

There is no story without its heroes. Ten women and the right to vote in Italy in 1906

Marco Severini
Department of Humanities
University of Macerata (Italy)
marco.severini@unimc.it

ABSTRACT: It is common opinion that the first women voters in Italy were the women who voted in 1946. However, the very first ones were ten bold teachers from the Marche area who had their right to vote recognized with a judgement issued on 25th July 1906 by the Court of appeal of Ancona headed by jurist Lodovico Mortara. Their story and oblivion thereof are explained by the process of women's liberation, the liveliness of Italian women's associations in the early 20th century and the political and civil dynamism of the time bearing the name of statesman Giovanni Giolitti.

EET/TEE KEYWORDS: Contemporary history; History of school; Rights and duties; Women's liberation; Italy; XXth Century.

The events of a changing country

During the period straddling the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, Italy was affected by a series of profound changes.

Having resisted the temptation of an authoritarian regression of its parliamentary institutions put in its way by conservative forces¹, Italy turned over a new leaf by leaning on the authority of its Prime Minister Giovanni Giolitti, who was responsible for forming three long-lasting governments between 1903 and 1914. Giolitti was deeply convinced that the country needed structural reforms; under his rule, Italy came to experience its first industrial successes and

¹ See F. Cammarano, *Storia dell'Italia liberale*, Rome-Bari, Laterza, 2011, pp. 286-296; A.A. Mola, *Giolitti, venti anni dopo. Dall'Italia all'Europa*, in Id. (ed.), *La svolta di Giolitti. Dalla reazione di fine Ottocento al culmine dell'età liberale*, Foggia, Bastogi, 2000, pp. 9-12.

began to shed the typical features of an agricultural nation; important social reforms were carried out and special laws for the *Mezzogiorno* (Southern Italy) were passed; the railway network was nationalized; and revenue conversion was achieved, i.e. a reduction in the interest paid by the State to those who possessed public debt assets, an obvious sign of the savers' trust in public finances.

This picture, however, was not completely bathed in light: there were a few shadows looming over it too. Giolitti governed, in effect, for a period of fifteen years with a rock-solid parliamentary majority, which was guaranteed, in part, by the strict control of prefects during electoral selections; he aimed for the support of the middle classes and the organized proletariat, leaving all other social classes out of his reforms; he did not resolve the *Mezzogiorno's* problems at the root; and he had a huge number of critics amongst progressive political forces and intellectual circles².

Giolitti was a man from the mountains; he was concrete and determined: he had an in-depth knowledge of the State's bureaucratic machinery (having been a lawyer and a ministerial civil servant before becoming a Member of Parliament); he was removed from any kind of rhetoric, but he possessed a virtue common to all great statesmen: long-term vision. He had the ability to look a long way ahead and, by doing so, he had understood that the future of Italy was in the hands of the Catholics and left-wing forces, as in fact it turned out during the course of the twentieth century. His strategy was to also incorporate these forces into the liberal world and lead them into accepting the laws and institutions of liberalism and democracy, drawing the conversation away from talks of revolution and radical changes that could not be easily controlled.

Giolitti did not like wars nor any resort to violence: he was pushed to conquer Libya in 1911-1912 – at a time when virtually every European country had at least one colony in Africa or Asia – because of pressure from certain lobbies and also because Italy's foreign policy underwent a distinct turn of direction during that period: after years of following a pro-German line, Italy became closer to France, a country that, together with the United Kingdom, was the main European colonial power of the time³.

On many other issues, however, Giolitti remained a nineteenth century man: after all, he was born in 1842 in Mondovì, a small town in Piedmont, the region of Turin, which had been the first capital of Italy from 1861 to 1865. One of these issues was the role of women: even on a personal level, from his mother to his sister, women had exerted a considerable influence over his life. Giolitti believed, however, that women's social role should be fulfilled at home, within the scope of family life. He despised or better ignored Italy's feminist and suffragist movement, which had been striving for women's political rights

² See E. Gentile, *L'Italia giolittiana*, Bologna, il Mulino, 1990, pp. 229-233.

³ See Mola, *Giolitti. Lo statista della nuova Italia*, cit., pp. 282-337.

– first and foremost the right to vote – and for their integration in the Italian society for over twenty years.

Having taken place between 1906 and 1907, the circumstances at the centre of our story are deeply connected with Giolitti's Italy: a country where only 8% of a population of 35 million (2,800,000 citizens) was allowed to vote, and they were all men.

If we consider the decade leading up to 1906, i.e. the period from 1896 to 1906, we can see that the average duration of a government was eight months. The protagonists of this story, ten grammar school teachers, had ten months' time to exercise their right to vote; this being the right to vote that they had sensationally obtained thanks to a judgement issued by a judge.

Had they managed to exercise this right, before the end of a government and the staging of electoral rallies, 2,800,000 citizens plus ten elementary school teachers born in the Marche would have been called to vote. The Marche – the home region of Raphael, Leopardi and Rossini – was a peripheral, rural and traditionalist area that had been completely forgotten by the state for half a century⁴.

