

## **2 The Struggle Over the Family: Ideology and Propaganda**

---

**Summary** 2.1 Introduction. – 2.2 Talking About Families, Speaking to the Nation: the Family in Political Propaganda. – 2.3 Women and Families, on the Placards and in the Sermons. – 2.4 Ambiguous Models. – 2.5 Countryside Against the City. – 2.6 The Limits of the Revolution. – 2.7 Marina, Mary, and the Others. – 2.8 The Protector of Family and Nation. – 2.9 Conclusions.

### **2.1 Introduction**

The family played a prominent role in the political propaganda of the early Cold War.

As political, economic and ideological blocs solidified, alternative models of family life were used to articulate opposite visions of social transformation and to assert parties' national and political credentials.

Political and religious leaders, as well as obscure political activists and priests, spoke about visions of family life, articulated families' supposed needs and proposed alternative ways to respond to individuals' expectations and desires. Families abounded both on electoral posters and in political rhetoric, across the political spectrum.

This chapter discusses the ways in which family entered the ideological confrontation of the early Cold War years, its use as an instrument of propaganda and its employment as a means of channelling fears and anxieties. It argues that the family proved a fertile instrument of political communication because of its resonance across the social spectrum and its ability to engage social and cultural values.

Both in Italy and in Poland, the influence of the Catholic Church rendered the family an unavoidable issue for postwar parties will-

ing to put forward a radical agenda of social and legal transformation. Centuries of nearly immutable Catholic doctrine and the Church's established authority on family matters set the stage for the confrontation. Communist parties, although historically much less equipped to talk about family issues, quickly rose to the occasion. Unable to compete with the Catholic Church in terms of doctrine, Communists talked about the family mostly through exemplary war time narratives. Through family stories, postwar Communists sought to advertise both their national commitment (through virtuous examples of wartime struggles) and the glorious future to be delivered by the socialist revolution. Catholics, on the contrary, used families mostly to put forward dystopic and terrifying visions of social transformation under Communist rule. Catholic fears and Communist optimism represented the two poles between which family propaganda oscillated.

## 2.2 Talking About Families, Speaking to the Nation: the Family in Political Propaganda

Already during the war, both Catholic and Communist leaders realised that families were relevant to political propaganda.

In 1944, the Italian Communist leader Palmiro Togliatti spoke of the family as the ultimate symbol of the devastation brought to Italy by fascism and as a proof that even those who had been seduced by the promises of the regime should now realise that they had been betrayed. Togliatti chose the magazine *L'alba*, published in Moscow for Italian prisoners of war, to describe the recovery of family life as the first endeavour to be pursued in liberated Italy. Freeing family life from the "corruption and hypocrisy of the present" should become the first task for everyone willing "to save the sources themselves of national life"; on the success of this, wrote Togliatti, depended the possibility of forging stronger national solidarities and of creating a new political community in a renewed country. Most of the articles published in *L'alba* sought to convert POWs who had fought in a military campaign waged in the name of anti-communism to the ideals of anti-fascism and the Resistance, by denouncing the corruption of the fascist elites and the atrocities committed by the German army in its offensive against the Soviet Union.<sup>1</sup> By talking about families, Togliatti evoked a cause for engagement far more urgent and con-

---

<sup>1</sup> *L'alba* started its publication in February 1943, as a collaboration between the Soviet army and exiled Italian Communist leaders, see Mola, "Attraverso L'Alba", 65-80. On the strongly anti-Communist feelings of Italian soldiers operating on the eastern front, Lepre, *L'anticomunismo e l'antifascismo*, 83-4.

crete than political ideologies alone. Moreover, recalling the dangers in which the fascist war had precipitated Italian families was bound to strike a particularly sensitive cord among men who had long been separated from their families and who saw the possibility of being reunited with them as a distant and uncertain prospect.

In many ways, Togliatti's article introduced an approach to the family that would become standard in Communist postwar propaganda, namely the double commitment to the protection and renewal of family life. This went hand in hand with the idea, variously affirmed by Togliatti, that backwardness, particularly in relation to women's condition, should not be seen as the by-product of Italy's deep catholic roots, nor of Italian women's religious culture. On the contrary, women's social position depended primarily on Italy's economic structure and their transformation was therefore compatible with the survival of traditional popular religiosity.<sup>2</sup> Although often difficult to translate in political action, the double commitment to protect and reform helped the party to defend itself from the accusation of being an enemy of family life and traditions, while asserting its difference from its catholic political counterpart.

If Italian Communists showed to be aware of the political relevance of the family, the Christian Democratic Party had put it at the centre of its political proposal since its foundation, in 1943. Fatherland, family, freedom and religion were the four words on which the newly born party founded its political programme and would become the mantra of the postwar years, with the family heralded as the pivot of Italy's moral and social reconstruction.<sup>3</sup>

Appeal to the family and the domestic sphere as a means of political propaganda seemed to become even more relevant once that Italian women were finally granted the vote.

The Catholic Church had long opposed women's suffrage and Pius XII remained openly sceptical of women's political judgment, fearing, as he explained in 1945, that "the sensitiveness and fine feeling proper to woman" would likely impede "clarity and breadth of vision", as well as "serenity of judgment and forethought for remote consequences".<sup>4</sup>

Having begrudgingly accepted women's vote as a political inevitability, however, the Italian catholic hierarchies soon understood the political potentialities opened by the new voters. The electoral campaign of 1948 gave ample evidence that the significance of women's

<sup>2</sup> Togliatti, *Discorso alle donne*, 17-18.

<sup>3</sup> "Valori morali e libertà delle coscienze", *Le idee ricostruttive della Democrazia Cristiana*.

<sup>4</sup> Pius XII, "Woman's Dignity: Political and Social Obligations", Broadcast from Vatican City, 21 October, 1945; Groag Bell, Often, *Women, the Family and Freedom*, 2: 415-7.

vote had not gone amiss, starting with the Pope's reiterated calls to women to exercise their new right in defence of family and religion.<sup>5</sup>

Faithful to the teaching of Pius XII, the electoral propaganda put in place by the DC in 1948 also addressed women almost exclusively as mothers and called them to vote to protect their families' material and spiritual wellbeing. While men could be seduced by a propaganda that promised social progress and workers' rights, so the message ran, women knew that what mattered most was the safety of the private sphere, of which they were implicitly recognised as the main responsible and protectors.

Communists also understood the relevance of women's vote. In Poland, both the 1946 referendum and the 1947 elections saw the mobilisation of Communist organisations and political propagandists to ensure women's support.<sup>6</sup> As the women's magazine *Kobieta dzisiaj* (Today's Woman) explained on the eve of the 1946 referendum, only by saying "three times yes" could women protect the future of their children, guarantee lasting peace and allow the reconstruction of the country.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, the Polish Women's League took it upon itself to educate and mobilise "backward women", transforming them in citizens "knowledgeable and devoted to socialism".<sup>8</sup> Educating women to the importance of industrial work and a secular conception of marriage figured highly on the agenda.

Against the secularising programme of the Communists, the Church responded with equal vigour. Between 1945 and 1947, the Polish episcopate used pastoral letters and the Catholic press to attack not only the threatening of private property and any measure designed to subjugate the individual to the State, but also the undermining of established family and gender norms by the new powers. Both in the campaign that preceded the referendum proclaimed by the Provisional Government in 1946 and in the elections of 1947, Catholic authorities reminded the flock that their faith forbade them from supporting those political forces whose programmes contradicted the position of the Church on a variety of matters, family, sexuality and gender roles first among them.

