

“THE MOST MODERATE ITALIANIZATION?” SOCIAL ACTION
AND NATIONALIST POLITICS IN THE NORTH-EASTERN
ADRIATIC BORDERLANDS (1919–1954)

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the development of a comprehensive network of Italian nursery schools in the highly mixed “Venezia Giulia” in the immediate aftermath of World War One. The schools were implanted by the largely female voluntary welfare association Italia Redenta with an eye to “Italianizing” the young children of slavophone and mixed language families.

Keywords: Social welfare, north-eastern Adriatic borderland, gender, childhood, social politics, voluntary welfare associations

“LA PIÙ SERENA ITALIANIZZAZIONE?” AZIONE SOCIALE E POLITICHE
NAZIONALISTE NELLE TERRE DI CONFINE DELL’ADRIATICO NORD-
ORIENTALE (1919–1954)

SINTESI

L’articolo esplora lo sviluppo di un’ articolata rete di asili nido e scuole materne italiane nella regione multietnica della Venezia Giulia all’indomani della prima guerra mondiale. Le scuole furono rette dall’associazione volontaria Italia Redenta, che, formata principalmente da donne, si occupava anche di “Italianizzare” i bimbi slavofoni e di famiglie linguisticamente miste.

Parole chiave: stato sociale, Adriatico nord-orientale, confine, genere, politiche sociali, politiche giovanili, associazioni volontarie

INTRODUCTION

This article is part of a larger project titled “Social politics in European borderlands; A comparative and transnational study, 1870s to the present.” This project seeks to reshape the history of European social provision by retrieving the contributions of local, borderland actors and associations in shaping national welfare systems. For understanding welfare provision in ethnically mixed borderlands gives us insight into how processes of inclusion in and exclusion from social assistance have functioned and evolved from the end of the 19th century until the present day. Hence, the experience of local social reformers, their knowledge of local conditions, but also their nationalist, racist, gender or religious prejudices profoundly shaped patterns of systemic involvement of the state.

Examining the politics of borderland regions through the lens of social politics allows us to deploy a lens that is different from, but complementary to, that of national/ethnic identity politics. As key objects of competing social actions in the northeastern Adriatic, children offer a royal road into the complex social politics of this highly contested border region (Klabjan, 2011). For the relationship of children to social provision has long been indirect, mediated through the welfare responsibilities and social rights of their parents. This is because, as workers and as citizens in the making, children stand in an indirect, future-oriented relationship to both employment and citizenship; the two central categories through which welfare states are structured.

One of the most important welfare measures targeting children, undertaken by the state and civil society actors alike, was ensuring their civic education through full-time primary schooling, which constituted a critical step in nation building throughout Europe, including European borderlands. In multilingual regions, as borderlands often are, tensions between civil society actors and the state (which was often perceived as “foreign”) could be and often were particularly intense, as the former sought to “renationalize” their own, allegedly “denationalized” children through schooling in their “true” native language. Alternatively, a state that aspired to control the region might move in and, with the necessary collaboration of supportive local actors, strive to assimilate people of “other tongues”, beginning with the very youngest children. The largely female association *Assistenza all’Italia Redenta* (“Assistance to Redeemed Italy”), which was active in the north-eastern Adriatic borderlands from the end of WWI, offers a telling example of the latter strategy.

Conceived by a group of nationalist and irredentist women, most of whom had seen service as nurses on the Alpine front, *Italia Redenta* returned to those same battlefields eight months after the Armistice in order to deliver emergency assistance to the surviving civilian population, primarily by distributing work to unemployed mothers. Very quickly, however, *Italia Redenta* shifted its focus from establishing workshops to organizing nursery schools in the small towns and villages that were dispersed across the highly mixed “Venezia Giulia” (North-eastern Friuli and Istria, Trieste, Gorizia and parts of Dalmatia).¹ Unsure of its dominance over the numerous Slovene, Croat and mixed

1 The name “Venezia Giulia” comes from the irredentist claim that Italy’s true northern and northeastern boundaries were made up of the so-called “3 Venices”: Venezia Trentina in the north, Venezia (the north and

language families that populated this former Habsburg region, the Italian state seized swiftly on school policy as a key instrument of state-building on the new Adriatic frontier (Andri & Mellinato, 1994). *Italia Redenta* worked in concert with the liberal state (which, in the immediate postwar years, took the form of the occupying Italian army), creating schools where the youngest children of local, mixed language or slavophone families were taught – in Italian – basic reading, writing, and numeracy, as well as gardening and other rural working class skills. For the next fifty-eight years, *Italia Redenta* would continue to deliver nursery school services in the Venezia Giulia under a dizzying succession of political regimes and geopolitical conjunctures. It is in many ways an emblematic borderland welfare association, blending as it does local actors (notably the female school teachers) with a few key players from the Italian interior while borrowing templates from international actors like the Red Cross and the (American) Federation of Day Nurseries.

