

Living War,  
Thinking Peace  
(1914-1924)



# Living War, Thinking Peace (1914-1924):

*Women's Experiences,  
Feminist Thought, and  
International Relations*

Edited by

Bruna Bianchi and Geraldine Ludbrook

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## CHAPTER TWO

# INSIDE THE STORM: THE EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN DURING THE AUSTRO-GERMAN OCCUPATION OF VENETO 1917-1918

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### **Introduction**

In October 1917, after three years of war, the Italian army suffered a heavy defeat at the battle of Caporetto, which led to the occupation of the eastern provinces of Veneto by the Austro-German troops. In these conditions some 250,000 people fled into the country, crossing the Piave river, while about 900,000 people were forced to suffer harsh domination for a year. The economic management of the Veneto region in 1917-1918 cannot be separated from the catastrophic food situation of the Central Powers, due to the Entente Powers' blockade, which used hunger as a real "weapon" of war (Bianchi 2010; Offer 1989). In fact, from December 1917, following orders from the Austrian high command, the occupying forces had to rely for their sustenance only upon food from the occupied territories, and this resulted in a systematic plundering of local resources, so that the occupation was recollected by people as "the year of hunger" (Horvath-Meyerhofer 1985, 12-20; Corni 1990).

The invasion brought about a marked change in women's wartime experience. In the first phase of the war, women participated in war mobilization in the countryside and in military logistics (Ermacora 2014). However, the occupation represented a sort of watershed as these events exposed civilians to "total war," in which they experienced violence, hunger and forced displacement on a large scale. The occupation led women to describe their material and moral sufferance in their diaries and

in post-war memoirs. These private writings, which represent precious sources not only to analyze civilian conditions, but also to explore women's perceptions and feelings, have enabled historians to develop a gendered history of the war, and therefore make new reflections on wartime legacies. This chapter, based on different types of sources (official documents, diaries, parish reports, oral histories, military judgments), deals with women's experiences. I will focus not only on issues of violence and hunger, but also on the collective actions of survival, and on the perceptions and the new dimension that women experienced during this last phase of the war.

### **Present but invisible. Women's occupation memories**

Although the invasion of 1917-1918 had a significant impact on the collective imagination, the memory of that event has been largely overshadowed in public discourse because it was directly linked to the issue of the defeat at Caporetto. In addition, the memory was essentially feminine, far from manly values that liberal governments and the later Fascist regime built around the "myth of victory" and the (male) "nation at war" (Bravo-Bruzzone 1995, 10). Furthermore, this memory was weak because these events were geographically and socially "peripheral" in relation to the national picture. Although the majority of the occupied population of Veneto were women, in the aftermath of war, they were considered by the Italian government only as victims of the occupying troops, as evidence of German "barbarism." During the investigations of the Royal Commission of Inquiry for the violation of the rights of populations, promoted by the Italian authorities to denounce the Austro-German oppression, women's voices were obscured by "male" administrators (mayors, priests, even officials who had fled and had not even experienced the occupation). For instance, in the sixth volume of the official Inquiry devoted to the occupation experience, only 16 percent of the reports are by women (55 out of 327). Otherwise, occupation meant defeat, betrayal or even collaboration with the enemy, so female experiences were not considered at that stage.

Hence, the creation of female memories followed two separate phases. The first occurred during the post-war period and women – especially those from educated and middle classes – published their diaries and memoirs characterized by justificatory tones, as they wanted to reaffirm their patriotism and tried to compensate the lack of public consideration (Borra 1919). In these publications women focused especially on the issues of violence; they represented themselves as victims of brutal

occupation. Then followed a long oblivion. These dramatic events became “local memories” and were removed from the national collective memory almost until the 1990s, when non-academic historians started to study war violence in the areas along the Italian border. Thus they “re-discovered” civilian wartime experiences by collecting oral interviews or analyzing parish priest reports. The oral interviews – “childhood memories” as the protagonists were children at that time – underlined the issues of failed escape, hunger and the desperate search for food. These recollections also show a sort of compassion for the hungry and tired Austrian soldiers, who were considered as victims of war as well as the occupied population, and also provide new insights into the issues of popular strategies for survival and collaboration with the occupier (Viola 1987 and 1998; Fabi and Viola 1990; Urli 2003; Pavan 2004).