<sup>5</sup> A crucial part in the production of propaganda material was played by the Civic Committees, the catholic organisation formed by Luigi Gedda in early February 1948. Officially formed to fight against abstention and supposed to operate as pressure groups and as point of reference for the Catholic organisations, the civic committees proved an extremely powerful weapon for the DC. See Novelli, *Le elezioni del Quarantotto*, 40.

<sup>6</sup> Zaremba, "Komunizm jako system mobilizacyjny", 110-26; Jarosz, *Polityka władz komunistycznych*.

<sup>7</sup> "Pracujemy". *Kobieta dzisiaj*, 1 July, 1946, quoted in Nowak, *Serving Women and the State*, 72.

<sup>8</sup> Alicja Musiałowa, *Nasza Praca*, 13, July-August 1950, quoted in Nowak, *Serving Women and the State*, 84. On the role of the Women's League, see also Jarosz, "Idee, programy i realia", 307-30.

In the first electoral confrontations of the postwar years, both Communists and Catholics called upon women to vote as mothers, and both looked at them as immature and potentially unreliable voters, in need of education and control. Both told them how they should structure their life.

The consolidation of the Cold War order brought no respite. In Poland, the effort to educate and mobilise women to the cause of communism intensified during the Stalinist period, when organisations such as the *Liga Kobiet* (Women's League) became less autonomous and more organic to the Party. In Italy, any common ground that may have existed between Catholic and Communist militants withered away as the battle against fascism receded into the past. As any space for dialogue was fatally eroded, the family remained a crucial means of ideological warfare and scaremongering.

You may be ready to give up many things for the triumph of your idea - wrote the Catholic activist Giorgio Giorgi to an imaginary Communist reader - but I am certain that if those who are dearest to you were in danger, then you would forget that you are a Communist: you would act first of all as a father and a spouse.<sup>9</sup>

Giorgi, a staunch Catholic from Bologna, was one of the many activists who sought to contribute to the political struggle through pamphlets aimed to illustrate the evil of Communist government. Attacking the private sphere, as Stalin had done in the thirties, was not an aberration but the inevitable outcome of Communist ideology. Any complacency, explained Giorgi, stemmed from a "treacherous underestimation of the danger that lied ahead".<sup>10</sup>

Although based on questionable historical analysis, even pamphlets such as Giorgi's provided powerful ammunition for political debate in a field characterised by a significant and undeniable imbalance of authority between the two contending parties.

### 2.3 Sources of Authority: Teaching from Above and Virtuous Models from below

The sources of authority on which Catholics could rely to talk about family life were powerful, clearly defined and largely unquestionable. A century-old doctrine and a series of Papal pronouncement provided a powerful guideline to political action.

<sup>9</sup> Giorgi, *Il comunismo e la famiglia*, 3.

<sup>10</sup> Giorgi, *Il comunismo e la famiglia*, 26.

Family and marriage represented recurrent themes in Pius XII's teaching, although little of what the Pope said and wrote showed original thinking or suggested a willingness to reconsider inherited doctrine. The encyclical letter *Casti Connubii*, published by Pius XI in 1930, remained the point of reference on marriage and family life at least until the Vatican II, and in many ways afterwards.<sup>11</sup> Pius XI had in turn reiterated established tenets and reasserted the full authority of Leo XIII's *Arcanum divinae sapientiae*, published in 1880.

At the core of the Catholic doctrine on matters of family life remained the indissoluble bond of marriage, understood as a divine institution whose sacramental nature reflected the holy love that linked Christ to the Church, and procreation.<sup>12</sup>

The Catholic Church's understanding of marriage and family as immutable institutions in the face of far-reaching social transformation hampered possibilities of dialogue and negotiation across the political spectrum, but offered a clear platform to Catholic activists. For those who took the position of the Church most heartedly, following its precepts provided a political line that was alternative to both Communist and capitalist visions of the world and of the economy.

The Marxist position that saw the family as "a variable product of human development", a function of the economy that did not carry any specific inherent value, represented the very antithesis of Catholic thinking.<sup>13</sup> Seemingly irreconcilable seemed to be the ways in which Marxists and Catholics looked at the impact of material circumstances on family life. Although Pius XII denounced poverty, lack of decent housing and the spectre of (male) unemployment as dangerous plights, no material shortcoming seemed to the Pope as detrimental to family life as the weakening of its morality, understood as adherence to religious norms. Moreover, as Pius XII emphasised, no material comfort could compensate the reduction of the family "to an organism totally subservient to the needs of society". No material wellbeing could compensate for spiritual impoverishment.

If historical materialism presented the Church with a worldview antithetical to a religious understanding, however, unbridled capitalism was not without problems. Although preaching opposite economic and political receipts, from the point of view of the Church, the

<sup>11</sup> It is worth recalling that, before becoming Pope with the name of Pius XI, Achille Ratti had served in Poland first as visitor apostolic and then as Papal nuncio, playing an instrumental role in setting the way for the concordat, eventually signed in 1925. On the legacy of Pius XI, Latourette, *Christianity in a Revolutionary Age*, 41. On the paradoxical role of the Holy Family as a model for the human family, see Koschorke, *The Holy Family and Its Legacy*.

<sup>12</sup> Bernini, *Family Life and Individual Welfare*, 50-5. See Barberi, Tettamanzi, *Matrimonio e famiglia nel magistero della Chiesa*.

<sup>13</sup> Orfeo, "La concezione della famiglia", 40.

two systems shared a dangerous disregard for religion and fostered an unwelcome preoccupation with the material side of life.

While the real socialist systems denied the very existence of God and the spiritual nature of humankind, the acquisitive spirit of capitalism filled people's lives with false ambitions and fallacious pre-occupations. Socialism undermined the solidity of marriage by rendering it a purely secular institution that could be dissolved at will; unrestrained capitalism threatened the "constant faithfulness and the solid perseverance of the spouses"<sup>14</sup> by exposing them to unhealthy models of life and unrestrained sexuality.

Crucially, both socialism and capitalism threatened the gender order that the Pope saw as the very foundation of a Christian society. The Pope urged Catholics to resist the "wonderful promises of modernisation" and the "unbridled freedoms" that could only lead to "hopeless misery" and desolation, while restoring "as far as possible the honour of the woman's and mother's place in the home".<sup>15</sup>

Against the bulk of ecclesiastical doctrine, the sacred texts of communism had little to offer to postwar activists. The founding fathers of communism had either given cursory attention to family matters or had left behind analyses that had little political currency after years of disarray, which left people longing for the peace of the domestic.

Marx himself had dedicated little reflection to the family, other than describing it as a function of the economic system. The analyses of those who had paid more attention to the issue, starting with August Babel and Frederick Engels, were far from easily applicable to the postwar situation. While providing a central reference on the issue of women's emancipation, Engels' prediction that the bourgeois family would wither away following the triumph of the proletarian revolution, seemed either too vague (if located in a hypothetical distant future), or too menacing, if imagined as a close prospect.<sup>16</sup>

While providing an important instrument of political education inside the party, the main texts of Marxism were of limited use outside it. Against the powerful voice of the Catholic Church, Communists faced a complicated task. They had to defend themselves from the accusation of wanting to undermine everything private, while trying to present an idea of family life at once alternative to the Catholic one and able to appeal to the broader audiences that postwar Communists aimed to reach. The task was all the more challenging in coun-

<sup>14</sup> Pius XII, "Discorso di Sua Santità Pio PP.XII al Convegno del 'Fronte della famiglia' e della Federazione delle associazioni delle famiglie", Martedì, 27 Novembre 1951, *Discorsi e Radiomessaggi di Sua Santità Pio XII*, Tredicesimo anno di Pontificato, vol. 13, 2 marzo 1951-1 marzo 1952, 413-18.