Based on research that is still at a very early stage, this article explores the shifting frontiers between social and political action, and between male versus female forms of action as these traversed the *Italia Redenta* movement across its very long life (1919–1978). I am particularly interested in grasping the complex and shifting relation between voluntary action and the Italian state from the last years of Giolitti's liberal régime through the fascist *ventennio* and beyond, into the early decades of the First Republic. For, among other things, the tale of *Italia Redenta* allows us to tell a very different story about the evolution of the Italian state, one that is told from the point of view of civil society actors who engaged regularly with that state and shaped some of its most important contemporary functions, namely, those of social protection. It also allows us to explore the process of nation-building from the perspective of a heterogeneous and highly contested borderland, where the meanings of *italianità* were of necessity rather different from those in the Italian interior (Sluga, 2001; Cattaruzza, 2017).

FROM THE AUSTRIAN LITTORAL TO THE VENEZIA GIULIA: BUILDING A SOCIO-EDUCATIVE NETWORK IN THE NORTHEASTERN ADRIATIC

In July, 1919 the first 18 volunteers from the *Opera Nazionale Assistenza all'Italia Redenta* (ONAIR), all of them women, arrived in Trieste, spearhead of a carefully meditated socio-educational initiative in the impoverished, war-torn Venezia Giulia. For nearly four years this frontier district, formerly of the recently vanished Austro-Hungarian empire had seen some of the most punishing battles of the Great War. Those who remained when the fighting finally stopped were a bombed-out, malnourished and under-employed population of italoophone, slavophone and mixed language families, ill-housed (when not entirely homeless altogether) whom the Italian government was eager to welcome

northeastern Veneto region), and Venezia Giulia in the northeastern Adriatic. Of the three only one – Veneto – belonged to Italy before WWI. Possession of the other two was a part of the irredentist dream of fulfilling Italy's "true" borders, first evoked by Garibaldi and then appropriated by irredentist nationalists toward the end of the 19th century. On 26 April 1915, Italy extracted the promise of these lands in return for joining the war on the Allied side.

(or press) into the newly expanded nation. Nearly two years before the frontiers of this borderland region would be settled, the women of *Italia Redenta*, most of whom had seen service as nurses on the Alpine front, seized the initiative and redeployed their skills in a program of immediate relief to these distressed families. Beyond the emergency distribution of food, clothing and medicine lay a longer-term socio-educative project of ministering to the region's very poorest women and children with an eye to conquering their loyalties for Italy's expansive nationalist program.

At a time when aid organizations were proliferating rapidly in the Venezia Giulia, some of which, like the Habsburg-era *Lega Nazionale*, had been quite active before the War, *Italia Redenta* had to define its niche very carefully in order not to duplicate (let alone compete with) its colleagues in this domain.² As many of the already active organizations targeted children of primary school age, particularly orphans (who made up fully 2% of the local population), *Italia Redenta* set its sights on a younger population, creating nursery schools and maternal and child health services that were all linked to those same schools. Here, the women of *Italia Redenta* fed, clothed and educated – in Italian – the young children (aged 3–6) of local slavophone and mixed language families while offering their mothers paid work making clothing in the organization's numerous sewing and knitting workshops.

In a region ravaged by malaria and tuberculosis, and beset by high levels of malnutrition, the women of *Italia Redenta* were immediately obliged to expand their mission to include badly needed medical services to mothers and young children. These latter were delivered via a network of dispensaries and walk-in clinics that were attached to several of the larger ONAIR nursery schools, as well as through the organization's *Casa Materna* on the via Manzoni in Trieste, where 16 mothers (most of them unwed) and 22 nurslings, some of them orphaned or abandoned, were housed and cared for by ONAIR staff.³ Pressed by the desperately poor public health conditions in the region, *Italia Redenta* pioneered two forms of social assistance that were new to Italy at the time. The first of these was the nursery school complex, which placed the school at the heart of a larger, polyvalent health, education and welfare center; an unusual structure that doubtless owes its shape to the fact that the initial organizers and leaders of this socio-educational initiative were nurses rather than teachers. The second was the *Casa Materna*, whose novel structures of mother and infant welfare would be faithfully reproduced some five to ten years later by fascist Italy's premier child welfare organization, the *Opera Nazionale Maternità e Infanzia* (ONMI) (Gobbato, 2012).

Italia Redenta's social action was thus at one and the same time an eminently political/nationalist one, concerned with the "patriotic penetration" of Venezia Giulia's slavophone population and their assimilation into the Italian nation via socio-medical assistance and

2 *Lega Nazionale* was Austrian-Hungary's main Italian school association. It ran cultural associations, after school programs and Italian nursery schools in mixed Italo-German (Alto Adige) or Italo-Slovene/Croat-speaking regions of the Empire (Friuli, Trieste, Istria, Dalmatia) from the late 19th century (1891 in the Venezia Giulia) until the end of the 1920s. See Apollonio, 2001.