### **Violence, displacement and forced labour**

The Austro-German invasion took place in a climate of violence exacerbated by the soldiers’ fatigue after the bloody battles on the Isonzo front and by the deteriorating situation of the Central Powers’ home front. These aspects, alongside the Austrian propaganda that depicted Italians as “traitors,” were translated into a harsh management of the occupied territories. The violence of war against the civilian population took on an unprecedented importance, especially during the initial phase of the breakthrough, marked by the movement of armies. In fact the retreat of the Italian army and civilians towards the Piave river created general chaos.

As soon as the Austro-German troops had conquered the territories of Veneto region, there was a huge wave of looting and rapes. In the central phase of the occupation there was a sort of forced cohabitation of civilians and occupied armies, but the deterioration of living conditions and scarce supplies available aggravated the relationship and increased the harassment of the population, which was subjected to forced displacement and labour in favour of the Austro-German armies.

The social outcomes of the occupation, as appears in the data provided by the Royal Commission of Inquiry, were dramatic: in the occupied towns there were 553 victims of “acts of cruelty,” meanwhile 24,597 people died from causes related directly or indirectly to the war, of whom 12,649 for lack of medical care, 9,797 due to malnutrition, and 961 died while they were trying to escape from the enemy (Reale Commissione d’Inchiesta 1919, vol. IV, 181-185).

As the occupied society was highly “feminized,” women and girls were overwhelmed by a large influx of violence and constraint. In this

framework, historians have recently focused on war rapes (causes, dynamics, social and cultural stereotypes) and on the issue of sexual violence as a propaganda topic (Gibelli 1999). Rapes were particularly frequent in the months of November and December 1917 when armies were on the move. Although this kind of violence was not preordained, it continued throughout the period of occupation, as in many cases rapes occurred during soldiers' searches for food and requisitions. In the Royal Inquiry, 735 cases were reported, and 53 women were killed after rape. Indeed these figures are under-estimated: the real number of rapes perpetrated was certainly higher – maybe about 2,000 – because many women refused to denounce this violence to the authorities, as they felt humiliated, or due to family pressures or, not least, because they did not want to relive the pain they had experienced (Calò 2003; Ceschin 2006). As rapes were considered crimes against “women’s honour,” Austro-German officers did not prosecute these crimes, and the soldiers who were guilty of them were not punished.

Research has shown that such violence had painful consequences on women’s lives, and that mothers and the “children of the enemy” – symbols of guilt, weakness and immorality – were marginalized by families and communities, and became the subject of social and moral condemnation. Women were forced by their husbands to abandon their children. In the aftermath of the war, the priest Celso Costantini founded a special charitable institution devoted to offering assistance to the children born from the occupiers’ violence (Ospizio dei Figli della Guerra San Filippo Neri) in Portogruaro (Venice province). In many cases the children were abandoned definitively. The letters the mothers wrote to this institution show their deep anguish for the abandonments and the social pressures to which they were subjected (Falcomer 2008).

The searches, the military requisitions of goods became daily violations of domestic spaces, often characterized by abuse, kidnapping and violence; alone, without men, women experienced anxiety, uncertainty and fear. Sometimes soldiers killed those who resisted or who refused to deliver goods. Despite these dreadful circumstances, women had to continue providing protection and emotional support to their families. As women’s diaries demonstrate, soldiers policing and looting determined a state of “constant concern” as they feared both violence and consequences for their families and children as they could not survive without supplies; Isabella Bigontina, a woman from Belluno, after a requisition, in January 1918, wrote in her diary: “I’m going to become crazy” (Lotto 1996, 38). Women also feared being evicted from their houses as new troops arrived

in the villages; displacement became synonymous of mistreatment, poverty and disease.

In this perspective the Royal Commission of Inquiry and personal writings offer a large range of cases of violence against women and looting; many of these abuses – largely unpunished by military authorities – were perpetrated by groups of soldiers against unarmed women and girls; the mistreatment, fear and psychological trauma brought women to abortion, illness, and death. As women played a key role within their families in this period, the violence that hit women multiplied its intensity and painful outcomes on the entire family.