<sup>15</sup> See previous footnote.

<sup>16</sup> Engels, *The Origin of Family, Private Property and the State*; similar considerations applied to the analysis of August Babel's *Women and Socialism*, published in 1879.

tries such as Italy and Poland, where Catholicism had long informed gender norms and models of family life.

In this difficult situation, a powerful means of counter-propaganda was found not in philosophical texts, but in exemplary life stories able to highlight from below the main tenets of what being a Communist entailed – at least in principle.

#### 2.4 Women and Families, on the Placards and in the Sermons

In the early Cold War years, Catholic parties and organisations represented women and families mostly to evoke fear of unwelcome transformation; Communists used them to advertise the optimism of the socialist revolution. In Italy, the Democratic Front used cheerful families under blue skies to express the socialist and Communist commitment to peace and prosperity; similarly, Polish Communists made a great display of smiling and confident-looking young men and women to suggest that the future of the country was in safe hands. Against this display of optimism, Christian Democrats' placards showed Italian mothers fighting to defend their children from the soviet monster.

In 1948, and in following local and general elections, women appeared on Italian placards as models of feminine modesty and domestic respectability, their sober dresses and attires hinting to the difficult conditions left behind by the war and to the struggle to make ends meet experienced by most Italian mothers. Polish propaganda, by contrast, focused not on mothers, but on young working women. Images of women welders, builders, joiners, and tractor conductors broke a standard narrative that saw these as quintessentially male jobs, while putting forward a representation of womanhood that merged new roles and conventional models. Whether portrayed next to a big industrial machine or on a modern tractor, the new working women of Poland were beautiful, carefully made up, and unfailingly smiling.

Both their new prospective roles as industrial workers and their confident and self-assured representation were highly subversive for a Church governed by a Pope who saw in the transformation of women's role one of the greatest dangers that awaited postwar societies.

As Pius XII often remarked, defending the Christian family equalled to defending the very essence of Christianity in modern society. This required not only asserting Christian marriage as the only acceptable marriage form, but also defending a 'gender order' that the Church saw as the very basis of family life.

Throughout his pontificate, Pius XII used all available means, from meetings with newly-weds to letters and radio broadcasting, to warn against the risk of undermining the domestic order. By this, the Pope meant the rigid hierarchies and inequalities of rights and duties that



should characterise the catholic marriage.<sup>17</sup> Women's subjugation in marriage had been defined in the *Casti Connubii* as a "fundamental law", to be "maintained intact" always and everywhere. The same idea informed Pius XII's image of an ideal catholic household as a place of female unwavering devotion to domestic duties, male commitment to the moral and material welfare of the family, and parental dedication to the Catholic upbringing of their (ideally numerous) children.<sup>18</sup> Against this Catholic ideal stood the "marvellous" but deceptive pledges made to women by political forces advocating widespread social and political reforms. Equal rights, "care during pregnancy and childbirth, public kitchens and other communal services", as well as "public kindergartens", "free schools and sick benefits", were grouped together by the Pope as examples of deceptive promises stemming from false notions of emancipation. Far from representing real improvements in women's life, their inevitable outcome was the undermining of women's "true dignity and the solid foundation of all [their] rights". Any reform bound to reduce women's maternal and domestic duties, posited Pius XII, not only prepared for them "a worse kind of subjugation", but threatened to weaken "the intimate coordination of the two sexes", on which both family and social life rested.<sup>19</sup>

The promotion of women's work by the State subverted Catholic ideas about the domestic order and challenged the strongly-held conviction that women's work outside the home could be a necessity, but it was rarely a choice and should never be encouraged.<sup>20</sup> In his staunch defence of women's natural domestic role, Pius XII reasserted his predecessor's view that, particularly in the case of married women, work represented either an unwanted imposition caused by the inadequacy of male salaries or the result of excessive and dangerous material desires.

In Italy, the Pope's warnings found immediate echo in political propaganda. The already mentioned Giorgi had little doubt that women should show "a certain submission" to their husbands, since even popular wisdom "condemn[ed] those women who wished to take over the ruling of their homes".<sup>21</sup> He was equally certain that the economic emancipation promised by Communists concealed a greater tyranny. In the Soviet Union, explained Giorgi, women had been deprived

<sup>17</sup> Pius XII, Encyclical letter *Casti Connubii*, 31 December, 1930, ch. 26.

<sup>18</sup> Pius XII, Encyclical letter *Casti Connubii*, 31 December, 1930, ch. 28.

<sup>19</sup> Pius XII, "Woman's Dignity: Political and Social Obligations" (*Questa grande vostra adunata*), Broadcast from Vatican City, 21 October, 1945, in Groag Bell, *Often, Women, the Family and Freedom*, 415-16.

<sup>20</sup> Menozzi, *La chiesa cattolica*, 72-95.

<sup>21</sup> Giorgi, *Il comunismo e la famiglia*, 6.

of “home, family, [and] religion” and transformed “in a devise for collective work and reproduction”.<sup>22</sup>

From a Catholic perspective, women’s work was dangerous both for the economy (taking jobs and authority away from men) and for the family. Accordingly, the introduction of a male family wage would remain an unfulfilled DC’s pledge throughout the postwar years. The rejection of women’s economic emancipation through work went well beyond Catholic circles. It was an idea subscribed by a number of sociologists and physicians, as well as by political activists across the political spectrum.<sup>23</sup>

Against the gender norms prescribed by the Church and echoed by the Catholic party stood the experience of the many women engaged in often heavy and badly-paid work or attracted in growing numbers to the new jobs made available in the expanding service sector.<sup>24</sup>

## 2.5 Ambiguous Models

Both in Italy and in Poland, cultural representations both reflected and subverted normative narratives of female and family morality.

In Italy, the hugely popular photo-romances such as *Bolero Film* and *Grand Hotel* popularised accessible and involving romantic stories, in which the quest for love and marriage appeared as women’s only aspiration. In a similar direction went several postwar melodramas focused on family and marriage troubles, whose plots were in some cases directly lifted from photo-romances.<sup>25</sup> Among the most prolific film makers of this genre was Raffaello Matarazzo, whose movies put forward a whole catalogue of tragedies resulting from behaviours that broke the norms of family and sexual morality. Hugely successful among the public, such movies presented women as “victims of males’ prejudices and false sense of honours” and the family as “an institution that repressed any form of individualism, independence and personal fulfillment”.<sup>26</sup> Far from providing an alternative

<sup>22</sup> Giorgi, *Il comunismo e la famiglia*, 11.

<sup>23</sup> The position emerged strongly in the congress organised in august 1950 by the Italian Sociological Society. See Gini, *Atti del 14 Congresso internazionale di sociologia*.

<sup>24</sup> See also Tentori, *Donna lavoro famiglia*.

<sup>25</sup> This was for instance the case of Matarazzo’s *Catene* (1949) and *Tormento* (1950); on the political use of photo romances also as a political tool, see Bonifazio, “Political Photoromances”, 393-413. On the popularity of photo-romance in postwar Italy, see Cecchetti, *Generi della letteratura popolare*, and Cardone, *Con lo schermo nel cuore*. On cultural confrontation in the cold war context, Baranski, Lumlev, *Culture and Conflict in Postwar Italy*.

