

Italian Social Policy for Mother and Child during the World War II (1943–1945)



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INTRODUCTION

The Second World War represented an interesting test bed for the social policies and welfare institutions established during the Fascist era. In this occasion the fascism regime was called to give concrete proof of the efficacy and efficiency levels they had reached by the welfare institution created. This essay analyse one of those institution: the The National Agency for Maternity and Childhood [Opera nazionale per la protezione della maternità e dell'infanzia, ONMI] created in 1925. The aim of this paper is twofold. First, is to analyse the born of Fascist social policy for the mother and child and their link with demographic policies and gender rules in fascist society. In fact, the ONMI is an example of how Italian women tried to turn the Fascist regime's emphasis on motherhood to their own advantage. They combined maternalist and pronatalist policies — of which ONMI was a clear expression — to obtain social rights as working and non-working mothers; to acquire a new sense of entitlement to assistance; and to create new female professions in the field of social assistance.¹

Second, is to verify how the social policies functioned during the occupation period in Italy. In other words, an analysis of the activity of the OMNI, checking in what ways it operated to meet the needs of mothers and children, which grew exponentially during the war and even more in occupation period, allows to verify how much exactly the regime realised it's so propagandised welfare policies and is important to verify if the Social Italian Republic — RSI was really "social". Moreover, the essay will compare the rule played by the occupation forces (Anglo-American and Nazi troops) the in the new organization of mother and child's policy in this dramatic period for Italy and for Europe. We will try to answer this question by reconstructing the activity carried out by the ONMI respectively in the North (Social Italian Republic — RSI) and in the South (Kingdom of the South) of the country.

1 Elisabetta Vezzosi, *Madri e lavoratrici: l'Opera Nazionale Maternità e Infanzia nel periodo fascista*. In: S. Soldani e M. Palazzi, a cura di, *Lavoratrici e cittadine nell'Italia Contemporanea*, Bologna 2000, pp. 193–224.



Preliminary questions to answer are: What was exactly the occupation in Italy during the years 1943–1945? How changed the OMNI's policy and activity? Were different in the North and in the South? What happened with and of the war?

One of the welfare institutions the regime was most proud about was the ONMI. It was considered as the highest expression of the State's care for Italian women and children. The ONMI, founded in 1925 and located within the Ministry of Interior for the “physical and moral improvement of the race”, was mandated to: protect and assist pregnant women, especially those who were poor or single; nursing and weaned infants up to five years old from needy families; children who are physically or psychologically abnormal; and minors under eighteen years of age who are materially and morally abandoned, deviant or delinquent.² ONMI had a well-developed structure with broad coverage all over the national territory, and its hubs were Federations [Federazioni] at a provincial level and Patronage Committees [Comitati di patronato] at a municipal level. The Federation had the function to transmit local requests and needs to the central seat in Rome, as well as to coordinate and integrate the network of public and private institutions working for the protection of maternity and childhood, to control the application of the laws for the safeguard of mothers and children and to encourage and promote the activity of local Patronage committees.³ The role of these committees, instead, was to materially realise the services of the ONMI, the direct assistance in the obstetric and paediatric clinics, nurseries, Kitchens [refettori], crèches for infant and also, starting from 1933, in the “Homes for the mother and the child” [Case della madre e del fanciullo].⁴

This organization reflected the structure of the Belgian National Opera for childhood but also presented quite different and original features, of which the most evident was a strong bond with the demographic policies promoted by Benito Mussolini, the National Fascist Party's leader and the Italian Prime Minister (October 1922–July 1943). Basically, the Belgian National Opera took care, as it still does, only of the hygienic protection of infants. The Italian National Opera, on the contrary, sought to have a global function, including the hygienic protection of maternity and childhood, but also the moral and material defence of youth and adolescence up to the eighteenth year of age and the education of women to maternity: the aim was not only a correct raising of the children but also the demographic growth, one of the pillars of Mussolini's policy⁵.

2 Act no. 2277, 10 December 1925 and implementing regulation of Rdl 15 April 1926.

3 Messaggio della presidenza dell'Opera Nazionale ai Presidenti dei Consigli direttivi delle Federazioni Provinciali tra le istituzioni per la Protezione e l'Assistenza della Maternità e dell'Infanzia, *Maternità e infanzia*, 1926, no. 12, pp. 63–64.