An age-defining event

On the 25th July 1906 the Court of Appeal of Ancona, headed by Lodovico Mortara, recognized the right to vote to ten woman teachers from the Marche.

The judgement immediately appeared, to commentators and jurists, as something sensational.

It was reached through the combined interaction of at least four factors: the vibrant and dynamic activism of the various women's associations that were striving for the right to vote in Giolitti's Italy; the political and civil resurgence of a region that had lived through the first post-unitary four decades tepidly, sleepily and, most of all, forgotten by the state; the legal competence and intellectual honesty of the judge who handed down the judgement; and the courage and civil determination of ten women from the province of Ancona who, without any political angles, fought for the recognition of a right that was not expressly forbidden by any legal or official document of the Italian state.

In 1903 various women's associations had joined together to form a national council of Italian women, affiliated to the International Council of Women, head-quartered in Rome and with a programme that included the right to vote. In 1904 the Republican Member of Parliament Roberto Mirabelli put forward a proposal of reform of the electoral law which – inspired by the principle of

⁴ See L. Pupilli (ed.), *Le Marche in età giolittiana (1900-1914)*, Ancona, Deputazione di Storia Patria per le Marche, 2007, pp. 5-10.

‘necessary universality’ of suffrage – petitioned for women’s right to vote in general elections: this proposal brought about a lively mobilization of women’s groups. In 1905 a few committees in favour of women’s suffrage were set up across Italy and this proved to be an incentive to those women who already met all the legal requirements to register on the electoral rolls⁵.

On the 26th February 1906 Maria Montessori – the eminent Marchesan pedagogist and anthropologist who had been one of the first Italian women to obtain a university degree in 1886 and who had distinguished herself as one of the most lively champions of female emancipation (without any politically partisan militancy) – launched an appeal in the pages of the newspaper «La vita», on behalf of the Society «Thought and Action», in which she urged women to join the electoral register, emphasizing that the law did not expressly forbid it. Posted on the walls of the capital, Montessori’s proclamation echoed throughout Italy⁶.

It is important to stress that right then Montessori, while increasingly combining scientific method with attention to spirituality, had initiated a critical discussion with Anna Maria Mozzoni, on the subject of a «modern Eve», placing her in contrast with Mary of Nazareth’s «social maternity». This, however, did not stop her from joining Mozzoni in presenting yet another petition to the Parliament: encouraged by pro-suffrage committees, women from all over Italy filed requests to register on the electoral rolls⁷.

Thus, the suffragist issue, hitherto discussed only in cultural and political settings, was being argued in a court of law and was entering a debate on the nature of Italy’s legal and constitutional system.

With no small measure of surprise, eleven electoral commissions (in Mantua, Caltanissetta, Imola, Palermo, Venice, Cagliari, Florence, Brescia, Naples and Turin) accepted these requests; however, they were subsequently rejected on appeal by their respective courts of appeal, which repealed women’s registrations on the electoral rolls.

In particular, some of the courts showed, through their respective judgements, that they felt threatened by women’s suffrage as if it were a kind of nightmare: in a judgement dated 14th August 1906 the Court of Appeal of Florence stated that if «a majority of women were to be formed in Parliament, this majority could enter a coalition against «the Head of State», thus gifting the civilized world a «new and bizarre spectacle», lacking in «decorum and use»⁸.

⁵ See S. Soldani, *Prima della Repubblica. Le italiane e l'avventura della cittadinanza, in Una democrazia incompiuta. Donne e politica in Italia dall'Ottocento ai nostri giorni*, a cura di N.M. Filippini e A. Scattigno, Milan, FrancoAngeli, 2007, pp. 74-76.

⁶ See M. Severini, *Montessori Maria*, in L. Pupilli, M. Severini (edd.), *Dizionario biografico delle donne marchigiane (1815-2018)*, Ancona, il lavoro editoriale, 2018, pp. 201-203.

⁷ See F. De Giorgi, *Montessori, Maria*, in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, Rome, Istituto dell'Enciclopedia Italiana, 2012, vol. 76, p. 167.

⁸ See G. Galeotti, *Storia del voto alle donne in Italia*, Rome, biblink, 2006, p. 47.

Double surprise

In this dynamic context, nine elementary school teachers from Senigallia (Carolina Bacchi, Palmira Bagaioli, Giulia Berna, Adele Capobianchi, Giuseppina Graziola, Iginia Matteucci, Emilia Simoncioni, Enrica Tesei and Dina Tosoni) and one from Montemarcano (Luigia Mandolini-Matteucci) filed a similar request for inclusion on the electoral register and their application was sensationally accepted on the 28th May by the Electoral Commission of the province of Ancona – the body responsible for reviewing the electoral rolls, in compliance with the law of 11th July 1894 n. 286.

The commission's spokesperson, a lawyer named Luigi Capogrossi-Colognesi, was the one to suggest that the teachers' request be accepted, on grounds that they were entitled by birth-right to the civil and political rights of the Kingdom of Italy, they were also over the age of twenty one, literate and fully qualified grammar school teachers. Out of the five members of the commission, two (the court chairman Monaco and the prefecture councillor d'Arcais) voted against the petition, while the remaining three (a lawyer named Guglielmo Bonarelli, Capogrossi-Colognesi and Professor Malia) voted in favour, thus allowing the plaintiffs on to the electoral register pending routine criminal record checks.