<sup>26</sup> Among Matarazzo’s greatest commercial successes were *Catene*, *Tormento*, and *I figli di nessuno*, see Vitti, *Giuseppe De Santis and Postwar Italian Cinema*, 40-1.

vision of family life, however, Matarazzo's movies regularly ended re-establishing the norm and resolving any confusion with a safe return to conformism.

Although hugely popular, those models did not go uncontested.

In 1949, De Santis' *Riso Amaro* brought to international fame a very different model of femininity, destined to become one of the most powerful symbol of postwar Italy's contradictory transformations. Already protagonists of popular stories and songs, the rice workers of northern Italy (the *mondine*) narrated by De Santis seemed the very antithesis not only of the Catholic ideal of femininity, but also of the conventional model proposed by Matarazzo and the likes. Far from passive and respectful of authority, the cultural representation of the *mondine* showed them as assertive and boisterous.<sup>27</sup> In the cinematic representation made by De Santis, the *mondine* showed all the tensions that traversed a society suspended between traditional values and new cultural models, between old peasant culture and emergent American myths, including through the portrait of an explicit and free sexuality.<sup>28</sup> The explicit eroticism of the *mondine* exposed De Santis to the accusation of sexual exploitation for commercial success, both at the release of the movie and in later years. When the movie was released, both conservative and Communist cinema critics and commentators attacked De Santis. Communist critics, in particular, were not impressed by the fusion of melodrama and social and political denunciation attempted by De Santis and even less happy with the explicit sexuality of the protagonists, accused of distracting audiences from the seriousness of the social matter at hand. De Santis, it appeared, had jeopardised the very morality of the *mondine*. The Vatican, for its part, put the movie on the list of forbidden films.<sup>29</sup>

Against such accusations, and particularly against the criticisms advanced from the left, the Communist De Santis claimed that he intended to show unionised, independent and sexually-free women, while showing the damaging impact of Americanisation on Italy's lower educated classes. Aptly, the photo-romance entered *Riso amaro* as the recognisable medium of a message aimed to spread individualism and materialist aspirations among young peasant women.

Independently of De Santis' intentions, there is little doubt that the representation of sexually explicit and free women broke both

<sup>27</sup> On the cultural representation of the *mondine*, see Castelli et al., *Senti le rane che cantano: canzoni e vissuti popolari della risaia*.

<sup>28</sup> *Riso Amaro* was widely distributed internationally, including in the US; on the reception of the film, Lawton, "Foreword" to Vitti, *Giuseppe De Santis*, x-xi, xvii-xx. See also Celli and Cottino-Jones, *A New Guide to Italian Cinema*.

<sup>29</sup> Vitti, *Giuseppe De Santis*, 36-7, 39-40. On the role of Silvano Mangano in *Riso Amaro*, see also Carman, "Mapping the body", 322-35.

Catholic and Communist normative representations, reminding Italian and foreign audiences that no easy formula could encompass the variety of experiences and positions occupied by postwar women.

The battle over gender models was even stronger in Poland, where women's economic activation became an explicit goal of the State. As the country embarked in a far-reaching project of forced industrialisation, official rhetoric, magazines, and even cinema converged in promoting a model of femininity that was, at least on the surface, radically different from the Catholic one. Publications such as *Przyjaciółka* (Girlfriend) and *Sztandar Młodych* (Youth Banner) told young Polish readers not only that work was essential to guarantee women's equal rights and prestige (both within and outside the home), but that women's "activeness and success in productive work" was what made them attractive as prospective wives.<sup>30</sup>

The message had unsurprising overlaps with the ideal of womanhood upheld in Italy by the Communist magazine *Noi Donne* (Us Women): a new woman forged in the anti-fascist struggle, no longer interested in frivolous activities and attires, but devoted to the common cause of building a better future. Far more strongly than in Italy, however, Polish representations celebrated women's productive work as their greatest asset and most attractive feature.

The appearance of the 'Superwoman' on Polish placards, magazines and films suggested the end of the discrimination and disempowerment of the past in favour of women's full inclusion in the economic and political community. As the documentary *Kobiety naszych dni* (Women of Our Days) dutifully explained in 1951:

Yesterday, the ruling classes provided women with the left overs of human rights. Today, in the People's Republic of Poland, for the first time, a woman feels the warm-earthed care of the State. Yesterday there were lies about the so called 'feminine vocation', today unlimited possibilities for learning are open to women.<sup>31</sup>

The transformation of women's economic and social role advocated by postwar Polish Communists necessarily invested parental and gender roles within the home. While women were expected to find in paid work their new dimension as individuals and citizens, men were encouraged to rethink their role in marriage and *vis-à-vis* their children, while devoting themselves to the rebuilding of Poland. In the worker hero model of the early postwar years, public and private morality should mirror each other. Where the *Casti Connubii* had proclaimed

<sup>30</sup> See Kłoskowska, *Z historii i sozjologii kultury*, 436.

<sup>31</sup> From the voice over of the documentary, *Kobiety naszych dni* [Women of Our Days], dir. Jan Zelnik, 1951, see Ostrowska, "Polish 'Superwoman'", 57.

the immutability of marriage's hierarchies, the socialist pedagogy upheld equal marriage as the new norm. While the Socialist state promised to act as a benevolent patriarch to the nation, older versions of patriarchal order came under attack.

## 2.6 Countryside Against the City

One of the crucial confrontations that took place both in Italy and in Poland concerned the urban and rural models of family life.

The confrontation had a much sharper character in Poland, where postwar industrial modernisation rapidly came to signify the overcoming of the old peasant household – large, multigenerational and imbued in catholic values –, now substituted by an urban family model: nuclear, based on close emotional relations between parents and children and (ideally) secular. In this process, the large peasant family quickly became a symbol of bigotry, ignorance and backwardness.

Many life stories published in the aftermath of the war recorded and advertised the transformation, contrasting the material and cultural poverty of the peasant past with the endless possibilities opened up by the Socialist state.

The publication in 1954 of a collection of peasants' life stories, originally put together in the mid-thirties by the Instytut Gospodarstwa Społecznego, presented readers with a reminder of what life in the countryside had been like. The life stories, explained Stróżecka in the foreword to the collection, constituted a "monument of the miseries, exploitation, and oppression" that had accompanied the bourgeois order. Story after story, wrote Stróżecka, the same picture emerged, "grim calculations, budgets of hunger: how many potatoes, how big a piece of bread for each member of the family, as to day of starvation".<sup>32</sup> The memorialists spoke of the

many many families in which bread [was] only backed at harvest, and afterwards only in the great festivities, which is four or five times a year, and where mothers [gave] children not a piece of bread, but a couple of roasted potatoes to take to school, and where sugar [was] so seldom bought, that they have forgotten its taste.

As an example of what had been and remained a remarkable Polish sociological tradition, namely the collection and analysis of life stories, the collection had a great scientific value. The main aim of the 1954 publication, however, was openly political. The goal was to show the responsibility that the bourgeois ruling class of Poland had in the

<sup>32</sup> Stróżecka, *Pamiętniki chłopów*, v.

penury of the interwar period and to alert to the danger that capitalist economy still entailed.

The same aim, showing the progress made by the country through socialism and industrialisation, characterised the collections of memoirs carried out throughout the postwar period, in which younger memorialists were able to describe both the backwardness of capitalist Poland and the transformation carried out by the State.