4 The House of the mother and child brought together in one building all the services direct and indirect, tangible and intangible ONMI, and was designed to provide assistance in an organic and integral. For another information see: D. La Banca, *La Casa della madre e del fanciullo: per una topografia dello stato sociale (1932–1975)*. In: V. Martelliano, S. Munarini (a cura di), *Spazi, storie e soggetti del welfare*, Roma 2012, pp. 119–130.

5 *Onmi, Origini e sviluppi dell'Opera Nazionale per la protezione della Maternità e dell'Infanzia (1926–1935)*, Milano 1936, p. 30.



In fact, Italian fascist government connected its pronatalist policy to measures aimed at improving population quality, protecting motherhood and reducing infant mortality.⁶ In the 1920s, the Italian population totalled 41,177 million people in 1931. The average annual population growth rate between 1921 and 1931 was 0.87%. This population increase was attributed to decreases in mortality and net migration rates rather than an increase in fertility rates. The first study on marital fertility was carried out by ISTAT in the framework of the 1931 census and revealed that the average number of children per married (or widowed) woman (4.11 per woman) was still above replacement level fertility. However there had been a decline in completed cohort fertility: the average number of children was equal to 6 for women above 60 years of age, to 4 children for those aged between 50 and 59 years, and to 3 children for those aged 40–49 year.⁷ Mussolini expressed his intentions to implement pronatalist policies in his Ascension Day Speech before the Italian Parliament, on 26 May 1927. In this speech, he considers the number of inhabitants as the main factor that determines countries' military strength, as well as their economic and civic development, for this these the activity of an Agency like ONMI was considered fundamental.

The ONMI's activity during the fascism regime was investigated in several studies;⁸ in this paper attention will be dedicated to the years of the Italian occupation (1943–1945). First of all, it is important to remember that Italian occupation was double. As a consequence of the downfall of the Fascist regime in the summer of 1943 and the armistice signed with the Allies on September 8th, Anglo-Americans started moving up from the South and German troops came down from the North:⁹ those who advanced northwards brought the end of the war, those who marched southwards wanted it to continue.

Central-Northern Italy was occupied by Nazi-fascist troops and the Italian Social Republic [Repubblica Sociale Italiana — RSI] was established, a government which was nominally led by Mussolini. In particular, the “Italian Social Republic”, whose capital was located in Salò, a small village on the Garda Lake, was a government demanded and led from a distance by Hitler; the German troops and the militias of the new-born RSI conducted a very harsh occupation, fighting against Italian partisans in an opposition that became a real civil war. The new government aims to introduce very advanced social security and work regulation provisions.¹⁰

6 Carl Ipsen, *Dictating Demography. The Problem of Population in Fascist Italy*, Cambridge 1996; Marie S. Quine, *Population Politics in Twentieth-Century Europe. Fascist Dictatorships and Liberal Democracies*, London 1996.

7 Anna Caporali e Antonio Golini, *Births and fertility in interwar Italy. Trends, Images, Policies and Perceptions*, p. 1, <https://www.uclouvain.be/cps/ucl/doc/demo/documents/Caporali.pdf>

8 Michela Minesso (a cura di) *Stato e infanzia nell'Italia contemporanea. Origine, sviluppo e fine dell'ONMI 1925–75*, Bologna 2007; Maurizio Bettini, *Stato e assistenza sociale in Italia. L'Opera nazionale per la protezione della maternità e dell'infanzia 1925–1974*, Livorno 2008; *Domenica La Banca, Welfare in transizione. L'esperienza dell'ONMI (1943–1950)*, Edizioni scientifiche italiane, Napoli 2013.

9 Lutz Klinkhammer, *L'occupazione tedesca in Italia 1943–1945*, Bollati Boringhieri 1993.

10 Monica Fioravanzo, *Mussolini e Hitler: la Repubblica sociale sotto il Terzo Reich*, Roma 2009; Luigi Ganapini, *La repubblica delle camicie nere*, Milano 2010.