The developments of the military operations and the creation of a new battlefield along the Piave river caused the forced displacement of some 55,000 people towards the far areas of Friuli (Corni 1990, 40-42). Military authorities forced entire villages to flee. Forcibly driven from their homes, deprived of everything and excluded from the food rationing system, the so-called “refugees from Piave” were abandoned and forced to depend on the solidarity of the hosting communities. Sometimes the refugees were despised, as they were considered responsible for the decreasing availability of goods (Pivetta 2012, 85-87) The conditions were so miserable and poor that among the refugees the mortality ratio was very high, and reached 6 percent among adults and 15 percent among children (Ceschin 2013, 174).

Alongside these evictions, the occupied territories were considered a source of labour, and thus women and children were exploited by military authorities to work on road maintenance, to collect debris and the remnants of war or to work the land. The workforce was recruited by local civil authorities or by military commands; when there was lack of manpower, the commands requisitioned the civilian population and forced them to work in the military yards. Several hundred women and girls of the districts of Feltre, Belluno, in Carnia and in the areas near the battlefield of the Piave river were employed in logistical work, transporting ammunition or building roads and new railways (such as the San Boldo, Toblach-Cortina and Sacile-Vittorio Veneto railways).

The military authorities did not care about the physical conditions of women, and they were forced to work in all kinds of weather or even under Italian artillery fire. The workers were victims of exploitation, mistreatment, displacement, beatings, and temporary imprisonments. The recruitment of female workers for the textile industries of Germany and Austria-Hungary, which occurred from March 1918, given the leverage of hunger and coercion, may be configured as form of violence. This kind of employment, which offered the opportunity to obtain meagre food rations

and low wages, gradually turned into a process of intense exploitation, so that young workers from the districts of Pordenone, Treviso and Belluno died of starvation while they were working or even after they returned to their villages (Reale Commissione d'Inchiesta 1919, vol. VI, 279; 313-315; 400; 708).

### **Coping with Hunger**

One of the central elements of women's memories was the distressing need to procure food for their family members. If, on the one hand, daily needs compelled women to play an important role in the occupied society, on the other hand this situation increased their stress and moral suffering. The occupying forces were also in search of food and started to systematically loot local resources, and as a consequence the living conditions of the civilians deteriorated. This situation engendered a sort of competition for survival between occupants and occupied. Parish reports and diaries show that during winter 1917-1918 the alpine communities of Veneto were the first to suffer from hunger. In the following months, due to the forced displacement of populations and the increasing presence of troops, the civilians that lived in the hills and plain areas also started to starve. From January 1918, as occurred in the Central Powers, civilian food rations were reduced to 150 grams of flour per capita. People had to eat grass, to grind corn cobs or pods of beans. Teresina Zanutto, from Teor (Udine province), a rural village in the lowlands of Friuli, noted on 15<sup>th</sup> June 1918: "We're starving: in the morning [we eat] a watered-down soup, at noon an unseasoned soup, in the evening salad with vinegar" (Fantin 2008, 135).

Although not obsessively, as in the concentration-camp narratives, "hunger," the need to find supplies, is one of the recurring elements of women's narratives and oral histories. In their diaries women annotated the progressive exhaustion of food resources and expressed their impotence and helplessness in the face of disease and the emaciation of the elderly and children. At the end of August 1918 alpine populations were about to starve. Ersilia De Maria, wife of a pharmacist in the alpine village of Forno di Zoldo (Belluno province), wrote in her diary: "We really suffer, the nightmare of hunger plagues everyone. Oh our suffering will never be believed" (De Maria 1918, 56). In many cases, such as in the alpine areas and among populations who lived near the Piave battlefield, children died from starvation and illness. This situation was perceived by women as a violence; as they could not feed their children, they were anguished and frustrated.

On the whole, the physical hardship, edema, malnutrition and disease (which were combined with typhoid, diphtheria, smallpox, malaria, and later with the “Spanish flu” in the autumn of 1918), led to great moral suffering, anxiety, and feelings of anger. In March 1918 Caterina Arrigoni wrote:

Hunger, hunger, hunger! Oh, if I could have tons of flour and give it to everyone! At least [I would give it] to all those children, who come here every day more and more emaciated, their noses sharper, a great resignation in their sad eyes, . . . their thin and crooked shoulders, their legs thinner and thinner (Arrigoni 1918, 346)

Indeed the women’s responsibilities related to family survival also increased their subordination and weaknesses. As they had an extreme need for food, mothers and girls were directly and indirectly subjected to violence, because they were compelled to sell their personal belongings and effects (linens, jewellery, wedding rings, dowry), or they had to travel in search of supplies, and in these circumstances they were subjected to sexual blackmail.