A model example of such narrative was offered by Krystina Malinowska, in a collection specifically dedicated to women's life stories. Malinowska wrote about the extended family of her childhood as too poor and preoccupied with surviving out of their small plot of land to take care of their children's desires and needs. As well as of material penury, Malinowska wrote about her abusive father and the local priest, both symbols of oppressive patriarchal institutions. While attributing her father's poor behaviour in the home mostly to ignorance, Malinowska was far more critical of the priest, unwilling to help those in needs, and having the authority and social prestige of the Church as his sole concern. Of his presence, Krystina remembered most vividly the visits he would pay at Easter, to collect presents from the hard-pressed family, and his reluctance to intervene in times of need.

Far from offering a supportive environment open to the outside, the peasant family of Krystina's youth had been an oppressive home, from which she had managed to escape thanks to the help of the Socialist state. The achievement of a hard-gained education and the possibility of following a career as an educator in the city had marked her emancipation. Having "struggled for years to reconcile [her] idea of a compassionate God with the actions of the Church", Malinowska eventually "abandoned the Church completely" after moving to the city; the overcoming of the patriarchal logic of the peasant family had gone hand in hand with the refusal of the institution that had governed it.<sup>33</sup>

The contrast between peasant and urban culture was much less sharp in Italy. While Polish Communists saw country's peasant culture as a remnant of the past to be swiftly eradicated, the PCI embraced the peasant tradition of Italy, finding in them a model of uprightness that the new and unwelcome cultural influences threatened to undermine.<sup>34</sup>

Even a movie such as *Riso amaro* offered a critique of the damaging effect that growing Americanisation could have on peasant values, seen as symbol of honesty and moral decency.

<sup>33</sup> Malinowska, "Wykorzystane Szanse". *Pamiętniki Kobiet*, 23.

<sup>34</sup> For an analysis of the sharecropping system as exploitative system, Sereni, *Il capitalismo nelle campagne*.

While, before the war, socialism and communism had been essentially urban phenomena, the conflict had transformed the countryside of central and northern Italy into a politically dynamic area, where the PCI could gain ground. The participation of the peasants in the Resistance had been considered as a crucial transformative factor by several contemporary observers, Gaetano Salvemini and Ferruccio Parri among them.<sup>35</sup> The sharecropping patriarchal family, which had been first adopted by Mussolini as the fascist family model for its unshakeable hierarchies, numerous children and clearly defined gender roles, could now be reinvented as the new metaphor for anti-fascist Italy.

Fitly, Italian Communists found in a peasant family from northern Italy one of the most powerful example of anti-fascist heroism. The seven Cervi brothers had been arrested in November 1943 in a small village near Reggio Emilia, by Italian collaborators, accused of having helped escaped Allied prisoners of war. They had been shot shortly after their arrest by a local fascist squad. Their village, Gattatico, situated north of the Gothic line, was one of the areas in which the war between German occupiers, Italian fascists and resistant fighters had been longest and harshest. In the early fifties, the story was transformed in an exemplary Resistance tale, and the celebration of the Cervi quickly became the celebration of the peasant family.<sup>36</sup>

The story of the Cervi offered not only a narrative of principled decisions paid with the ultimate price, but also a story of familial solidarity and sufferance with which many could identify. Furthermore, it was a story of political commitment by a family of peasants, which was both traditional and modern, attached to the past and yet eager to improve its conditions through education and technology. In sum, the Cervi provided the perfect myth for a party busy trying to present itself as a national party, able to understand the traditions and values of rural Italy, while offering a model of transformation.

As all powerful myths, the story of the Cervi spoke to different audiences. The liberal-socialist Piero Calamandrei saluted the Cervi and the peasantry they represented as the example of “the most human, simple, natural aspects of the Resistance”. He did not hesitate to praise the patriarchal family for its ability to act with absolute unanimity in defence of freedom; as in the best of collectives, “one was

<sup>35</sup> Absalom, “Allied Escapers and the contadini”, 413-25, and Absalom, *A Strange Alliance*; see also Albanese, *Le campagne italiane*, 9-10, 54-5; Ragionieri, “Dall’unità a oggi”, 2380 and Revelli, *Le due guerre*.

<sup>36</sup> The first to narrate the story of the Cervi was the writer Italo Calvino, in two articles published respectively in January and December 1953 in *Patria indipendente* (“Nei sette volti consapevoli la nostra faticosa rinascita”) and *L’Unità* (“I sette fratelli”).

like seven, and seven like one".<sup>37</sup> The Cervi, stressed Calamandrei, had not followed an abstract ideology but a deep sense of morality, motivated by their deep connection with the land in which "they worked daily", transforming their labour in hard earned fruit.

In contrast to the Polish situation, in which the peasant culture appeared as the emblem of what should be overcome, the story of the Cervi helped to accommodate the many fractures of postwar Italy.

In the Cervi's household as in many others, socialism had coexisted with the catholic influence exercised by the mother, and far from appearing as irreconcilable ideologies, both could be celebrated as expression of Italy's "best popular cultures". As Alcide Cervi explained in the autobiography written with Renato Nicolai:

If it were true that different progressive faiths cannot get on together, then the history of my family would be destroyed, because if we have done something good, we have done it because we have the strength of those different faiths.<sup>38</sup>

## 2.7 The Limits of the Revolution

Italian Communists' determination to find ways of mediating between different messages and cultures found a reverberation on their approach to women. Where Polish propaganda emphasised the strong discontinuity that the state had made possible in women's lives, including through their emancipation from the patriarchal peasant family, the models that the PCI presented to Italian women were somewhat less clear-cut. If Polish Communists found in the discourse of women's emancipation a strong terrain on which to attack the Catholic Church, the PCI was too preoccupied with defending itself from the attacks of the Church to go on the offensive.

The messages sent out in Poland and in Italy, however, converged in the cautious attitude that both Polish and Italian Communists held *vis-à-vis* the institution of marriage.

Even when strongly advertising the 'new woman' and condemning backward models of family life, Polish socialist propaganda never put into question marriage as an institution, nor ventured to show the recently introduced divorce as a fully acceptable alternative to marital unhappiness.

This can be seen both in biographical narratives, as well as in cultural artefacts.

<sup>37</sup> On the myth of the Cervi, Lucenti, *I fratelli Cervi*; Cerri, *Papà Cervi*; Bernini, "Mothers and Children", 242-58.

<sup>38</sup> Cervi, *I miei sette figli*.



A string of movies released in the mid-fifties under the strict agenda of socialist realism, and clearly designed to convene the image of the emancipated woman to postwar audiences, highlighted both the innovative elements and the limits of the transformation. Films such as *Przygoda na Mariensztat* (An Adventure in Mariensztat) directed by Leonard Buczkowski in 1954 or in Jan Rybkowski's *Autobus odjeżdża 6.20* (The bus leaves at 6.20), also released in the same year, portrayed young women who escaped traditional female positions to take up typically male jobs – in these cases, constructor worker and welder respectively.<sup>39</sup>

As well as presenting new models of female emancipation, both movies provided a mild critique of conventional romance and marriage, portrayed as disappointing experiences undermined by betrayal and lack of sincerity. Both narratives presented emancipation through work not as an ideological choice, but as a lucky chance, encountered in the aftermath of sentimental disappointment.

While showing the potential pitfalls of romantic liaisons and marriage, however, neither narrative could avoid a rather conventional ending. In both cases, marriages were saved, thanks to women's ability to educate their husbands to the virtues of companionship. Once men could understand women's legitimate desires and aspirations, marriage happiness was restored.