In the South, on the contrary, there was the occupation of the Allied troops, which from Sicily reached Naples in September 1943. Politically, this experience takes the name of Kingdom of the South, that work together with the Allied Military Government (AMG). As Allied troops conquered the Peninsula, the territory controlled by the RSI grew smaller and smaller, until the Liberation realized on the 25th of April 1945.¹¹

The Kingdom of the South as well as the central and northern areas of Italy were deeply affected by the course of the military operations, with regard both to the political-administrative order and to the dramatic experiences of *total war* in which the civilian population was involved. It is essential to keep in mind this fragmented picture to analyse the development of the ONMI in the period spanning from the Armistice of the 8th of September 1943 to the Italian Liberation. The ONMI was soon divided into two blocks: in the Kingdom of the South it lived through a period of complete uncertainty (September 1943–June 1944) followed by a first reconstruction phase, made possible after the Rome Liberation (June 1944–April 1945). In the RSI, on the contrary, a laborious activity of transfer and renovation was undertaken by ONMI (November 1943–April 1945). This picture is complicated by the further separation of the Sicilian ONMI, which was ascribed to the General Regional Management of public healthcare and remained there until 1952.

The documents recovered about Neapolitan ONMI reveal two successive phases in the Kingdom of the South: the first one was an initial emergency moment and mostly corresponds to the *45-days* period of the Badoglio government, during which the directorate of the institution passed from Sergio Nannini (May–July 1943) to Francesco Valagussa (July–October 1943); the following phase was a period of “self-managed” activity which lasted until the Summer 1944, precisely because the offices of the central headquarters were moved northwards.

The indications promulgated by Sergio Nannini during his presidency, that is to say indications still addressing the whole of the Italian Provinces, concerned the suspension of the construction of new ONMI buildings, the children evacuation modalities and the “emergency” functioning of healthcare services.¹² And indeed, the reports by local healthcare managers very strongly pointed out how the work of the ONMI was often made impossible by the lack of structures and necessary equipment.

This was the situation passed on to the Roman paediatrician Francesco Valagussa, who led the institution during the *45-days* of Badoglio’s government and a short time after. Valagussa could not possibly do more than his predecessor. Besides, his management was mostly focused on the reconstruction of the federal and municipal

11 Mack Smith, Denis, *Il regno del Sud: Brindisi capitale d’Italia*, Lecce 1994; George F. Botjer, *Sideshow War: The Italian Campaign, 1943–1945*, Texas A&M University Press 1996; Ian Gooderson, *A Hard Way to Make a War: The Italian Campaign in the Second World War*, London 2008.

12 Historical Archives of Naples (henceforth ASN), Gabinetto di Prefettura (henceforth Gab. Pref.), b. 485, Circ. ONMI, 2 June 1943, n. 363. Oggetto: Sospensione di nuove costruzioni delle Case della Madre e del Bambino e Circ. ONMI, 6 July 1943, n. 368. Oggetto: Sffollamento minori.

councils of the institution, which had been dissolved after the suppression of the Fascist party. The ONMI reform made in 1933, in effect, had given the presidency of the provincial and municipal branches respectively to the president of the provinces [deputazione] and to the mayor [potestà],¹³ while the vice-presidency of provincial and municipal councils were assigned to the Women's Fasci. The brief guidance of Valagussa came to an end in October 1943, when he was substituted by Doctor Francesco Adami and the central management started being transferred to the North, in Pedrengo, near Salò. From this moment on, until the Liberation of Rome, the southern federations followed separate ways, without any coordination and unified goals. For the ONMI, therefore, the 45-days constituted a time of immobility for what concerns social welfare and a timid attempt at a reorganization of the Opera, mostly realized through the nomination of new local managers. Very soon, though, the dramatic division of the nation reverberated also on all social welfare institutions "creating huge efficiency problems".¹⁴

THE CENTRAL HEADQUARTERS IN ROME AFTER THE CITY'S LIBERATION

The nomination decree of the Commissary Giuseppe Cavallera, only a few days after the Liberation of Rome, marked the beginning of the reconstruction of the ONMI central headquarter in the Kingdom of the South.¹⁵ Its task was to verify the situation of the finances and staff.¹⁶ The documentation that could be recovered mostly concerns the second point, highlighting two issues in particular: the first one is the epuration of the staff,¹⁷ while the second one is the doubt whether to confirm or not the dismissals decided by the Institution during the "pseudo" Salò government.¹⁸ The epuration process within the ONMI, just like in most other public agencies, was a failure, thus proving once more that there was a particularly high grade of continuity in the