3 By 1923, the number of nurslings would rise to 30.

language instruction, especially to the very young. In a region that had been laid waste by four years of war, with high levels of unemployment and infant mortality, thousands of orphaned and abandoned children and an illegitimate birthrate that was 3–4 times higher than the average for the rest of Italy (though fertility rates were in fact quite low), the blending of a social mission with a nationalist and educational one was a winning formula: by November 1919, *Italia Redenta* had already established an important beachhead in Trieste and had opened nursery/workshop complexes in several of the most important frontier towns: Gorizia, Monfalcone, Tolmino, Gradisca.

Italia Redenta's ever-more expansive activity in the Venezia Giulia region reminds us of just how porous the frontier between social and political/nationalist action was in interwar Europe. Indeed, these were the years when understandings of politics across the ideological spectrum were expanding to include social politics. If the left had long understood social action to be an integral part of its political mission, the right would soon come to see the point as well, as Europeans sought to come to grips with the massive destruction and socio-economic dislocation that the war had imposed across the continent (Downs, 2014).

The realm of social action had long been a women's world, particularly (though not exclusively) a terrain of public action for bourgeois and aristocratic women. At a time when women in most European nations were excluded from formal political participation (Italian women would not receive the franchise until the end of WWII), social action in connection with a political movement, or in the context of municipal socialism, swiftly became an important avenue by which women could participate publicly in advancing their chosen movements' social and political goals. But as the social dimension of politics gained in importance, this formerly female domain began to be colonized by male activists as well. In post-WWI Italy, the shape and timing of this masculine colonization had everything to do with the rise of fascism and the centrality that socio-medical services to poor women and their children acquired in the context of Mussolini's struggle to raise the birthrate while lowering infant mortality. *Italia Redenta* offers an especially revealing lens through which to examine this process, as the sexual division of labor within the organization would shift markedly with its gradual transition from liberal-era nationalist/irredentist aid organization to fascist para-statal educational structure after 1924.

The idea behind *Italia Redenta* was originally conceived by the Duchessa Elena d'Aosta. A fervent nationalist with irredentist leanings (she was good friends with Gabriele D'Annunzio), Elena d'Aosta had already shown herself ready to act in service of her political convictions; first in Libya, where she had served on the frontlines in 1911, then as Inspector of voluntary nurses for the Italian Red Cross during WWI. In the spring of 1919, d'Aosta gathered around her a like-minded network of noble and upper-bourgeois women, plus a few well-placed (male) politicians. These women and men would make up ONAIR's Executive council, which coordinated (from Rome) activities on the ground in both Venezia Trentina and Venezia Giulia. So here we have an example of an association with close ties to the state and, as we shall see, to the army as well. While this may not fit everyone's idea of a civil society organization, it is by no means an isolated example in 20th century Europe. Moreover, *Italia Redenta's* close collaboration with the army

reminds us of many forms that the “state” takes in borderland regions: imperial, absent, weak, occupying army, etc. (Hametz, 2017).

ONAIR’s founding statutes stipulated that the vast majority of volunteers be former Red Cross nurses; women who had been “put to the test during the war” and proven their valor in the face of extremely harsh conditions on the Alpine front. The hard climate, poor housing and generally desolate conditions that awaited them in war torn Venezia Giulia would demand every ounce of that courage.⁴

The association’s regional organization was centered in Trieste, where the organization’s Regional Inspector for the Venezia Giulia managed the activities of her volunteer workers whilst forging good relations with regional and city government as well as other *Opere* active in the region. ONAIR’s first such Inspector, the Contessina Gigliucci, arrived during the summer of 1919 with 17 volunteers and began setting up operations. Soon after their arrival, D’Annunzio organized his infamous Marcia di Ronchi (11/12 September 1919) in order to support the uprising by Fiume/Rijeka’s Italian population, which hoped to join their multi-ethnic city to Italy.⁵ *Italia Redenta*’s volunteer company gladly accompanied him, supporting his seizure of the city by distributing material and medical aid to local citizens during the initial weeks of the Fiume adventure. By late September/early October, however, the *Italia Redenta* volunteers had withdrawn from Fiume and returned to Trieste in order to develop their local operation. Although *Italia Redenta* would swiftly implant schools and clinics throughout the Venezia Giulia and along the Istrian peninsula, they would not return to Fiume/Rijeka until the early 1930s.⁶

By the end of August, the Contessina Gigliucci saw herself replaced by the decidedly non-aristocratic, but very experienced Clara Valli, who, during her three-year tenure during ONAIR’s crucial early years created many of the policies that would govern ONAIR action on the ground.⁷ The role of the Regional Inspector was extremely powerful, as she was head of all operations on the ground; Roman oversight very distant and the Executive Council trusted her implicitly. Valli thus established the practice whereby less experienced volunteers were paired with trained Red Cross and social work professionals so that they might learn the work more quickly. By the same token, Valli refused to take voluntary workers for less than three months, given the amount of time it took to train them. This effectively weeded out any dilettantes and ensured a high level of commitment among the volunteers.