The role assigned to women in these representations suggested that, even when they became skilful industrial workers and equal contributors to the family's economy, good socialist women retained most of the responsibility for the success of family life, through their performance as wives and mothers. Even mainstream aesthetic norms were only partially broken. If *Przyjaciółka* told its young readers that women's working ability was what made them attractive, cinema continued to portray beautiful women, who once dismissed their working clothes quickly went back to conventional feminine attires.

In their effort to keep new models and established expectations together, these early representations of women's life in the new Poland already pointed to what would soon become one of the most critical issues of the socialist economy: women's acquisition of a new economic role did not diminish their domestic centrality, but left them to carry the double burden of professional and domestic work largely unaided.

In Italy, the limits and contradiction of the postwar Communist reflection on marriage was well represented by one of the most successful biographical narratives published in the fifties.

Marina Sereni's *I Giorni della nostra vita* (Days of our life) was published in 1955 and became an instant success, with five editions

<sup>39</sup> Similar narratives could be found in other movies from the same years, such as *Niedaleko Warszawy* [Not Far from Warsaw], dir. Maria Kaniewska (1954) and *Irena, do domu* [Irena, Go Home], dir. Jan Fethke (1955).

and nearly one million copies sold by the end of the decade. Much more than Engels or Babel's writing on the family, Sereni's memoir provided postwar Communist households with a guide to family life and political militancy. The fact that it was written by a woman and the compelling story of Marina ensured the popularity of a book that touched different cords and could be read as a family novel as much as a political text.

The daughter of Russian revolutionaries, Xenia Silberberg, had arrived in Rome with her mother as a child and married Emilio Sereni in 1928. For Emilio, she had converted to Judaism and joined the anti-fascist underground movement, suffering both political and racial persecutions. Marina shared Emilio's political activity from the beginning of their relationship, risking being arrested several times, and keeping up Sereni's political network when he was detained. In 1935, she followed him to France, where she contributed to the creation of the clandestine paper *Noi donne*.<sup>40</sup> Separations, uncertainty and fear were the constant companions of Marina and Emilio's marriage and Marina brought up largely by herself two of the three daughters born to the couple. The third was still very young when Marina Sereni died in early 1952.

Contrary to Marina's hopes and expectations during the war, separations and anxieties did not end with the 'anti-fascist' victory. After 1945, as Emilio Sereni rapidly became one of the leaders of the PCI, Rome, the newly constituted Republican parliament and the party replaced prison and exile in taking him away from the family. Political engagement in times of peace proved less dangerous but not less pervasive than the anti-fascist struggle.

Marina Sereni's account of her complicated marriage and family life could have hardly been told in a more reassuring tone; her highly polished narration of a complicated and often dramatic life left no space for tensions, regrets or complaints. Not even loneliness was ever admitted.

The key that Marina offered for her actions and feeling was an absolute trust in the Party, as instrument of universal transformation:

The Party is for me fused with my private life, so intimately and completely, as to give me the certainty that I am a part of that immense strength that moves the world forward.<sup>41</sup>

Sereni's faith in universal progress and the strong sense of being part of it coexisted in her account with a striking modesty when talk-

<sup>40</sup> The same title would be taken in 1944 by the official monthly of the women's organisation of the PCI, the *Unione Donne Italiane* (Union of Italian Women), or UDI.

<sup>41</sup> Sereni, *I giorni della nostra vita*, 110.

ing about her role in the anti-fascist struggle and in the building of the postwar Party.<sup>42</sup> Throughout the book, Sereni's political role and commitment appeared secondary when compared to that of her husband and even somewhat accidental: her political engagement was the result of Mimmo's teaching and dedication.<sup>43</sup>

Although Marina Sereni had been without doubt a prominent protagonists of Communist politics during the fascist years and throughout the war, *I giorni della nostra vita* left all this in the shade. The clearly pedagogical aim of the narrative was to show how a Communist family should be: equal, open to learning and to constant improvement, but also based on a clear and recognisable division of responsibilities.

In a letter written to her newly married daughter and her husband, Sereni spelled out both the difficulty and the importance of running a Communist household.

There are several very good comrades who think that their work is finished once they return home. They think that at home there is nothing to do; they don't realise that *to be* a Communist means to be a Communist always and in everything: educating children as a Communist, speaking to the wife as a Communist, being attached to the parents as a Communist. [...] It is only this unity that can allow a Communist to be happy. And this of course applies also to the wife of the militant comrade.<sup>44</sup>

Sereni did not spell out what behaving like a Communist in the home meant exactly. The way in which she and Emilio had run their household, however, would suggest a rather conventional distribution of responsibilities. The words that Marina Sereni addressed to her husband from Moscow, where she was undergoing cancer treatment, must have sound extraordinary and yet familiar to many Italian women. Marina apologised for the unusual domestic chores that her forced absence had imposed on her husband; that Emilio should be busy with the care of their youngest daughter, Clara, at a time in which he "really needed to be free" was a real inconvenience, wrote Marina. However, she added, the Communist leader might have found "some consolation" in the experience: "as it had never happened be-

<sup>42</sup> A different picture of the Sereni household was painted by Marina's youngest daughter, Clara, in her autobiographical novel, cf. Sereni, *Il gioco dei regni*; on Marina Sereni and the Sereni family, Gabrielli, *Tempio di virilità*; Casalini, *Famiglie comuniste* and "The Family, Sexual Morality and Gender", 229-44; Bellassai, *La morale comunista*. For a broader discussion of Communist identity in Italy, Accornero, Mannheimer, *L'identità comunista*; Agosti, "Il militante comunista torinese".

<sup>43</sup> Sereni, *I giorni della nostra vita*, 11.

<sup>44</sup> Sereni, *I giorni della nostra vita*, 112.

fore that you had to take care of any of our children, so now for the first time you have a sense of what it means to be a mother. This thought gives me so much pleasure, you cannot imagine...".<sup>45</sup>

Was Marina's remark ironic? Or was it meant to convey the idea that her husband's lack of participation in the work of care had really deprived him of an important dimension of his life? Was Marina making a subtle point on the lack of equality that had characterised their domestic life, or had she tried to emphasise that her husband's dedication to politics had been at the cost of his sacrificing his family and personal sphere?

The interviews conducted with Communist militants by the American political scientist Gabriel Almond in 1954 revealed the many tensions that political activity provoked within the household: from the competing demands of young families and party's activities, to the ideological divisions that could separate family members. If those tensions could be revealed to a researcher from abroad, however, very little echo of them could be found in Communist public narratives. The accepted ideal of militancy born out of the Resistance dictated that political commitment should always prevail over the private.

In 1952, the publication of the last letters written by Resistant fighters sentenced to death between 1943 and 1945 consecrated this ideal of devotion to the cause paid with the ultimate price.<sup>46</sup> Here too, the family appeared as a painful reminder of the often irreconcilable duties that confronted committed anti-fascists, as deep and moral devotions could however never prevail over political commitment.

The idea that, even in times of peace, political commitment should always prevail over private preoccupations remained the dominant model of militancy throughout the postwar years. As the Communist leader Gian Carlo Pajetta succinctly explained in his own autobiography: "I often wondered then, whether there were cases when the 'private' should be given priority over the 'public'. And I wondered about it later in life. The answer has always been the same: never".<sup>47</sup>

*I giorni della nostra vita* helped to promote the idea that pursuing the goodness of the family while being a good Communist was a difficult, but possible and even necessary task, and that behaving morally within the home was a condition for any good Communist militant. Such moral behaviour, however, did not entail freeing their wives from the work of care.

<sup>45</sup> Sereni, *I giorni della nostra vita*, 110-11.