In a letter to a newspaper, Capogrossi-Colognesi published a reminder that, despite the fact that the commission's decision had caused a stir in some legal circles, he had carried out a «simple and rigid application of the current law», interpreting «its impact and significance independently of its political consequences»⁹.

This surprising result was followed by another, even more remarkable, event.

The King's Prosecutor of the court of Ancona, Cavalier Nicola Marracino, lodged an appeal against the provincial Commission's deliberation, on the grounds of a restrictive interpretation of the electoral regulations of 1895 (women didn't enjoy civil and political rights and, not being tax-payers, were not allowed direct representation of their interests) and on the alleged incompatibility of typically feminine qualities with the «strong duties» required for political commitment.

The female plaintiffs were notified of the prosecutor's appeal sometime between 3rd and 4th June and the first appeal hearing was scheduled for 30th June: none of the teachers appeared on that day and the hearing was deferred to 18th July. Once again the teachers did not appear before the court and, ultimately, the appeal was rejected on 25th July 1906 by the Court of Appeal of Ancona headed by Lodovico Mortara¹⁰.

⁹ To learn more about him, see N. Sbano (ed.), *Dizionario degli Avvocati di Ancona*, Ancona, il lavoro editoriale, 2009, pp. 94-97.

¹⁰ See M. Severini, *Il voto negato. La battaglia isolata di dieci maestre marchigiane*, in N.

Mortara – aged fifty-one, from Mantua, professor of civil procedure in Pisa and Naples, judge of the Court of Cassation – was one of Italy's most eminent jurists. He was a staunch supporter of the idea that judges should occupy a central position, as active participants in the authentic creation of the law; Mortara's stance was based on his own educational and professional background and took a dynamic view of the legal system and the state. The idea of equality, which provided substance to his constitutionalist vision of civil proceedings, was profoundly inborn in Mortara's own family history, which was typical of Italian-Jewish emancipationists¹¹.

The judgement he handed down was unprecedented and generated great public interest.

We will talk about it in more depth later, but, for now, let's summarize it.

Mortara was personally against the women's right to vote because he believed that, as long as women were confined to the boundaries of their homes, they would not be able to fulfil any social role other than that of mothers and wives. In 1906, however, he was appointed to deal with this issue not as a citizen, but as a judge. Since there was no written law in existence that excluded Italian women from voting, Mortara simply followed routine procedure as any jurist would do in a liberal and democratic state¹².

«Let's go and see» – he said, essentially – what the state's fundamental law says on the subject. At the time, the law was enshrined in the Albertine Statute, a constitutional text issued in 1848, when Italy did not exist as a state yet: it had become the constitutional text of the Kingdom of Sardinia from which, following the sensational events of the Risorgimento, the Kingdom of Italy had been created in 1861.

Article 24 of the Albertine Statute states:

All *regnicoli*, regardless of title or grade, are equal before the eyes of the law. [...] All enjoy equal civil and political rights, and are entitled to civil and military appointments, barring any exceptions determined by the law¹³.

Sbano (ed.), *Donne e diritti. Dalla sentenza Mortara del 1906 alla prima avvocata italiana*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2004, pp. 76-78.

¹¹ Born in a family where patriotism and pandects had constantly intersected, Lodovico was the son of Marco Mortara (1815-1894), Chief Rabbi of the Jewish community of Mantua and a scholar of Hebraism of world renown. Marco was a patriot, teacher, preacher and scientist who took part to the community debate about some relevant issues (capital punishment, divorce, rabbinic education, the advisability of calling a rabbinic synod in Italy) and defended Hebraism at a time when threats were coming from religious scepticism and Jews were increasingly excluded from different social environments. A. Salah, *L'epistolario di Marco Mortara (1815-1894). Un rabbino italiano tra riforma e ortodossia*, Florence, Giuntina, 2012.

¹² L. Lacchè, «Personalmente contrario, giuridicamente favorevole». *La «sentenza Mortara» e il voto politico alle donne (25 luglio 1906)*, in *Donne e diritti*, cit., pp. 99-121.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 126.

What did the term *regnicoli* mean in nineteenth century Italian? It means «the Kingdom's inhabitants». Were these male or female inhabitants? Mortara asked himself in 1906. In order to answer this difficult question carefully, Mortara took the time to read and interpret the following articles in the Albertine Statute, from 25 to 32, according to which women enjoyed all fundamental, social and political rights.

And political rights were not only those connected with carrying out public duties, but included the right to vote; a right to which – according to Mortara – all *regnicoli* should be entitled, barring any exceptions determined by the law. The Italian legislature, however, had not passed any laws that excluded women from voting in general elections since 1861. Therefore, Mortara officially upheld the appeal lodged by the ten woman teachers and, handing down a judgement that became known by his name, ordered the mayors of the towns where the women resided to register them on the municipal rolls as «voters in general elections».