4 ASTs, ONAIR, Scatola 1, dossier 1919, Statue, 1–2.

5 In theory, Fiume/Rijeka had 24.212 people who declared Italian as their primary language of use, and 12.926 who declared as their primary language Serbo-Croatian, German, Slovenian or Hungarian. But this census was based on a carefully gerrymandered drawing of the city boundaries so as to leave out the overwhelmingly Croatian port district of Sušak which, if included, indicated a clear Yugoslav majority (27.393), versus 24.870 Italians, 6.856 Magyars and 3.870 “others.” (all ethnic identifications being based on self-declared language of primary usage) (Comité Yougoslav de Paris, 1919). See also Alatri, 1959, and Ledeen, 1975.

6 ASTs, ONAIR, Ex-scatola 1, b. 2, Dossier «Autorità scolastica 1932-5».

7 Crocerossina from Narni, in Umbria.

Valli left a second, important legacy from her years as Regional Inspector: as the network of ONAIR nursery schools expanded (to 8 by the spring of 1920), she began sending the neediest and most physically fragile children to *colonie marine* along the Adriatic coast for a month each summer, aided by a generous subsidy (L 20.000) from the Ministry of Public Health, which subsidy was renewed annually. During the early 1920s, some 80-100 tiny children left home each summer for a *cura marina* by the sea. They returned "robust and in remarkably better health" to families that were "fully satisfied with the treatment offered to their little ones."⁸

Finally, Clara Valli brokered a very advantageous deal with Professor Paolo Jacchia, head of the *Opera Orfani di Guerra*, that allowed her to move ONAIR headquarters from their sadly dilapidated building on the via Franca and join the *Orfani di Guerra* in larger, more comfortable and – crucially – more hygienic facilities on the via Manzoni. It was here that Inspector Valli would officially establish ONAIR's *Casa Materna*, transferring the 22 nurslings and 16 desperately poor and malnourished mothers who had been parked provisionally in the decrepit via Franca premises to lodgings actually worthy of the name. "If the *Opera* can build this, the only nursling hospital in Trieste and then implant 12 more like it in the Venezia Giulia, *Italia Redenta* will have given a benefit of unquestionable value to this region," wrote Valli to the Executive Council back in Rome, hoping to gain both moral and financial support for this unexpected venture, taken on Valli's initiative when the opportunity for collaboration with another *Opera* suddenly presented itself.⁹ She also profited from the association with Professore Jacchia, who was an expert in child medicine, to establish ONAIR's first professional training courses, intended to give volunteers and staff further training in infant hygiene and care (*puericultura*) and in practices of child assistance more generally.

Valli's activism around the Casa Materna and the collaboration with Prof Jacchia remind us of the crucial role that well-chosen opportunism on the ground played in the success of a venture such as *Italia Redenta*, whose success rested on the ability of local activists like Valli to cultivate ties with individuals and institutions already active on the terrain. But it also reminds us of the importance that the ONAIR attached to technical training, professional qualifications and scientific social work as means of distancing their association from earlier traditions of charitable ladies.

When the first *Italia Redenta* workers arrived in Venezia-Giulia sights of devastation, destruction and profound human misery awaited them at every turn. Helping women (especially mothers) to find sources of employment was therefore one of *Italia Redenta*'s top priorities. Absolutely everything was in short supply in these "desolate regions" – food, clothing, medicine, transport. So ONAIR's first act was to set about creating workshops where women could knit and sew clothing for a small wage while their children were looked after in adjacent ONAIR nursery schools. The first of these complexes opened in Gorizia in early October 1919, thanks to a helping hand from the Army, which assisted

8 ASTs, ONAIR, ex-scatola 1, b. 1, dossier 1922, Rapporto del 13 gennaio 1922.

9 ASTs, ONAIR, ex-scatola 1, dossier 1920, 10 September 1920. Valli seems to have had a personal mission to improve the lives of poor, unwed mothers.

the *Opera* by offering them two empty barracks for their workshop and school plus a third one nearby where they could stock material (tinned food, clothing, thread, cloth, wool, shoes, school supplies, etc.).

If the Army's timely offer of former barracks allowed *Italia Redenta* to establish early on an important workshop and nursery school complex in the frontier town of Gorizia, the drastic shortage of buildings in reasonable repair obliged the *Opera* to distribute much material directly to women workers across the region, who would then produce the garments in their own homes. Alas, lack of rolling stock hampered this form of assistance as well, given the wide dispersion of peasant homes across the region. Happily for ONAIR, the Army once again came to their aid, offering them free passage on military trains so that they might distribute work, food and clothing to the neediest families.