The phenomenon of prostitution in exchange for food was in fact widespread, especially among the poorest women, such as the female refugees from the Piave area, whose dreadful conditions made them vulnerable to violence, blackmail and oppression. This situation often resulted in attempts to get an abortion or even in infanticide (Fantoni 2013, 202).

On the other hand, motherhood represented a sort of great strength that forced women to leave their houses in search of food for their children. The urgent need of supplies hastened an intense mobility of women and girls, who challenged the military circulation laws, and headed for the Veneto-Friuli lowlands in search of flour, wheat, salt in exchange for cheese, butter, linen or handicrafts. Women and girls, alone or in small groups, walked for 50 or even 100-150 kilometres in search of food. In January 1918 the priest of the alpine village of Luincis (Udine province) wrote: “Women continue to trickle down through the Friuli . . . It’s a heartbreaking scene . . . Gloomy eyes, swollen faces. Their outlines show an ill-concealed pain that may burst. Women are the living image of sad and melancholic resignation” (Dreosti and Duri 2006, 138).

These attempts often ended up in failure because women were arrested as they violated the rules of movement, and in many cases they were put on military trial (ASTS TG 1917-18, b.8, K3432/18). The grain purchased with so much fatigue was stolen or confiscated by soldiers or military policemen. Maria Todovertò Pasquale, from San Vito di Valdobbiadene

(Treviso province), born in 1899, remembers: “We were put in prison. [The military policemen] locked us in a room and they took away the bag [with the grain]. They left us there, maybe a week, with a little water and food . . . When we walked to the plains, the bog was up to mid-leg. In the evening we slept on the hay . . . We walked barefoot” (Pavan 2010).

The “hunger treks” had debilitating consequences, as women and girls were raped by soldiers or they got sick or died from physical exhaustion. The priest of Ampezzo, in the alpine area of Carnia, in June 1918 reported that women were bedridden, they even could not claim for the grain confiscated because they their feet were injured by the long-distance walks (Martina 1999, 56).

It’s worthwhile remembering that – in official documents, diaries and parish priests reports – during 1917-1918 similar stories spread through occupied territories. These stories – such as the answer that soldiers gave to women who asked for supplies (“Eat your children!”), or the story of a desperate woman who drowned herself in a river (in Tagliamento, Livenza or in Meduna) because she could not provide food for her children – highlighted both the cruelty of the occupiers and the mothers’ suffering (Reale Commissione 1919, vol. VI, 703; 395). Nonetheless women made great efforts and had some success in providing food for their families. Some personal narratives are focused mainly on the capacity to face difficulties and ensure food. For instance, Ersilia De Maria was able to organize several expeditions by truck to procure grain for the populations in the alpine area. As she wrote proudly in her diary, at night she had to cross the military checkpoints and hide to escape from controls (De Maria 1918, 58).

### **Women’s protagonism in a society turned “upside down”**

Notwithstanding the difficulties, women were far from being passive victims as they played a considerable role in managing family survival. Invasion and then occupation changed the social landscape of the rural communities: in 1917-1918 there was a “new” wartime society, characterized by a lack of male authority (only priests and occupier-appointed officials remained in the communities). Civilian life was bureaucratized and subordinated to the occupying forces; in addition the situation was troubled by the presence of prisoners of war and disbanded soldiers who hid in the mountains or in the villages. Although women were overwhelmed by war, they perceived themselves as non-combatants; they were geographically and emotionally isolated, therefore tried to humanize the war and establish new relations. Despite their tones characterized by

fatalism and resignation, diaries and memoirs reveal courage, perseverance, the will to fight and resist, ability to adapt to the new wartime circumstances. Indeed, women became “custodians” and organized a new existence in the occupied society: they became household heads, worked the land, and dealt with local authorities and with the enemy.