The publication of Mortara's judgement came as a bolt from the blue. When the news reached the press, newspaper editors rushed to send their reporters to Ancona to find out what was happening. Lawyers and politicians expressed their surprise and amazement.

One of Italy's most famous political pundits, Gaetano Mosca, confessed in the «Corriere della Sera» – the country's most authoritative newspaper – that he had got his forecast completely wrong, claiming that no court of law would ever uphold an appeal in favour of women's right to vote¹⁴.

With the exception of a few isolated cases, most of the political and legal establishment rallied against *Mortara's judgement*: starting from the greatest lawyers of the time, like Vittorio Emanuele Orlando who, as a professor of constitutional law at the University of Rome and future prime minister, declared that women's right to vote «was not permitted by the law». His statement confirmed the opinion held, as he described it, by «a universality of Italians», both in favour and against¹⁵.

As increasing numbers of lawyers continued to express their opinions, the mayors of Senigallia and Montemarçiano (the latter a small country town where the mayor was the husband of one of the women – Luigia Mandolini) added the ten teachers to their electoral registers.

¹⁴ See G. Mosca, *Le iscrizioni delle donne nelle liste elettorali politiche*, «Corriere della Sera», 27 february 1906.

¹⁵ See V.E. Orlando, *Le donne hanno diritto al voto politico?*, «La Tribuna», 3 august 1906.

A single interview

Two days after the publication of *Mortara's judgement*, a lawyer named Edgardo De Francesco, who was a contributor to «Il Giornale d'Italia», was posted by the Rome-based newspaper to the Marche, specifically to Falconara, with the task of interviewing Mortara.

The newspaper had an anti-Giolitti liberal stance and would turn out to be on the front-line of reporting about the event's developments. Furthermore, it was one of the most authoritative voices nationally to confine the judgement's value to «pure exegesis of the written law»; for this reason its contributor was sent to interview Mortara not only as a «magistrate», but also as a «jurist and citizen», so that his thoughts on «the grave and complex issue» could be known.

On the evening of 30th July De Francesco headed for the villa in Falconara where the Mortara family were staying; he met the Chairman of the Court of Appeal of Ancona along the «main road», not far from the house itself, accompanied by his daughter.

This was the only interview that he would ever release on the issue and, when questioned by the journalist, Mortara replied that, on a personal level, he did not feel «any enthusiasm towards extending the right to vote in general and local elections to women», because he got the impression that most women were not «yet mature» enough to perform this «important duty». When interviewed on the same topic in 1903 by a journalist from Milan, Mortara had expressed his aversion to women's right to vote.

In 1906, however, he had been summoned as a magistrate to pronounce on the issue and, therefore, he had had to free himself of «all personal prejudice» in order to examine the letter of the law dispassionately.

Mortara continued to say that his judgement, in accordance with the Albertine Statute, refuted both a tendency rooted in European public law to exclude women from enjoying political rights and also to expressly forbid them from voting in local elections. The latter had been made necessary to eliminate any «doubt» that could have arisen in those Italian provinces where that right had existed before the country's unification. In fact, even if only under «extreme special measures» and «for the purpose of census registration», women in the regions of Lombardy, Veneto and Tuscany, had been allowed, before Italy's Unification and under Austrian and Lorraine rule, to vote in local elections.

In short, a «true dissonance» existed between the Statute and local electoral laws, and the judge confirmed that his colleagues from the Court of Ancona had been «persuaded» by this.

Furthermore, the transformation of political institutions «into a free State» was gradually replacing the old hermeneutical doctrine centred on the idea of the legislator as the «master of the State»: the legislator was becoming the «first and highest» of those bodies destined for the service of social living and, as

such, his function, and duty, was to «adjust» the law to the needs of civil life. The office of the magistrate as interpreter of the law was, therefore, taking on a completely new degree of importance; as a consequence, rather than undertaking «historical research into the law-maker's thought» as it might have been in the more or less recent past, he had to ask himself «what the intention was behind» a legislative body that maintained a legal formula liable to be interpreted differently from how it had originally been intended.

Mortara's language was as clear as his convictions were extremely modern.

The interview ended with De Francesco's thanking Mortara and apologising for disturbing him at a time – summer – usually devoted to holiday. Mortara, assuming that the interviewer was referring to «rest and relaxation on the beach», corrected him, pointing at his books: «You realise I'm not here on holiday, do you?»¹⁶.

The endgame

The Office of Public Prosecutions of Ancona appealed to the Court of Cassation via the prosecutor Augusto Nazari, a magistrate who had worked on the Bank of Rome scandal. Controversies and arguments on the case continued to be reported in the press for several weeks.

Maria Montessori herself published a poetic hymn in the newspaper «La vita» celebrating the city of Ancona, in which she extolled the virtues of the so-called Doric capital («My birthplace, you have conquered women and history») and she described the city emphatically as «a delightful oasis of the world, where hermits became saints, and was chosen by D'Annunzio as his love nest». Montessori, however, was born on 31st August 1870 in Chiaravalle, a small town 20 km away from Ancona and many residents of her home town complained that their fellow-resident, having lived in Rome for years, had forgotten her origins¹⁷.