As October turned to November, and the *Opera* opened two more nursery school/medical dispensary complexes (Monfalcone and Gradisca), the autumn rains began to fall in earnest. The wretchedness of the cold, wet northeastern climate struck a hard blow for these missionaries from Italy's warmer and sunnier interior. All found that the problem of acquiring sufficient wood to heat their schools merely added one more woe to the already lengthy list of concerns over how to accomplish, materially, the task of social, economic and educational assistance they had set themselves.¹⁰

ONAIR's nationalist activism on the early education front was by no means a novelty in the linguistically mixed borderlands of the former Habsburg empire. On the contrary, Slovene nursery schools had been established throughout the region during the decades leading up to the war, and local Slovene activists did what they could to re-open these schools after the Armistice. But in the struggle for the souls and tongues of Venezia Giulia's smallest children, *Italia Redenta* had the benefit of state support plus considerable material assistance from the Italian army, while Slovene activists, formerly supported by the Slovene School association (St Cyril e Methodius), could only count on their own, considerably reduced resources. This put ONAIR activists in a position to target neighborhoods and villages where the prewar nursery school had been a Slovene one: "The Committee [in Trieste] proposes that the *Opera* open under its own sign a nursery school that is currently closed in an ultra-working class district of Trieste (Rozzol), which is in desperate need of healthy Italian moral propaganda," declared Regional Committee Secretary Argentino in June 1921. To this end, the Committee granted the Rozzol project a L 20.000 subsidy so that it could fly the ONAIR flag over the formerly Slovene school which had had to close its doors for lack of funds, "as it no longer receives aid from the [Habsburg] 'Institute for poor neighborhoods' [St Cyril e Methodius] that had maintained the school under the Empire. It has all the necessary furniture which they would cede to us," concluded Argentino on a smugly confident note.¹¹

10 ASTs, ONAIR, ex-scatola 1, busta 1, dossier 1920, Valli to Bona Luzzato, 11 December 1920. Valli went on to note that the situation in ONAIR nursery schools outside Trieste was «critical».

11 ASTs, ONAIR, ex-scatola I, busta 1, dossier 1921, 9 giugno 1921, «Proposte».

ACTIVISM – AND PUSH-BACK – IN THE NORTH-EASTERN ADRIATIC BORDERLANDS DURING THE EARLY YEARS OF THE FASCIST VENTENNIO

After an initially strong implantation, growing political and economic crisis throughout Italy in 1921–1922 obliged ONAIR to interrupt its planned expansion and retreat to a simple holding operation. In the fall of 1922 came additional bad news: the government subsidy (L 180.000) that had allowed ONAIR to maintain that holding operation was about to be cut to L 100.000, a move that would surely “paralyze” ONAIR activism.¹² Fortunately for ONAIR, the ascendant fascist regime, with which a number of ONAIR stalwarts had close ties (including d’Aosta and Luzzatto) soon stepped into the breach and assured ample funding over the next three years.

Once again in a position to wage a ground war village by village for ONAIR against existing slavophone nursery schools, Italia Redenta rapidly expanded its network of schools, workshops and consultoria across the region in 1923–24 while defending existing schools on the linguistic frontier: “It is essential that this nursery school not be abandoned,” wrote the secretary of the Padova Committee to the Marchesa Bettina Casanova of the school in Devin/Duino on 20 May 1923. “We must keep it even if it demands sacrifices; otherwise, it will become a Slavic nursery school.”¹³

The Devin nursery school was indeed hotly contested, as journalists at the region’s premier Slovenian newspaper *Edinost* underscored in September 1924:

Since 1890, hundreds and thousands among our parents have been just like foolish flies when faced with ‘de-nationalizing spiders’ like Lega Nazionale or ONAIR, sending their children year after year into the denationalizing webs of non-Slavic kindergartens [...] where they are taught to despise all that is ours and authentically Slavic! [...] Italia Redenta alone has set up kindergartens in the following municipalities: Devin/Duino, Kanal/Canale, Tolmin/Tolmino, Bovec/Plezzo, Kobarid/Caporetto, Podbrdo/Piedicolle, Idrija/Idria, Zaga/Saga, Sveta Lucija/Santa Lucia, Cerkno/Circhina, Dolina/San Dorligo della Valle, Podgrad/Castelnuovo, Matulje/Mattuglie, etc. [...] and proudly boasts about how successful they’ve been, especially among children of ‘other nations/other kin.’ The kindergarten in Tolmin has 52 children, Kobarid has 32, Idrija, 100. They were least successful in Devin and Kanal, which are the two municipalities with the most nationally conscious parents [...].¹⁴

12 ASTs, ONAIR, ex-scatola I, busta 1, dossier 1922, 26 settembre 1922, Bona Luzzatto to Valli, quoting Commandant Aldo Mayer (of Trieste’s ONAIR Committee).