As the living conditions deteriorated, popular attempts to survive implied the rupture of moral and social rules. Compromise with the enemy was necessary. In some cases relationships with soldiers were characterized by a sort of mutual help, with exchanges of food for laundry services, cooking or sewing clothes. In other cases women had sexual relations with soldiers and officers to avoid violence and to ensure food for the family (ASTS TG 1917-18, b.1, K2455/18). This latter issue was largely censored (and self-censored), but forced cohabitation and relationships of protection and prostitution were common. These were closely linked to the asymmetrical relations between occupiers and occupied, the male-violence and power, and different access to food. At the same time, these relationships engendered tensions within rural communities and precipitated the search for “scapegoats,” often identified among refugee women who did not belong to rural communities and were amongst the poorest people.

Women had to make an extra effort to ensure the survival of their families: they defended their daughters from the attackers, searched for supplies or looted. Sources show that the atmosphere of violence and the absence of menfolk strengthened the solidarity between mothers and daughters; women in fact lived and worked together, encouraged, helped and protected each other. Many women, as they feared violence, started to live together with other women, and therefore acted collectively to overcome terror and anguish. Life under occupation became a sort of daily survival “operation” in which women and girls developed strategies with the aim of hiding goods, supplies and animals from military requisitions. In this perspective, the oral histories reveal a number of episodes in which mothers and daughters helped each other to build double bottoms in floors or walls, to hide animals in the woods or in the cornfields, to conceal clothes, corn and cheese under the tiles or in holes dug in the ground (Viola 1998). Compelled by hardship, women “invented” new practical cookery: they learnt to grind grain with stones or with a coffee machine. Moreover, uprooted women joined disbanded Italian soldiers and started to steal goods, a phenomenon that sometimes undermined the communitarian solidarity and gave rise to complaints.

In a general framework marked by fatigue, women were also involved in episodes of unarmed resistance, which had high symbolic value. In fact

they often opposed requisitions, kept the soldiers at a distance, refused to participate in public events or to learn German, made clothes in the colours of the national flag. In many cases, they also used irony and dissimulation as “weapons” against the soldiers, and these events constituted a sort of liberating moment that enabled women to cancel the asymmetry of positions in the occupied society, such as woman-man, civilian-soldier, occupied-occupant.

Exasperated, women had to act collectively and protested against army commands, and they pleaded against or resisted requisitions. In January 1918, women in Calalzo protested after repeated episodes of mistreatment of civilians perpetrated by soldiers (Reale Commissione 1919, vol.VI, 45); in May 1918 mothers in the alpine area of Carnia opposed forced recruitment of their daughters (Dreosti and Duri 2006, 97); in April 1918, the female workers in the textile industry in Udine went on strike as they demanded improved food rations and higher wages (Blanchini 1921, 153). In many cases, as oral stories or military judgments demonstrate, they also challenged military bans, hiding or hosting soldiers in their barns and stables. However, women also showed humanitarian attitudes as they expressed concrete solidarity with disbanded soldiers, prisoners of war, civilian refugees or even with occupation soldiers (Reale Commissione 1919, vol.VI, 297).

To summarize the new role assumed by women in a “world turned upside down” by war, it is worthwhile remembering that, in many areas of the Veneto, women wore trousers, dressed up as men and defended their own land with day and night patrols to prevent theft and looting by soldiers. Amelia Burba, twenty-two, from Ampezzo (Udine province), in the autumn of 1918, reported her experience of night surveillance in her diary. The words she wrote expressed irony but also pride in their new tasks: “Virginia and I we dressed like men . . . , we looked like tramps or deserters . . . . Even the saddest and most afflicted person would have laughed seeing us ending up like this” (Martinis 1999, 139-140).

After the first traumatic phase of the occupation, women had to face forced cohabitation with soldiers and officers in domestic spaces. Despite the unavoidable subordination of their positions, women played an important role as mediators with the enemy. In this perspective women demonstrated compassion towards occupying soldiers. Moreover the culture of exchange, which was a typical attitude among rural populations, let women cross the boundaries between occupier and occupied, and soldiers were perceived as their “own sons” or as victims of war, because they shared the same experiences of violence, hunger and hardship (Bravo 1991, 98-99). In particular, among mothers or wives of mobilized men,

there was a widespread idea that solidarity towards Austrian soldiers would be mutually exchanged with their loved ones in the ranks of Italian army (Biedermann 2008, 137-138).