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- 13 Act n. 312, 12 April 1933, Modificazioni di aggiornamento e perfezionamento alla legge sull'Opera Nazionale per la protezione della maternità e l'infanzia.
- 14 A. Salini, L'ordinamento dell'assistenza nei lavori dell'Assemblea costituente, *Bollettino dell'Archivio per la storia del movimento sociale cattolico in Italia*, 2003, n. 38, p. 241.
- 15 The decree was dated 23 June 1944. Giuseppe Cavallera (Villar San Costanzo [Cuneo] 1873 — Rome 1952), doctor, was forced to abandon the Piedmont to Sardinia in 1895 for police persecution as a result of his socialist propaganda during the fascism regime.
- 16 National Archive in Rome, Ministry of Interior, General Archive, Permanent Files, (henceforth, ACS, MI, Gab., AG, fasc. per.), 1944-48, b. 248, Circular of Ministry of Interior, 23 June 1944. Oggetto: Conferimento d'incarico.
- 17 G. Melis, *Storia dell'amministrazione italiana: 1861-1993*, il Mulino, Bologna 1996, pp. 383-402 e Id, *Percorsi di continuità: l'epurazione dei ministeri*. In: L. Ganapini (a cura di), *La Resistenza fra storia e memoria*, Milano 1999, pp. 298-303. On the epuration H. Woller, *I conti con il fascismo. L'epurazione in Italia dal 1945 al 1948*, Bologna 1997; R. Canosa, *Storia dell'epurazione in Italia. Le sanzioni contro il fascismo 1943-1948*, Milano 1999.
- 18 See M. S. Giannini, *La Repubblica sociale rispetto allo Stato italiano*, *Rivista italiana per le scienze giuridiche*, 1951, n. 5, pp. 330-417 e S. Cassese, *Stato e parastato nell'Italia del dopoguerra (1945-65)*, *Storia contemporanea*, 1990, n. 3, pp. 561-566.



public administration, higher than anywhere else: this raised strong doubts as to the possibility to really bring any innovation in the activity of Opera after the regime.¹⁹ Moreover, the staff of the ONMI accused of pledging allegiance to the republican government (RSI) was defended by the central management of the ONMI, which stated that their adhesion to the Social Republic had allowed them to protect the interests of the Institution. This was the only way; it was stated, to preserve all what could possibly be saved, in terms of economic resources, structures and food, from “the greedy hands of Pedrengo management”. It was only thanks to this behaviour that the ONMI, after the Liberation, could carry on its activity with a certain speed and also a minimum quantity of resources and equipment. Besides, these were the same justifications put forward by most public employees who had served under the RSI. In fact, as explained by Claudio Pavone, “advancing the argument that they had ensured some essential services, they were free of the accusations of treason and collaboration”.²⁰

Administrative matters, on the one hand, and epuration, on the other hand, diverted the attention of the ONMI management from the actual assistance activities. Is it possible, then, to speak of a welfare activity in this period? While the management of the institution took care of epuration and administrative reorganizations, who took care of the mothers and children of the territory that the Anglo-American forces were gradually liberating? The report about the activities carried out by the ONMI in the South, drafted by the General Management of the Public Healthcare for 1944 and the first semester of 1945, pointed out numerous difficulties.²¹ In the South of the country, the institution lacked a healthcare manager, the consultative commission hardly worked and the scarcity of vehicles made the healthcare surveillance impossible. To solve this last problem, the Management had encouraged local doctors to increase the cooperation with their colleagues of the ONMI.

The report, though, was based only on the information received from 23 southern Federations.²² We have no way of knowing which they were, but it is certain that Rome and Naples did send their data. Based on this information, the obstetrical and paediatric clinics in activity were 636. Quite disheartening data. In effect, considering that the population residing in the 23 Provinces of the South amounted to 12,435,000 inhabitants, it can be concluded that there was one ONMI clinic every 2,000 people. Even the dermosyphilopathic clinics were scarce: only one per province, with the exception of Rome and Naples, which had respectively 8 and 3. Almost all kitchens

19 The documentation available, as noted by Raffaele Romanelli, also shows clearly that “talking about an epuration of the public administration, and not of new organizational criteria, was an early sign of how the anti-fascist action was limited to a re-establishment of the old systems”. R. Romanelli, *Apparati statali, ceti contesi e modo di governo*. In: V. Castonovo (cura di), *L'Italia contemporanea (1945-1975)*, Torino 1976, p. 155.