<sup>46</sup> Antonicelli, *Lettere di condannati a morte*.

<sup>47</sup> Almond, *The Appeals of Communism*, 318.

## 2.8 Marina, Mary, and the Others

The idea that private and political commitment should feed on each other, creating a smooth and powerful continuum, was at the core of Marina Sereni's autobiography. By determinately putting her own political life in the background, however, Sereni seemed to suggest that the main role of a good Communist wife was to keep family life going, allowing the husband-comrade to dedicate himself fully to political work.

Although motivated by a very different faith, the family life that she described was not so different from the ideal of reciprocal support and virtuous conduct so often advocated by the Church. Sereni would have certainly not subscribed to Pius XII's open endorsement of hierarchical marriage. The Pope's call for homes open to the outside, but not dominated by mundane concerns, where the spouses could help each other to improve in the moral virtues that held marriages together and help them to grow, however, was not so far from her own description of an ideal Communist marriage. Although Sereni would have probably taken exception to the Pope's invitation to women to attend their duties gladly "forgetting themselves" and "enduring and forgiving" for the good of the family, her own biography seemed to have followed a rather close model of femininity, although motivated by different beliefs.<sup>48</sup> It is difficult not to read the last pages of Marina Sereni's memoir as a form of secular devotion akin to Catholic tales of selflessness and sacrifice.

Ill with cancer, between 1950 and 1952 Marina Sereni spent long periods alone in Moscow and in Lausanne, undergoing medical treatment. Her published correspondence presents us with a model of virtuous tolerance and endurance, veined with irony and playful affection:

as far as your visit is concerned, don't feel pressured: come when you are free. I am in fact very pleased that you are not here; given that we have mastered this model, of being two in one, we have to make the most of it, sparing the other what we can. The same joy that I felt in Milan, when they came to arrest you and your were not at home, I felt it again on the operating table, thinking that you knew nothing, and would not worry.<sup>49</sup>

Marina suffering alone and sparing her husband the pain of her illness could have been lifted from a Catholic representation of holi-

<sup>48</sup> On the model of the Christian family, see also Festorazzi, "La famiglia nella Bibbia", 157.

<sup>49</sup> Sereni, *I giorni della nostra vita*, 14.

ness, and even Marina's trust in the Party, only and absolute mover of the world, suggested a faith akin to transcendental religiosity.

In a Communist household, suggested Sereni, political struggle and family life should go hand in hand, responding to the same morality, and sharing the same commitment and self-abnegation. The only way in which this could be done, however, was through the upholding of rather traditional gender roles.

In her biography, Sereni said hardly anything about her life before marriage and about her own family of origin, including her revolutionary mother. Marina's story had started with marriage. As if to confirm her personal and political rebirth, the biography was published under the name that Xenia had assumed while in hiding.

The complexity of Sereni's life and the way in which she told her story produced a powerful portrait. The mode of the narration, the mixing of power and submission, the commitment to family and maternity, but also the willingness to subordinate them to a higher cause, evoked a figure of womanhood with whom not only Communists but also Catholic women schooled in the cult of Mary could easily identify.

Marina Sereni's powerful self-narrative laid bare the question that would have accompanied the representation and self-representation of women throughout the postwar period: was power to be found within the home or outside of it? Should women reject the primacy of the domestic postulated by centuries of religious teaching and consolidated national traditions in favour of full political, economic and social emancipation? Or should they accept that even the participation in a political movement that promised radical social transformations could go hand in hand with their overwhelming responsibility in domestic matters?

Both in Italy and in Poland, the figure of Mary provided the most powerful archetype for an idea of womanhood in which power and submission, domestic devotion and participation in the greatest historical revolutions merged.<sup>50</sup> No discussion of family models in Italy and Poland can ignore her influence.

The attractiveness of Mary laid largely in the multifarious and mysterious prerogatives that made her a pliable figure. Mary signified acceptance and innocence, as well as strength and power and offered the perfect model of maternal devotion, faithfulness and perseverance.<sup>51</sup>

**50** Rubin, *Mother of God*, xxi. On the symbolic importance of Mary in the definition of women's social and political role in Catholic contexts, Accati, "Il marito della santa", 79-104. For classic anthropological accounts of the place of women in southern European societies, Schneider J., Schneider P., *Culture and Political Economy*.

**51** See Warner, *Alone in All Her Sex* and Zemon-Davies, *Culture and Society*.

Mary was both the ultimate mediator between God and humanity, and a sign of the triumphant Church, which through her celebrated both the virtues of domesticity and the power of the Ecclesia.

To women, Mary offered a model at once unachievable and unavoidable. While putting a woman at the centre of the event that had defined the history of the western world, Mary's attribution restricted the perimeter of what was deemed acceptable for them. She could therefore be used both to celebrate a general notion of womanhood and to discipline actual women into their assigned role.

In the Cold War confrontation, Mary displayed all her political relevance.

## 2.9 The Protector of Family and Nation

On 1 November 1950, the Apostolic Constitution *Munificentissus Deus* proclaimed the bodily assumption of Mary into heaven as a dogma, to be accepted by all the faithful. In this way, Pius XII brought to completion a process started by Pius IX a century earlier, with the proclamation of Mary's Immaculate Conception.<sup>52</sup> Both Popes intervened on issues on which no theological unanimity existed, but that were certain to help the Pontiff's popularity.

As he had done since the beginning of his Pontificate, Pius XII turned to Mary to call the flock to resist the siege of the modern world, never losing sight of the real models that should inspire their life. As Pius IX before him, Pacelli reminded the faithful that Mary signified not only virtuous womanliness but also Mother Church and "the triumph of the spiritual family of Christ over sin and worldliness".<sup>53</sup>

The Marian celebrations of the mid-fifties represented the culmination of a process that had started with the big political confrontations of the late forties, in which the power of Mary had been fully displayed through hugely popular pilgrimages and novenas, miracles and apparitions.<sup>54</sup>

Both in Italy and in Poland, the resurgence of religious devotion in the aftermath of the Second World War represented a powerful phe-

<sup>52</sup> On the cultural and theological implications of the dogma see Hamington, *Hail Mary?*, 18. The Pope's devotion to Mary had found a first manifestation on October 31, 1942, when Pius XII had consecrated the human race to the Immaculate Heart of Mary. The decision to make 1954 a special Marian year, to celebrate the centennial of the definition of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, and the institution of a new festivity dedicated to the Virgin in the same year, completed the appraisal of the figure of Mary.

<sup>53</sup> Corrado Pope, "Immaculate and Powerful", 175-7.

<sup>54</sup> Christian, *Visionaries*, 40. On the wave of miraculous apparition and their meaning in early Cold War, Ventresca, "The Virgin and the Bear", 441. On Marian apparitions more broadly, Zimdars-Swartz, *Encountering Mary*.

nomenon, signifying deep-seated sentiments and beliefs, stirred by the rising ideological conflicts of the early Cold War. The particular relevance assumed by the Marian cult in both countries demonstrated the resonance of gender in popular piety and in its manifestations.

In Italy, the grand Marian pilgrimages organised by the Church in 1947-48 were followed by a wave of apparitions and miraculous interventions in the eve of the 1948 election. Despite the caution of Catholic hierarchies, popular devotion readily accepted the idea that Mary had mobilised in what the Pope had often defined as a battle for or against Christ.