13 ASTs, ONAIR, ex-scatola I, busta 1, dossier 1923, 20 May 1923, Lucrezia Manzoni Brunelli to Marchesa Bettina Casanova on the subject of the Duino nursery school, which the Marchesa had been obliged to quit for reasons of poor health in spring 1923.

14 *Edinost*, 16 September 1924, 1, “Pajek in Muha,” translated by Dasa Ličen. Interestingly enough, the expression “of other nations/other kin” was used by both Slovenian and Italian activists in the region: *drugorodci* by *Edinost* (literally “of other kin”); *allogene* (“of foreign origin”) by *Italia Redenta*. Unlike the term “foreigner,” *drugorodci* and *allogene* refer to people of long-term (i.e., many generations) residence in the region who are nonetheless “of other nations.” The choice of these terms defined the problem as one of people who were there for generations and yet somehow should not be because the former Austrian littoral was “really” Slovene, “really” Italian.



Fig. 1: *The Italia Redenta school in Trnovo / Tarnova (Archivio Civico Museo di Storia Patria, Trieste, Fonds Opera Nazionale di Assistenza all'Infanzia delle Regioni di Confine – ONAIRC).*

Several months later, Council Delegate Bona Luzzatto reminded the Regional inspector that “His Excellency Mussolini has urged us to redouble our efforts in *la Slavia* and especially the area around Isonzo. “For the real purpose of the *Opera*” lay in the aggressive “patriotic penetration” of these “Slavic centers.”¹⁵ As we shall see below, wars of position in the former Habsburg littoral raged particularly strongly in these years of rapid – indeed, aggressive – ONAIR expansion.

The following October (1924), the young fascist regime decided to transform the ONAIR into an *ente morale*, that is to say, a public body with private civil society origins that performs work that the state has identified as strategic. At the same moment, the Gentile law (October 1923) was already transforming the status of nursery schools all over Italy, which were henceforth attached to the public elementary schools and given a new statute – that of “preparatory elementary grade.” Under this law ONAIR nursery schools were given the official task of Italianizing children in the frontier territories of Venezia Trentina and Venezia Giulia. From this day forward, ONAIR would receive subsidies from the Ministry of Public Instruction while retaining its autonomy as a private organization.

15 ASTs, ONAIR, ex-scatola 1, busta 1, dossier 1923, Bona Luzzatto to Edwige Costantini, 11 October 1923. Isonzo was, at the time, the most heavily Slovene-speaking district in the entire region.

The Gentile law spurred a profound transformation of the ONAIR, which henceforth sought to professionalize its staff not only on the socio-medical front but on the pedagogical one as well. Well aware of the youth and inexperience of the young women teachers whom ONAIR had recruited from the immediate environs (nearly all of whom were bi-, if not tri-lingual in the major languages of the region: Slovene, Croat, Italian), the *Opera* decided in 1926 to inaugurate its first summer classes in the burgeoning field of kindergarten teaching. The development of summer training courses coincided with the *Opera*'s larger pedagogical turn in favor of the child-centered methods of the sisters Agazzi, Rosa and Carolina. The Agazzis' "intuitive" methods for pre-primary school teaching shared a number of features with other "new pedagogies" of the era, notably that of Maria Montessori. But the Agazzis placed the emphasis on the teacher's "maternal mission," which was conceived in quasi-spiritual terms.¹⁶

To the extent that it was child-centered, the Agazzi method had much in common with Montessori's approach. But the Agazzis used poorer, more ordinary materials than did Montessori; materials that these impoverished children would have been likely to find around their own homes – cords, pebbles, bobbins and the like. These homely and familiar objects were meant to furnish the child occasions for spontaneous self-expression and discovery. Moreover, the Agazzi sisters stressed the importance of kind and gentle motherliness on the part of the *maestre giardini*. Indeed, the idea was to make the *scuola materna* as much like the child's home as possible, a kind of transitional space between home and the world. These schools therefore also had gardens and animals (rabbits, chickens, geese, etc.) that the children were meant to care for, thus expanding their repertoire of practical, rural working-class skills.

Finally, the children were taught the Italian language via an "intuitive" method that was grounded in a combination of constant dialogue with the teachers and – crucially – singing accompanied by movement. For the Agazzis had given considerable thought to the question of language acquisition; a reasonable preoccupation in a nation where so many children arrived at school speaking dialect, if not a different language altogether. It was here that song entered into their approach, offering children a ludic pathway into their new language, one that passed by their bodies and the human capacity for (and interest in) rhythmic sound and movement.¹⁷ And indeed, it was the Agazzi songbook above all that drew ONAIR officials to their methods. By 1927, the Trentino division of ONAIR had organized summer classes in Trento that Rosa Agazzi – "the spiritual guide for all our nursery schools" ran herself, classes that *maestre* from Venezia Giulia were only too happy to attend.¹⁸

16 Not surprisingly, the Agazzi sisters drew their primary inspiration from Froebel's approach, which had its own mystical/spiritual base in the idea that the geometric shapes of the froebelian «gifts» to the child (balls, triangles and rectangles made of wood) speak directly to the child's spirit.