As the interest of the press in the judgement came to an end, this thorny issue reached the third and final stage of the judicial process.

On the 4th December the Court of Cassation in Rome, chaired by Senator Pagano Guarnaschelli, annulled the judgement passed by Mortara and decided to refer the case to the capital's Court of Appeal for further examination.

In short, the Supreme Court established that women's right to vote was hindered by those very «exceptions» determined by the law of article 24 of the

¹⁶ See *Il voto politico alle donne*, Intervista di E. De Francesco a L. Mortara in «Il Giornale d'Italia», 1 august 1906.

¹⁷ See Severini, *Il voto negato*, cit., pp. 80-81. Orlando, *Le donne hanno diritto al voto politico?*, cit.

Statute, which needn't «be plainly formulated», but which could result «from the fundamental rules and the informative spirit of all public law legislation».

The Cassation's judgement reversed the essence of Mortara's judgement, stating that the silence of the law on the matter should be interpreted as «an obvious and implicit exclusion of women from performing public duties and from exercising political rights»; it went on to state that the explicit exclusion from voting in local elections had been a way of eliminating the exceptions of certain pre-unification states; and, most of all, it stated that a reform of this kind required «long and careful preparation»¹⁸.

Once again tradition, in the form of custom and unwritten standards of public law, had prevailed over the letter of the constitutional text.

Furthermore, it was perfectly clear that the political consequences of Mortara's judgement had given many people sleepless nights.

Parliamentary scenes

The issue of women's suffrage had been discussed in the Italian parliament on a number of occasions. A few ministers had put forward, as we will see, bills aimed at allowing women to vote, but nothing had come of them.

Nevertheless, on 25th February 1907 an unprecedented event took place. A petition was submitted to the Chamber of Deputies – one of the two branches of the Italian Parliament – in February 1907. It had been drafted by suffragist Anna Maria Mozzoni in 1906 and signed by 10,000 women, some of them well-known people.

On the day, the parliamentary public galleries were crowded with women, a fact that had a profound effect on the attending Members of Parliament, even though it produced a diametrically opposite result.

The discussion was opened by the Republican MP Roberto Mirabelli, who had introduced a bill on emancipation in 1904, which had been rejected by Parliament: he stated that that petition had been presented so that women would not remain «nailed to the cross of secular exclusions» and, therefore, an issue that had already been raised in Britain and France should be faced up to in Italy too.

In particular, Mirabelli issued a reminder that the absence of any law establishing the exception of women's right to vote in general elections, as was the case for local elections, should be interpreted as an admission that women could exercise that right, since the principle of equality in both civil and political

¹⁸ See Atti Parlamentari, *Camera dei Deputati*, Discussioni, Legislatura XXII, 25 february 1907, p. 12304; M. Severini, *Dieci donne. Storia delle prime elettrici italiane*, Macerata, Liberilibri, 2012, pp. 32-41.

spheres was «clear». The legislator had not intended to exclude women from voting in general elections using silence and that silence could not be used to deny the strength of «the clear and precise word» written in the «law of laws», i.e. the Constitution.

A law excluding women from voting in general elections did not exist and, therefore, denying women the vote using «an arbitrary interpretation» was no longer possible.

Finally Mirabelli recalled how the petition referred to a «great revolution» taking place in the world and amongst modern nations; a revolution that had led «the poor man's daughter» to leave her home for a place of manual work and «the middle-class daughter» to study at university or find a job as «shop assistant, trader, industrialist, telegraphist, telephone operator, electrician or journalist». It was an evolution, a «historical progress» that could not be fought, because in the «great plot of human society» economic, financial, intellectual, religious and political problems were all mutually dependent. By «courageously» facing the problem of life itself, women had discovered that they were «unarmed», i.e. lacking the «most formidable» weapon available in countries «governed by a representative regime»: the vote.

There was no need for any new law to allow women to vote or take part fully in public life: already Mazzini, Italy's greatest patriot and «heated advocate of women's suffrage», had advised «to remove from our minds any notion of superiority, because we do not possess any». The women signatories to the petition had rightly written: «We have the right to vote, because we are citizens, because we pay taxes and rates, because we produce wealth, and because we pay a blood tax with the pain of motherhood»¹⁹.

Illustrious Liberal Members of Parliament – including Luigi Luzzatti, would-be-prime-minister from 1910 to 1911 – spoke against this statement; all of them held the conviction that the right time for Italian women to vote had not come yet.

Until the Prime Minister Giovanni Giolitti himself took the floor and was as humorous in refuting the opposition's argument as he was determined to close the case as speedily as possible.

The Piedmontese head of government tackled the issue on a procedural level – in his opinion, when it came to petitions, the House should not decide an agenda –; he joked about the fact that the issue had found consensus amongst members of parliament from opposing sides; he stated it was important to take into account the state of Italian legislature and the «customs of the country»; and he concluded emphatically by saying that it was not his intention «to take on any specific commitment on such a delicate matter today».