20 C. Pavone, *Tre governi e due occupazioni*. In: F. Ferrantini Tosi, G. Grassi, M. Legnani (a cura di), *L'Italia nella seconda guerra mondiale e nella resistenza*, Milano, 1998, p. 346.

21 ACS, Ministry of Health, *Alto commissariato per l'igiene e la sanità (hearafter MS, ACIS), 1937-1965*, b. 45, *Relazione dell'attività svolta nel 1944 e nel 1° semestre 1945 dalla Direzione generale della sanità pubblica*.

22 Were excluded Sicilian provinces.

for mothers were out of service, as were nurseries, of which there were at most one or two per province (in many cases there were none) with the exceptions of Naples and Rome. The malfunctioning of kitchens and nurseries, according to the report of the General Management of Healthcare, depended on the lack of supplies; however, these services were expected to recover their activity with the arrival of UNRRA aids. Unfortunately, these initial data also included worrying news about the situation of the assistance to illegitimate children, the conditions of the equipment and the activities of the provincial institutions for the assistance of mothers and children. The headquarters of Rome were thus informed about the most dramatic situations it was necessary to take care of with the utmost speed, but the Roman ONMI could not do much on its own. A considerable help came from the Allies.



TWO EXPERIENCES COMPARED: NAPLES (KINGDOM OF SOUTH) AND MILAN (ITALIAN SOCIAL REPUBLIC)

The assistance activity and the interaction with the Allies: the case of Naples: The absence of a global historiographic picture about the southern Federation makes it impossible to concretely test the activity or ineffectiveness of ONMI branches during the regime, and even less during the brief Kingdom of the South. However, the words pronounced by Cavallera before the Senate a few years later are a clear witness of the hardships that had to be faced initially, in the 1944: “The beginning was not easy at all for me, because from the Gothic line down, with the exception of Rome, all provincial Federations of the ONMI were destroyed, the structures had been bombed or ruined.”²³

In the middle of such a void of information, the analysis of the Naples case casts a bit of light on the reality of the South. The conditions of Naples at the moment of the Liberation were those of a city crushed in its body and spirit, a still, resigned city, where nothing was in place and nobody knew what do; the barest actions of daily life were compromised and nothing was in the least close to normality. Naples, in short, “had a desperate need for massive, immediate aids from the Allies”.²⁴

These aids did not come, at least not immediately. The Allied Military Administration (AMG) subordinated the first actions in favour of the population, to the protection of public health and safety, to military operations.²⁵ The reasons which compelled the heads of the Allied to modify their civilian policies were: the food emergency,

23 ISREC (Historical Institute of the Resistance of Cuneo), Fondo Cavallera, G. Cavallera, Per la protezione della maternità e dell’infanzia. Discorso pronunciato al Senato della Repubblica nella seduta antimeridiana del 29 ottobre 1948, Tipografia del Senato, Roma 1948, p. 10.

24 P. De Marco, Polvere di Piselli. La vita quotidiana a Napoli durante l’occupazione alleata (1943-44), Napoli 1996, p. 5. For an analysis of the whole Mezzogiorno see: G. Chianese, Quando uscimmo dai rifugi: il Mezzogiorno tra guerra e dopoguerra, 1943-46, Roma 2004.

25 Isobel Williams, Allies and Italians under Occupation: Sicily and Southern Italy 1943-45, London 2013.



come to light with the discovery of the failure of Mussolini's accumulation policy, the typhus epidemic and the problem of evacuees and refugees.²⁶