17 Which we now know to be closely linked to our capacity for language. See recent studies of parrots' capacity to dance in rhythm and the link to their capacity for language, both in inter-parrot communication and in their mimicry of human language.

18 ASTs, ONAIR, ex-scatola 1, busta 3, dossier 1928, rapporto di Adele Amegnani Spini (Regional Inspector from 1927–1933), 10. In 1933, Rosa Agazzi would succeed Spini as Regional Inspector.

Between the Gentile reform and ONAIR's summer training course, the *Opera* found itself more and more entangled with town and village administrations, as well as with local education authorities, a fact that only deepened ONAIR roots in the region. (As a general rule, municipalities provided the classrooms, housing for the *maestre* and sufficient wood to heat both, while ONAIR supplied the staff, socio-medical expertise and basic supplies for both schools and dispensaries: pedagogical, alimentary and medical.) Moreover, the Gentile reform plus the *Opera's* transformation into an *Ente morale* poised the ONAIR for further expansion during the middle years of Mussolini's regime.¹⁹ By the end of the 1920s, the ever-expanding ONAIR would absorb a further 80 nursery schools in Venezia Giulia, Istria and Dalmatia, originally created by the *Lega Nazionale*, whose deep roots as a Habsburg institution had aroused profound mistrust on the part of fascist nationalists. By 1930, the ONAIR found itself abruptly in charge of a vastly expanded network of 167 village schools (and 8.193 children) spread across the small towns and villages of Dalmatia, Istria and the Adriatic islands; regions where the ONAIR had organized very few schools during the 1920s.

ONAIR's success may be measured by the force of local slavophone resistance, which, in the spring of 1924 mounted a fierce propaganda campaign in the Yugoslavian border district around Castua/Kastav against Italy and the ONAIR, prompted largely by the numerous Italian schools that had recently arrived in the region.²⁰ Nor was this an isolated case: "The 6th of August (1928) marks a dark day in the story of the *Opera*" wrote Regional Inspector Adele Spini in the fall of 1928. For that night "several fanatics burned down the nursery school in Storie (Sezana) which was housed in a Decker pavillion."²¹ In the war of position that *Italia Redenta* was waging in Venezia Giulia, each territorial/linguistic victory was counted up, but never taken for granted "the nursery school in Mattuglie (Matulji) will modestly initiate with our noble means the most serene Italianization, especially here in Mattuglie, which will surely be a site of struggle."²² The language of struggle permeates ONAIR discourse about its civilizing mission in Italy's northeastern/Balkan frontier zone, with each school a site of struggle, standing on the front line of ONAIR's battle to "fare penetrazione di italianità, and so "guide the region to Italy by teaching the language to local children."²³

Yet overt resistance to ONAIR's battle to "Italianize" the region was in fact quite narrow (if at times, spectacular); confined to small circles of Slovenian activists, many of whom were linked to the Slovenian TIGR (Trieste-Istria-Gorizia-Rijeka) resistance

19 ASTs, ONAIR, ex-scatola 1, busta 2, dossier «Autorità scolastica 1932–5; 1937–8», undated document describing the history of ONAIR (1 p.).

20 These ranged from the ONAIR nursery school in nearby Mattuglie (which lay just over the border, on the Italian side) to post-elementary vocational schools.

21 ASTs, ONAIR, ex-scatola 1, busta 3, dossier 1928, A Spini to Giunta Esecutiva, Autumn 1928. Spini hastened to note that the school had been rebuilt quickly, thanks to the assistance of the «healthy part» of the population that had raised money for the new school.

22 ASTs, ONAIR, ex-scatola 1, busta 3, dossier 1924, E Costantini to Bona Luzzatto, 4 March 1924.

23 ASTs, ONAIR, Ex-scatola 1, Busta 3, dossier 1925, Dir Regionale to Comune di Rovigno d'Istria, 10 December 1925.

movement (Kacin Wohinz, 1988 and 2010; Vinci, 2011). Far more common were those thousands of parents who accepted the ONAIR schools, even sought eagerly after them. For in this desperately poor region, with both parents working, the schools provided child care, medical assistance, clothing, shoes and a hot meal daily to children who would otherwise be gnawing on a piece of bread for lunch. If the price to pay was learning a few songs and poems in Italian, well, this, too, could prove useful in a world that, as far the locals could see, would continue to be run by the Italians.

If fascism brought more resources to the ONAIR, it also introduced a new sexual division of associational labor. For when, in winter 1925–1926, Council delegate Bona Luzzatto retired, she was replaced not by another female member of the Executive Council but rather by a man: Colonel Nino della Santa. With his accession to the key post of Council Delegate (linchpin of the entire ONAIR operation) an entirely new phase opened for the *Opera*, whose stabilization as a key *Ente morale* on the linguistic frontiers of fascist Italy was accompanied by a new sexual division of labor where all posts on the ground (teachers, visiting nurses, regional inspectors) remained in the hands of an increasingly trained and professionalized corps of women, while posts of direction/administration gradually passed into the hands of men, beginning with the Executive council in Rome.