The fifty-six year old Member of Parliament Andrea Costa, who had been the first Socialist to be elected to the Italian Parliament in 1882, also intervened in the debate: he stated that women's suffrage would not happen as a result

¹⁹ See G. Belardelli, *Mazzini*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2010, pp. 197-198.

of the petition by the ladies present, but would come from «women workers' associations», from the «fields», the «places of manual work», from those women who needed to be «the bread-winners for their children».

Nevertheless, a House majority approved the government's proposal to refer the petition to the Interior Ministry.

On 20th May 1907 a parliamentary committee chaired by the sixty-eight year old Senator Gaspare Finali gathered at the Interior Ministry in Rome; the committee had been established as a result of Giolitti's government commitment in the lively vote that had taken place earlier that year, on 25th February.

The committee remarked that granting women certain legislative reforms, while still not allowing them to vote, could improve their condition²⁰.

From epilogue to oblivion

The Court of Appeal in Rome, taking the Cassation's conclusions on board, upheld the appeal of the King's Prosecutor to the Court of Ancona on 8th May 1907 and ordered the removal of the ten teachers from the electoral register. In passing its judgement, the Court drew on the distinction between private and public law and stressed that in the latter «the *ius commune* is not all *ius scriptum*» [«common law is not all written law»], because there were principles that, while not openly stated «in any legislative measure», were sanctioned by use. Women's exclusion from taking part in elections could be counted amongst these, since it had been sanctioned by the *ius commune* prior to the Albertine Statute and confirmed by the Statute itself²¹.

The Court of Appeal in Ancona too decided, on 6th July 1907, to act in accordance with the Cassation's conclusions, noting the importance of Mortara's judgement on a political and social level, i.e. that this was an important issue which had to be solved «with clear and definite legal measures»²².

So, the curtain was brought down in an essentially predictable way, on an event that had been the climax, as far as its results were concerned, of Italy's process of women's emancipation.

Why was the manner of this outcome predictable?

In 1906 Italy was a country with a population of approximately 35 million, where only 8% of people voted, all of them men, and the political consequences

²⁰ See Galeotti, *Storia del voto alle donne in Italia*, cit., p. 121.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 133. See Judgment of the Court of Cassation of Rome, 4 december 1906, in *Donne e diritti*, cit., pp. 185-193; Lacchè, «*Personalmente contrario, giuridicamente favorevole*», cit., pp. 147-149.

²² Severini, *Dieci donne*, cit., p. 42.

that could arise from women's admission into political life caused great concern to government staff at the time.

The prevailing Italian culture of the time regarded voting and «feminine nature» as mutually incompatible; it was thought that if women engaged in political affairs they would be going against their nature; that women's interests could be protected through slow and gradual reforms, rather than through the right to vote; many believed that women's suffrage was a «revolutionary idea»; and lots of Italians held chauvinistic prejudices.

With this epilogue, the initiative of ten brave women teachers from the Marche was destined to sink into complete oblivion for almost a century.

It is hard to comprehend how such an important event could be completely forgotten in a region, like the Marche, characterized by a strong interest in history.

In all probability, the reason why the events of 1906 were neglected for so long is due to a form of collective amnesia affecting both the female protagonists and the single male protagonist of this story.

The teachers, who had originally met at work, gradually lost contact with one another; some of them left their communities to move to different towns or cities, both in Italy and abroad; but none of them, it seems, kept any record or handed down any memory of the event in which they had played such a key role.

Mortara himself lay forgotten for a long period: both because of the introduction of a new Civil Procedure Code (1940) and, also, because of the long silence that lasted until 1968 when the scholar Salvatore Satta decided to re-introduce the «Master» from Mantua as a topical figure, thus laying the foundations for his revival²³.

Finally, the deep commitment shown by Italian women during the Resistenza and the political and civil reconstruction of the aftermath of the Second World War, which culminated in the exercise of citizenship «for all purposes», did open new avenues of participation to women, but also indirectly confined to oblivion the intrepid enterprise of ten women teachers from the Marche. The First World War and twenty years of Fascist dictatorship had already contributed to their removal from memory. In the post-Second World War period, however, in a country as strongly politicized as Italy, two facts may have played a significant role: that the women of 1906 had not been members of any political party and that their initiative had taken place during a monarchic regime everybody was keen to forget.

These are the words of the scholar Elena Loewenthal who reviewed this book in the newspaper «La Stampa» on 26th February 2013:

There is no story without its heroes: even that of women's suffrage has its own, and there are many indeed. Ten, plus one²⁴.

²³ See L. Mortara, *Pagine autobiografiche* (1933), in S. Satta, *Quaderni del diritto e del processo civile*, 6 vols., Padua, Cedam, 1969, Vol I, p. 65.

²⁴ See E. Loewenthal, *Nell'Italia del 1906 dieci donne potevamo votare*, «La Stampa», 26

History rediscovered

The story of the first women voters started to be gradually rediscovered in the late 20th century with different studies, which would eventually intersect in the early years of the new century.