After the comprehensible disorientation of the *45-days* the activities of the Neapolitan ONMI started again and the institution, after the arrival of the Allies, seemed to recover its strength. The Allies had first come to know about the ONMI during the reorganization of the Sicilian healthcare services and in that occasion they had chosen to join the ONMI Federations of the island to the Provincial Healthcare Office. This kind of reorganization, which characterized Sicily way past the end of the war, aimed to improve the healthcare services of the island by making them administratively and technically autonomous. On the 1st of November 1943, the Lieutenant Colonel Charles Poletti, Chief Officer of the Civil Affairs in Sicily, signed the birth decree of the new offices, aiming on the one hand to encourage and coordinate all preventive care activities, public hygiene, provincial healthcare organizations and related structures; and on the other hand to exert functions of supervision and control on all public and private healthcare institutions of the Provinces.²⁷ With specific regard to the ONMI, considered as the only still-functioning child care organization born before the occupation,²⁸ its dissolution was decreed and its managers in charge were put under receivership. Therefore, although the Allies had already had a first contact with the ONMI in Sicily, it was only after their arrival in Naples that they realized the goals and functions of the Opera, through the work of the Health and Welfare Commission, thus confirming the studies that interpret the political-administrative situation of Naples as a true "laboratory" in this transition period.²⁹ In effect, it was here that the administration first outlined what would later become the public health and welfare system to be adopted throughout the whole peninsula, which was gradually being liberated.

The documentation available reveals many traces of the interest for this institution showed by the Allied Military Government and provides, as anticipated, a more detailed picture of the functioning of the Neapolitan ONMI. First of all it is interesting to observe that a better knowledge of the ONMI in action contributed to modify the opinion of the Allies about this institution, which was not considered as a mere healthcare authority anymore, but rather as a social welfare one. A report about the welfare authorities of Naples and its province, dated 10th of April 1944, read as

26 H. L. Coles and A. K. Weinberg, *Civil Affairs: Soldier become Governors*, Office of the Chief of Military History, Department of Army, Washington D. C. 1964, pp. 306 e ss.

27 ACS, Allied Control Commission 1943-47 (henceforth ACC) — Original kept at the National Archive of Washington (NARA) — bo. 399 D, UA Headquarters Allied Commission (10000) Public Health (163)/385, Reports by Italian Government, Subject: Public Health, Reports by Italian Government, Quartier Military Allied (QMA) — Ufficio regionale Palermo — Decreto 27 ottobre 1943.

28 ACS, ACC, bo. 864 D, UA Napoli Province (10263), Welfare (165)/18, File Report's Welfare Officers, Memorandum, Subject: Agencies Responsible for Welfare & Related Function, 21 febbraio 1944.

29 L. Cortesi, Introduzione. In: L. Cortesi, G. Percopo, S. Riccio, P. Salvetti (a cura di), *La Campania dal fascismo alla Repubblica*, Napoli 1977, p. 7.

follows: “Although primarily a health agency, specifically for mother and children, ONMI is listed with relief agencies”³⁰ and a few months later Eduard Silveira, the chief of the Welfare Branch of the Health Section, in a report about the activity of his section highlighted how the ONMI took care not only of the healthcare services but also of the “general social service”³¹ for the children, better specifying: “It is the only one in which Italian law has declared and positive attitude on general social service for the children”.³²

Basing on this information, the Anglo-American government devoted much effort to put the ONMI in a condition to work again. For this purpose, in the summer 1944 Silveira himself put pressure on the representatives of the South government, complaining about the absence of participation of the Italian government in the support given by the Allies to Italian children and mothers. According to Silveira it was necessary to start from the reconstruction of the central headquarter. So he wrote in his report: “with the organization of the Central Headquarter of ONMI, there is the opportunity to assist the Italian Government in directing the program of this agency along the lines most useful to the welfare of needy mothers and children. Therefore, Regional Welfare Officers are requested to inform the Welfare Branch of the ONMI activities considered to be most valuable for their respective Region and of the extent to which these have been placed into operation”.³³

This attention to of the ONMI, anyway, is to be considered as a part of the general interest taken by the Allied Government in the issues of welfare policies and its organization, where the mothers and children had a privileged position, evidently in line with Roosevelt’s policies which had given great importance to their care and safety.³⁴ This same care was soon going to be taken up by the UNRRA, and ONMI “has been very helpful to UNRRA in the latter’s preliminary planning, and there is the possibility that UNRRA will utilize it, should it (UNRRA) decide to operate in Italy”.³⁵ While requesting the possibility for ONMI to be operational again, the Allied Headquarter was also sketching the plan for the creation of the Provincial welfare

30 ISRC (Historical Institute of Resistance in Campania), Archivi diversi, ACC, T. E. Winterstein. PWO, to Major Harry G. Hershenson, DPC, Subject: Relief Agencies, Naples Province, 10 aprile 1944.