After four years of war, people were war-weary and perceived the conflict as a useless “slaughter of the young.” However, relationships with soldiers sometimes resulted in friendships, especially with the educated officers. The “enemy” became a human being, or a friend or even a lover. The names of the soldiers and officers that appeared on the pages of the diaries (Gustaf, Willy, Alfred, Alois) show that women achieved a certain degree of intimacy with them. Sometimes there were romantic relationships that, because of self-censorship and patriotism, were omitted. If, on the one hand, priests underlined that these relationships were hindered by the lack of knowledge of German and by female patriotism, on the other hand – as occurred in occupied Northern France or in Belgium – these relationships were considered a betrayal, a unbearable violation of the gender and communitarian hierarchies, and therefore were highly stigmatized, both in moral and political terms (Le Naour 2000, 151; Cadeddu 1998, 36).

### **Perceptions: “The village is a graveyard”**

Private writings, in particular women’s diaries, offer significant insights into morale, the perceptions of occupation and the enemy, and the intensity of the hardships. Diaries were mostly written by wealthy and educated women (such as Caterina Arrigoni, Isabella Bigontini Sperti, Maria Spada), but also by teachers and young girls (Angelina Casagrande, Brigida Salvadori), variously motivated by the need to demonstrate their patriotism, to bear witness to the hardships of invasion, or to react to the trauma of chaos and disorder. Other popular subjective narratives focused on death, disease and illness, and the ways to escape from these situations. In her diary, written in May 1918, Maria Villotti, a 25-year-old peasant woman from Teor (Udine province), described the occupation with a sort of restless stream of events marked by violence, solitude, hunger and the sudden deaths of her mother, sister and nephew from disease (Villotti 1990, 12-13).

Diaries and memories were far from being uniquely patriotic. In fact they are often characterized by feelings of hostility and compassion towards the invader or, on the contrary, express criticism for the behaviour of Italian soldiers during the retreat (Martina 1997, 27; Nodari 1921). As women tried to preserve their identity in a collapsing world, the act of writing became a sort of passive resistance, a way of understanding the

dramatic events, explaining the feelings and concerns that could not be publicly expressed, or attempting to counteract isolation, with the aim of overcoming the feelings of abandonment and separation from their loved ones. Moreover, writing was a means that enabled women to restore their dignity, a consolation and, at the same time, the decision to write made women more autonomous and reflective.

These private writings constitute an important source of women's feelings and perceptions. In describing their condition, they used images and cultural stereotypes that can be related to the Holy Bible ("slavery," "via crucis," "Calvary," "ordeal"), to the rhetoric of the Risorgimento ("captivity," "vassalage," "exile") or to wartime propaganda ("barbarians," "huns," "animals" and so on). Often women related attitudes, behaviour and violence to the different national groups of the multiethnic army of the Dual Monarchy.

The female gaze is characterized by highly-involved observation, especially when women described the poorest and most vulnerable. At first women described in the pages of their diaries their emotions and their disorientation determined by the quick succession of wartime events, such as the trauma of the impact with the enemy, anguish for the lack of news of their loved ones who fled over the Piave river, the hopes of an immediate Italian counter-offensive. Later, during winter 1917-1918, as the occupation consolidated and seemed to be endless, they expressed their despair, tiredness and apathy; the isolation, the deterioration of living conditions and the repeated army requisitions engendered pain, anguish feelings of hopelessness. The presence of the enemy influenced perceptions of time and space. The description of landscapes and the seasonal changes underlined the contrast between the beauty of nature and the sadness of their condition under occupation. Malnutrition prevented them from taking on the everyday functions as household heads, and this fact generated feelings of great discouragement.

As war dragged on, the unprecedented intensity of suffering and hardships made captivity seem more prolonged; time seemed still, "everlasting." As they wanted to endure, women tried to remove the present time and the brutality of war. Brigida Salvadori, a primary school teacher, aged twenty, from a village near Pordenone, wrote on 9<sup>th</sup> February 1918, "What about us? We live every hour in a sea of troubles." A few days later, on 22<sup>nd</sup> February, she wrote: "What dreadful days, in which I think of my home, my loved ones far away, and my heart is so torn; I can find neither peace nor rest. Today is one of those days. I do not know where to go, I cannot stop, I would put my brain to sleep because my restless thoughts are constantly tormenting me" (Salvadori 1918).