A slow gradual revival of the issue was originated by some historians from the Marche area. In the late 1980s, Andrea Casciari, a student at the Law Faculty of the University of Perugia, got his degree with a thesis on Mortara's judgment in the academic year 1987-1988. His was a diligent dissertation, based on juridical sources and on press records, but reported only few details about the women who had engaged the resounding battle at the time of Giolitti's leadership²⁵. After his degree, however, Casciari was still interested in the life of the ten teachers involved in the battle, of whom he only knew the names and town of residence, and decided to go to Senigallia to learn more. He gave a copy of his thesis to Mario Gambelli, the director of the "Antonelliana" Library, who became enticed by the distant events and soon reported about them in a brief article published in a renowned local magazine²⁶. Casciari tried to find out whether any of the intrepid women of 1906 was still alive, but they had all died by then (the last to depart was Adele Capobianchi, at 88 of age on 12th February 1970). He could, however, meet Maria and Emma Storani, the two daughters of Giulia Berna. Though they kept the memory of their mother as a strict and austere woman (who had died on 10th October 1957), they were entirely unaware of the events happened earlier in the century²⁷.

At the same time, Franca Del Pozzo, a scholar belonging to the circle of the Regional Institute for the history of the liberation movement, started to reconsider the events of 1906 in the light of the periodicals published locally. Her studies revealed that the conservatory magazines of the time had resolutely opposed the teachers' battle, and even derided it quite a few times, while the republican and socialist ones had not pushed further than mildly supporting the movement, which was met by the general indifference by the public opinion²⁸.

At national level, the first biographical notes about judge Mortara were published by his son in 1990²⁹, giving way to some fairly interesting suggestions.

february 2013, p. 49.

²⁵ See A. Casciari, *La sentenza Mortara del 25 luglio 1906 e il diritto elettorale politico e amministrativo della donna*, Degree thesis of the University of Perugia, Faculty of Law Studies, academic year 1987-1988.

²⁶ See M. Gambelli, *Un caso di "femminismo" senigalliese ante litteram*, «Sestante», nn. 2/3, 1989, pp. 44-46.

²⁷ See Severini, *Il voto negato*, cit., p. 86.

²⁸ F. Del Pozzo, *Ancona 1906: «le donne hanno diritto al voto»*, «Storia e problemi contemporanei», n. 4, 1989, pp. 109-125.

²⁹ G. Mortara, *Appunti biografici su Lodovico Mortara*, «Quaderni fiorentini per la storia del pensiero giuridico moderno», n. 19, 1990, pp. 107-113.

However, thirteen more years would pass before a person of his stature became the focus of a real convention. A research convention about «Lodovico Mortara in the hundredth anniversary of his taking oath in the Court of Cassation» was held in Rome, in the auditorium of the United Sections of the Court of Cassation, on the initiative of the latter and of the Cassa Nazionale di Previdenza ed Assistenza Forense, on 24th January 2003. The assembly actually laid the foundations for scientific research not only about the judge, but also about the political and electoral incidents of 1906-1907, as the convention was attended by the scholars who would later promote further studies on the issue. One of them was Nicola Sbano, a lawyer from Ancona, who was already planning a conference to pay tribute to the first Italian woman to become a lawyer (in 1919), Elisa Comani³⁰, and decided to put the two topics in one³¹.

As highlighted by Sbano himself, the conference made a happy «starting point for deeper research and more accurate thoughts»³².

In 2012, jurist Nicola Picardi published a comprehensive profile of Mortara in the leading Italian biographic directory³³. In the same year, after several scholars had failed similar attempts, the first scientific reconstruction of the events of 1906-07 and of the human and professional life of the ten teachers was produced. Their job was a crucial element in the feat, as their vocational files were finally found, after long archive research, in a secondary storage area of the Municipal Archives of Senigallia. In 1906, in fact, school teachers were still members of municipal staff, until the enactment of Law Daneo-Credaro (1911)³⁴. Further research studies, again connecting judge Mortara and the bold teachers, followed in 2013³⁵ and in 2016³⁶, while the updated profiles of the teachers were published in a complex publishing operation staged by Associazione di Storia Contemporanea in 2018³⁷. The collection tells the story

³⁰ Comani was born in Bergamo on 21st January 1893, but moved to the Marche area after her father Francesco Eugenio, a history teacher at high school and university, died. She studied law at the University of Camerino in 1915, became the first woman lawyer in Italy at the Courts of Ancona and enrolled with the Bar Association on 10th august 1919. She made her debut before the court of Ancona defending a soldier accused of cowardice. Updated notes about her are found in *Dizionario biografico delle donne marchigiane*, cit., pp. 92-93.

³¹ «Donne e giustizia. Storia dell'Avvocatura al femminile e storia di una causa fatta dalle donne per il voto e di un grande giudice, Lodovico Mortara, che nel 1906, Ad Ancona, dette loro ragione», Ancona, 23 may 2003: the proceedings of the convention have been published in *Donne e diritti*, cit.

³² See N. Sbano, *Introduzione*, in *ibid.*, p. 22.

³³ See N. Picardi, *Mortara, Lodovico*, in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, Rome, Istituto dell'Enciclopedia Italiana, 2012, vol. 77, pp. 232-236.

³⁴ See Severini, *Dieci donne*, cit., pp. 137-171.

³⁵ See *L'impegno politico e intellettuale delle donne nel Novecento*, a cura di L. Pupilli and E. Sansoni, Fano, Aras, 2014, pp. 171-179.

