights violations – including rape – committed by the occupying army were recorded in the Royal Commission's report⁴², in which sexual violence was classed as a 'crime against a woman's honor'. However, it was considered a rather minor crime. 'The trauma suffered by the women, both physically and psychologically, was not taken into account'⁴³. Alberto Banti called this gap between the passionate public discussion and the later silence following occupation the 'collective repression', and explained that:

[The] theme of sexual assault is an argument of great effectiveness when it used in the form of nightmare, of shadow, of threat; but when it is realized, it highlights the incompetence of the male component of the population, more than it does the psycho-physical reactions produced by the women of the nation.⁴⁴

The representation of violated women in war has contradictory meanings: when it comes to abortion rights, women are regarded as objects of protection. When referring to abortion as a duty, they become a threat, potentially allowing 'invaders' to corrupt the nation through their bodies. In both cases, the individual woman's will is ignored because of the assumption that the only valid considerations for decision-making should be male and collectivist. In that sense, even before it happened, the event was partly repressed by ignoring the vacillation, anxiety, and will of the women. The war required nations to clarify borders that had been blurry in peacetime. The following racist discourse needed to appropriate women's bodies in order to establish 'biological', immutable borderlines. But the contradictory meanings imposed on women shows the impossibility. We know that about two decades later, when the mission which sought to keep a nation away from the other had to be completed in Europe, experts and specialists such as politicians, bureaucrats, jurists and doctors decided to extinguish all ambiguous bodies. As Franchi feared, this single blow was enough to change a centuries-old law.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, p.181.

⁴¹ Montesi, *op.cit.*, p.75.

⁴² *Relazione della Reale Commissione d'inchiesta sulle violazioni del diritto della gente commesse dal nemico*. Milano-Roma, Bestetti & Tumminelli, 1920.

⁴³ Ceschin, *op.cit.*, p.181.

⁴⁴ Banti, *op.cit.*, pp.363-4.