Isolated, with no news of their loved ones, women developed a keen sensitivity to perceiving signs of change. There was a sound dimension (the roar of the guns in the distance, rumours and news), a visual dimension (the movements of the Austro-German troops, the Italian planes), but also the circulating news of diplomatic and political issues. Sounds, signs, and voices had to be analyzed and interpreted in the light of the longing for peace. In this framework, as shown in several sources, women mostly turned to news and rumours, raised hopes that were followed by bitter disappointments. These dwindling emotions forced women to rely on traditional sources of stability and resilience, such as religion (“divine providence”), collective celebrations and popular piety. In many rural villages, women took part in pilgrimages and celebrations, and prayed for peace. Nonetheless, in 1917-1918, the religious interpretation of war as a collective sacrifice (“God’s punishment”) or “natural calamity” became less persuasive. Meanwhile war-weariness engendered popular pacifism based on prophecies, holy apparitions, rumours and false news which were expression of eschatological anguish and uncertainty (Procacci 1999; Ziemann 2007, 161). Thus the occupation made women’s desire for peace more acute. In this perspective – like the German or Austrian women struggling with hunger – they longed for peace, at first mostly interpreted as the end of hostilities, as an “immediate peace.” Later, the failure of the Austrian offensive on the Piave river in June 1918 played an important role in raising new hopes and the idea of peace was now interpreted as liberation from constraint and military occupation.

## Conclusion

The final retreat of the Austro-Hungarian troops in November 1918 led to a new wave of violence, moral suffering and tension. The great enthusiasm for liberation was soon obscured by feelings of bitterness and sorrow for the losses, widespread disease, and devastation of the land. In the immediate post-war period the atmosphere in the liberated territories (“Terre Liberate”) was poisoned by suspicions and accusations of collaboration with the enemy. In public discourse, refugees were “patriots” who escaped from German slavery, meanwhile those who had remained in the invaded territories were considered collaborationists and traitors (the so-called *austriacanti* or Italian supporters of Austrian politics). Big landowners, people of the middle classes who fled in October 1917, expected to find their property as they had left it. When they returned to find their homes looted and devastated, they began to

express feelings of anger against the people who had remained in the occupied territories as they were considered responsible for the lootings. Moreover, those returning did not want to recognize the hardships the people had experienced under enemy occupation. Therefore, during winter 1918-1919, many women also had to endure the shame of trials, accused of theft and misconduct (ASUD T SP 1919 b. A129). In addition, as refugees and soldiers came home, women who had been raped were socially marginalized.

The process started during the war that led women to expand their social role in the public sphere had had a very high cost in terms of physical and moral suffering. At the end of the war they were exhausted, traumatized by violence, ragged, poor and ill. Unsurprisingly, they wanted to return to their pre-war lives and to their traditional roles. For these reasons, adult women considered the war experience as “exceptional,” “extraordinary,” a sort of dramatic and negative “parenthesis,” as the autonomy, freedom and responsibilities were generated by the dramatic needs of the moment rather than by processes of social evolution and emancipation.

However, while adult women emphasized unprecedented sufferings, fears and anxiety, the younger generation on the contrary had acquired new roles and skills that were used during the inter-war years when young women were protagonists of emigration to help their families and later during the Nazi occupation in 1943-1945. After the war there was no room for women’s wartime experiences. The only public image of women was that of *mater dolorosa*, or mourning mother. Likewise there was no public recognition either of female mobilization in support of the war effort, or of refugees or women under enemy occupation, as they had become the symbols of military defeat. In this latter case, women had multiple and weak identities as they were women, civilian, non-combatant, and occupied. In addition, during the last phase of the war they were stereotyped by propaganda: on the one hand they were considered the “body of the nation;” on the other they were despised for their alleged distortion of gender roles and collaboration with the enemy. In this perspective cultural stereotypes and wartime propaganda increased their victimization and their passivity.

Despite the public oblivion of this period, women wrote their diaries as they considered their suffering important and valuable to remember. To some extent women considered their life as having been as hard as, or even harder than, their husbands’ experience at the front. At the same time, the awareness that those who had not experienced enemy occupation could not comprehend it contributed to isolating them, and compelled

them to remain in silence. Moreover, after the war, women were subjected to new pressures, such as unsure family life, re-building a devastated nation and repopulating it. In public discourse, liberation was interpreted as an opportunity to return to normality, as a “moral” regeneration and a restoration of gender hierarchies, so that women were forced to forget those dreadful experiences of 1917-1918.

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