³⁶ M. Severini, *Mortara e le donne: la sentenza del 1906 e la legge del 1919*, in Id. and L. Pupilli (edd.), *Dodici passi nella storia. Le tappe dell'emancipazione femminile*, Venice, Marsilio, 2016, pp. 54-74.

³⁷ *Dizionario biografico delle donne marchigiane*, cit.

of the women from the Marche area – the second one in Italy after a volume about Lombardy edited by Rachele Farina in 1995³⁸ – and points to the need, as if proof was needed, for more similar studies to be promoted in Italy³⁹.

Lastly, 2017 saw the publishing of a biography of Giulia Berna⁴⁰, one of the ten teachers and lively protagonists of a forgotten page of Italian and European history, which we have now better understood.

³⁸ See R. Farina (ed.), *Dizionario biografico delle donne lombarde (568-1968)*, Milan, Baldini&Castoldi, 1995.

³⁹ See P. Di Cori, *Sotto mentite spoglie. Gender studies in Italia*, «Cahiers d'études italiennes», n. 16, 2013, pp. 15-37.

⁴⁰ See M. Severini, *Giulia, la prima donna*, Venice, Marsilio, 2017.

Les organisations de jeunesse fascistes dans l'Italie mussolinienne (1926-1943). *L'Opera Nazionale Balilla (O.N.B.)* et *La Gioventù Italiana del Littorio (G.I.L.)**

Première partie

Michel Ostenc
Professor Emeritus
University of Angers (France)
nmod@noos.fr

Fascist youth organizations in Mussolini's Italy (1926-1943). The Opera Nazionale Balilla (O.N.B.) and the Gioventù Italiana del Littorio (G.I.L.)

ABSTRACT: On the basis of a large collection of sources that have not yet been analyzed, the present paper aims to reconstruct in detail the history of the fascist youth organizations during the Mussolini regime, paying particular attention to the *Opera Nazionale Balilla* (O.N.B.) and to the *Gioventù Italiana del Littorio* (G.I.L.).

EET/TEE KEYWORDS: History of education; History of youth organizations; Fascism; Italy, XXth Century.

Mussolini avait créé l'*Opera Nazionale Balilla* (O.N.B.) le 30 janvier 1926, placée sous son autorité directe assistée de celle du ministère de l'Intérieur et

* Abréviations: A.C.S.: Archivio Centrale dello Stato; P.C.M.: Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri; B.C.G.G.: Bollettino del Comando Generale della G.I.L.; D.B.E.: G. Chiosso, R. Sani (edd.), *Dizionario biografico dell'Educazione*, 2 vols, Milan, Editrice Bibliografica, 2013; D.B.I.: *Dizionario biografico degli Italiani*, Rome, Istituto dell'Enciclopedia Italiana, 1960-2013; D.F.: V. De Grazia, S. Luzzato (edd.), *Dizionario del fascismo*, 2 vols., Turin, Einaudi, 2003.

In 1897 women started to demand the right to vote in national elections and to have equal rights with men. The war of 1914 changed public attitude to women. Britain would have been unable to continue the war without the women who took men's place in the factories. By the 1918 29 per cent of the total workforce of Britain was female. In 1918, women over the age of 30 gained the right to vote after a long, hard struggle. But it was only in 1928 that the voting age of women came down to 21, equal with men. The liberation of women took other forms. They started to wear lighter clothing, shorter ha 2. He hated women. 3. He did not know any good words. 4. He forgot to take his loaves of bread. 10. Choose the right verb: Miss Martha _ well putting butter into the loaves of bread. 1. did. He was a real Count. He had an estate and a castle in Italy. Count Fernando Mazzini was his name. My father objected, of course, and once we eloped, but father overtook us, and took us back. Finally, father agreed, and said we might be married next spring. Fernando showed him proofs of his title and wealth, and then went to Italy to prepare a castle for us. Three days ago I got a letter from Italy, saying that Fernando was killed in a gondola accident. That is why I am in mourning. My heart, Mr. Donovan, will remain forever in his grave. I guess I am poor company, Mr. Donovan. Women in Saudi Arabia were only given their right to vote in 2015. But when they do get a fair chance, it can have a big impact. India's big election in 2019 saw the same percentage of women voting as men, for the first time, helping to elect more female members of parliament than ever before. Step two: Take inspiration from role models. We all want someone to look up to and it's no different in politics. New Zealand was the first country to give women the right to vote. And their current prime minister, Jacinda Ardern, is only the second elected world leader to give birth while in office. She In the early years of the women's rights movement, the agenda included much more than just the right to vote. Their broad goals included equal access to education and employment, equality within marriage, and a married woman's right to her own property and wages, custody over her children and control over her own body. After the Civil War, debate over the 14th and 15th Amendments to the Constitution which would grant citizenship and suffrage to African-American men inspired many women's rights activists to refocus their efforts on the battle for female suffrage. But if you see something that doesn't look right, click here to contact us! HISTORY reviews and updates its content regularly to ensure it is complete and accurate. Sign up for more history!