EPILOGUE

There is much that could be said about the ongoing expansion of the ONAIR during the 1930s, usually in response to requests from local mayors across the region, most of whom were at the head of fascist municipalities. ONAIR's regional inspectors refused the vast majority of these requests, pleading lack of resources. But these dossiers reveal as well a distinct reserve on the part of ONAIR's local leadership vis-à-vis the local fascists that merits further exploration.

ONAIR's relationship with the national fascist regime was another matter altogether; indeed, ONAIR prospered throughout the *ventennio*, reaching its peak during the winter/spring of 1943, with a network of over 200 schools (more than 10,000 children) that reached as far east as Ljubljana. After Mussolini's fall, however, the ONAIR was inexorably sucked into the violent politics of retreat and retribution that devastated the region from July 1943 onward. By June 1945, the towns and villages of Venezia Giulia had been traversed repeatedly by all the players: Italy's fast-retreating fascist army, the German army (which subjected the region to a punishing scorched earth retreat), and the Italian and Yugoslav partisans. The exactions of all these forces, both material and human, would cost the region as much as a third of its prewar civilian population by the time the British and American Allied Military Government (AMG) had arrived (June 1945). From the outset, the AMG sought to calm the intense civil strife by whatever means necessary while coming to a temporary agreement with Tito's socialist republic regarding the areas of occupation to be assigned to the AMG versus Tito's partisans (Duroselle, 1966; Novak, 1970; Rabel, 1988). The temporary agreement (which soon became permanent) divided what had been Italian territory since 1919–1920, leaving a significant part of *Italia Re-denta*'s schools and school teachers on the Yugoslav side of the occupation (Dalmatia and

Istria) while moving ONAIR headquarters from AMG-occupied Trieste to the Friulian (hence Italian) town of Udine, 40 km to the north.

The ONAIR's ongoing activism in the First Republic's much reduced Venezia Giulia was soon buttressed by President Alcide De Gasperi who, in 1948, signed a new law confirming the ONAIR's central role in delivering nursery school services to the region. The law named former ONMI stalwart and convinced eugenicist Aprile Lo Monaco to ONAIR's head, thus assuring an important continuity with the fascist years in early Republican social policy regarding maternal and child welfare²⁴ Present at the ceremony was Regional Inspector Costantino Cologna, confirming the ongoing masculinization of ONAIR's administrative layers, but now at the regional level as well. The ONAIR would continue running the region's ever-growing network of urban and rural *scuole materne* along firmly agazzian lines until 1977; 9 years after the Italian state would finally make the *scuola materna* an obligatory phase of Italian education across the nation.

24 This kind of politically ambivalent gesture, officially de-fascist-izing an institution by overturning its fascist statutes but then placing a fascist functionary at its head, was typical of postwar Italy, especially under the Christian Democrats, who single-handedly ensured tremendous institutional continuity between Italy's fascist and post-fascist bureaucracy while allowing much of the South's local government to slide *de facto* into the hands of the Cosa Nostra, 'Ndrangeta and Camorra.

“NAJBOLJ UMIRJENA ITALIJANIZACIJA?” SOCIALNA AKCIJA
IN NACIONALISTIČNE POLITIKE V JADRANSKI SEVERO-VZHODNI
OBMEJNI REGIJI (1919–1954)

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POVZETEK

Članek prikaže razvoj celovite mreže italijanskih vrtcev na etnično mešenem območju Julijske krajine po prvi svetovni vojni. V teh inštitucijah so ženske prostovoljke, vključene v društvo Italija Redenta, bdele predvsem nad "italijanizacijo" otrok iz t. i. slovanskih in mešanih družin. Kot ena od redkih tovrstnih servisov v regiji, je organizacija Opera Nazionale Assistenza all'Italia Redenta (ONAIR) dominirala na tem področju. Njeno delovanje je segalo v obdobje od dvajsetih let vse do leta 1977, ko so državni vrtci končno nadomestili izobraževalne "postojanke" ONAIR. Avtorica je preučila bogat dokumentarni fond omenjene organizacije, ki je shranjen v tržaškem delu državnega arhiva. Na primeru društva Italija Redenta jo je tudi posebej zanimala meja med tedanjim družbenim in političnim delovanjem ter med moškimi in ženskimi oblikami tega delovanja oziroma v kolikšni meri je prihajalo do prepletanj in nato preoblikovanj v razmerju med prostovoljnimi delom na eni strani in uradnimi – državnimi inštitucijami na drugi.

Ključne besede: socialna država, severo-vzhodna jadranska obmejna regija, meja, spol, socialna piltitika, politike otroštva, dobrodelne organizacije

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