Ventresca has argued that the pre-electoral apparitions of 1948 reflected “Italy’s unique position as the seat of the universal Roman Church”, as well as the many tensions that throughout history had accompanied the uneasy coexistence of civic and religious institutions in the country. Faced with the concrete possibility of a victory of the Popular Front, Italian Catholics reached to Mary to ask for protection against the prospect of an atheistic government, the “spectre of civil unrest” and even “the faint but frightening prospect of armed military invasion from behind the Iron Curtain”.<sup>55</sup>

I would suggest that something else was also at stake. In the aftermath of unprecedented violence and disruption, praying for Mary’s intercession brought the comfort of a maternal presence that not even the war could take away. This was as strong in Poland as it was in Italy.

Far from being a typically southern European phenomenon, in Poland invoking Mary’s help in time of political crisis and danger had a tradition that was at least equal to Italy and quite possibly stronger. In the nineteenth century, while Italian Catholics called on Mary to help them resist the secular national State, Poles invoked the intercession of Mary in defence of a nation deprived of statehood by its aggressive neighbours.<sup>56</sup> On at least two occasions in the history of Poland, Mary had been credited with saving the country, thanks to her miraculous interventions.

In 1944, as Warsaw engaged a desperate struggle against the Nazi occupiers, hundreds of chapels dedicated to Mary were erected in the city’s courtyards. The shrines were not only a sign of devotion to the patroness of Polish combats, but also a desperate effort to obtain protection at a desperate time, by bringing Mary as close as possible to the domestic space. While no otherworldly intervention saved Warsaw in 1944, the shrines erected during the battle became so powerfully associated to the resistance of the city that no attempt to eliminate them was pursued by Communist authorities; even when Mary became a point of reference in the battle engaged by the Cath-

<sup>55</sup> Ventresca, “The Virgin and the Bear”, 442.

<sup>56</sup> See also Blackburn, *Marpingen*.



olic Church against the new powers.

The political force of Mary found a powerful display in the Polish Primate Wyszyński's appeal to the Mother of God as the ultimate defender of the prerogatives of traditional family life. As a protector of the Polish nation and the family, Mary provided powerful symbols both of national cohesion and of political resistance. Images such as the Black Madonna of Częstochowa, credited with having saved Poland from the Swedish invasion in 1655, and whose cult Wyszyński strongly supported, embodied both a maternal and regal figure. At once suffering and powerful, caring and bereaved, she provided the perfect representation of the suffering but undefeated nation that the Catholic Church wished to represent.<sup>57</sup>

In 1956, Wyszyński solemnly declared Poland's servitude to Mary in recognition of the special tie that linked the Poles to the mother of God. The prayer that accompanied the national devotion proclaimed by the Primate made special reference to the family, invoking Mary's protection against the unwelcome intrusion of the state.

On 26 August 1956, the great pilgrimage called by Wyszyński at the monastery of Jasna Góra, where the image of the Black Madonna was preserved and venerated, saw the participation of at least one million people. Organised as the first public act of the Polish Church in the aftermath of the worst of Stalinist repression, the pilgrimage was a mass demonstration of devotion that belittled the State's effort to promote Poland's secularisation and to restrict the perimeter of the Church's social engagement.<sup>58</sup>

The litany recited by the pilgrims, moreover, called for direct divine intervention to redress the wrongs that the new atheist government had brought to family life, to eliminate divorce and abortion and to protect parents' ability to educate their children in the spirit of the Church.<sup>59</sup>

The invocation to protect traditional family life was even stronger in the prayers of the Great Novena launched by Wyszyński in 1957. The prayer *Rodzina Bogiem Silna* (Family is Strong with God), in particular, reasserted that marriage was primarily a sacrament, dependent solely on God, and that family was a natural institution independent of the State. Family and nation, both consecrated to religious values, were one and the same, and their rights should always prevail over those of the State. Motherhood remained women's first

<sup>57</sup> See Niedźwiedz, "Mère et reine", 320-2.

<sup>58</sup> This demonstration of unwavering faith in Mary would have been renewed in even greater form in 1966, when massive gatherings of people saluted the image of the Black Madonna of Częstochowa taken in pilgrimage across Poland. See Porter-Szűcs, "Hetmanka and Mother", 151-70.

<sup>59</sup> Żaryn, *Dzieje Kościoła*, 158-9; Thiriet, *Marks czy Maryja?*, 264-5.

role, and the ideal household was one blessed by generous fertility, informed by religious values, and attached to the traditions that had informed Polish culture through the centuries. The nine-year Jubilee launched by Wyszyński in preparation for the Millennial anniversary of Polish Christendom, celebrated in 1966, offered an extraordinary platform for Catholic mobilisation. In Kosicki's words, the Jubilee was a "testament to the strength of popular religious sentiment on a continent long confronted with the specter of secularization".<sup>60</sup>

In the harshest moments of the confrontation, Wyszyński had emerged as the "international face of the Catholic Church's resistance to Communist encroachment".<sup>61</sup> As the rigours of Stalinism finally started to relax, few could doubt that the Church had managed to retain a powerful voice, which was determined to assert especially on family issues.

## 2.10 Conclusions

In an article published in 1967, the progressive catholic intellectual Ruggero Orfeo reflected on the shortcomings of the ideological war fought by catholics over the family since the end of the war. He complained about the superficiality of the Catholic position, which had often preferred propaganda to the actual analysis of the Communist conception of family life.<sup>62</sup>

A deeper analysis of the Communist position, argued Orfeo, would have revealed little originality and scant clear thinking, but not the immorality of which Catholics routinely accused Communists.<sup>63</sup>

Not only could Communists be highly moral, pointed out Orfeo, but their vision of family life was not necessary at odds with the Catholic one, at least as daily life was concerned. Catholics and Communists diverged radically in their conception of the family as either a manifestation of natural law (for the Catholics) or a variable product of human development (for the Communists), but not necessarily on how to run a household.<sup>64</sup>

Orfeo's comments had a particular ring in Italy, where the models of virtuous family life put forward by the PCI gave ample man-

<sup>60</sup> Kosicki, *Catholics on the Barricade*, 126-7; see also Micewski, *Stefan Kardinal Wyszynski*.

<sup>61</sup> Kosicki, *Catholics on the Barricade*, 125.

<sup>62</sup> Orfeo, "La concezione della famiglia" 35.

<sup>63</sup> Orfeo, "La concezione della famiglia", 40.

<sup>64</sup> Orfeo, "La concezione della famiglia", 40. Unable to find contemporary Catholic thinkers seriously engaged in this debate, Orfeo had to remind his reader of the analysis published by Agostino Gemelli in 1921. See Gemelli, *L'origine della famiglia*.

ifestations of Communists' own conservatism in family and gender matters. It applied somehow less to Poland, where the effort to put forward an alternative vision of family life was pursued with much greater determination by postwar Communist government.

The factors that most explained these differences in approach are to be found in the political situation that existed in the two countries: the position of power occupied by Polish Communists and the relative marginality of the PCI to national government.

The differences in the immediate political circumstances lived by the two countries, however, could not affect the impact of a deep-seated cultural model and by the imagery of popular Catholicism, in particular in postwar narratives of family and gender roles.

The huge popularity of Mary, in particular, provided an unavoidable term of confrontation in both countries. From the Catholic side, Mary could be upheld as the ultimate model of femininity, and brandished as the ultimate defender of family and nation. From a Communist perspective, the popular devotion to Mary could appear as a remnant of the past, whose pervasiveness had nonetheless to be reckoned with. One way of doing so was to incorporate themes such as maternal sacrifice and devotion into Communist narratives of model family life. The autobiography of Marina Sereni is an exemplary case.