31 ACS, ACC, bo. 398 D, UA Headquarters Allied Commission (10000) Public Health, (163)/372, Staff Conference Regional Welfare, Subject: Current Work of the Welfare Branch, 10 settembre 1944 (E. Silveira).

32 Ibidem.

33 ACS, ACC, bo. 400 D, UA Headquarters Allied Commission (10000) Public Health, (163)/413, Welfare Relief ONMI, Subject: Reconstitution of ONMI (E. Silveira), 15 agosto 1944.

34 Cfr. E. Vezzosi, *Madri e Stato. Politiche sociali negli Stati Uniti del Novecento*, Roma 2002, pp. 103–155.

35 ACS, ACC, bo. 398 D, UA Headquarters Allied Commission (10000) Public Health, (163)/372, Staff Conference Regional Welfare, Subject: Current Work of the Welfare Branch, 10 settembre 1944 (E. Silveira). On the UNRRA’s activity in Italy see S. Salvatici (a cura di), *Not enough food to feed the people. L’Unrra in Italia (1944–1945)*, *Contemporanea. Rivista dell’800 e del ‘900*, 2011, n. 1, pp. 83–99.





office, which would completely redefine the administration of children care agencies and authorities.

How reflected in quantitative terms the help of Allies to the ONMI Federation of Naples? The children and mothers taken care of by the Neapolitan ONMI in 1944 were respectively 5,280 and 1,560; these figures are quite lower than the potential city user base. After all, war and the destruction of the management had drastically reduced the number of working ONMI centres until the previous year: in 1943, Naples and its province had in activity 7 Homes for the mother and the child, 121 paediatric clinics, 107 maternity clinics, 6 dermosyphilopathic clinics and 31 canteens for mothers.³⁶ What had happened was a severe structural weakening that was bound to have negative repercussions on the activity of the authority. This is further confirmed by a comparison with the number of women taken care of in 1942, that is 10,320, and that of infants and children visited in the paediatric clinics, that is 26,385.³⁷ But without the support of the Allies, most certainly the Neapolitan ONMI would not have worked at all.

	Mothers taken care of by the Neapolitan ONMI	Infants and children visited in the paediatric clinics
1942	10,320	26,385
1944	1,560	5,280

The Central Headquarter of Upper Italy ONMI: the Federation of Milan: While the life of the ONMI in the Southern Kingdom mostly advanced thanks to Allied aids, as seen, in the Republic of Salò the central headquarters of the ONMI had been reconstructed in Pedrengo, in the province of Bergamo, in December 1943. Since it had kept most of the economic resources of the original institution, within the limits of the possible it managed to ensure the activity of Provincial Federations and Municipal Patronage Committees in northern Italy. In the South the ONMI had to go at first through a period of total confusion, then through a difficult moment of reconstruction of the central headquarter, mostly suffocated in its actions by economic problems, whereas the RSI did not have any of these problems, on the contrary: pay rises, bonuses, indemnities and all that sort of things were quite frequent.³⁸ Did the welfare receive as many attentions? Moreover, was the Italian Social Republic a good investor in the assistance to maternity and childhood, just like the past regime had declared to be?³⁹ It should not be forgotten that social policies, at least

³⁶ National Archives of UDI (Union Italian Women), SS 1948.2/1 Parlamento, Relazione dattiloscritta dell'On. Lucia Viviani, cit., p. 10.

³⁷ ASN, Gab. Pref., II ver., b. 485, Circ. ONMI, 19 giugno 1942. Oggetto: Attività svolta 1942. Elenco delle istituzioni dell'Opera al 31 dicembre 1942, p. 3.

³⁸ For a more complete analysis see D. La Banca, Welfare in transizione, cit.

³⁹ M. S. Quine, Italy's Social Revolution: Charity and Welfare from Liberalism to Fascism, p. 147.



in the initial period, should have been an essential part of the new Fascist government, which called itself “social” even in the official denomination.⁴⁰ It was more than a simple terminology question; during the first Council of Ministers of the new government, Mussolini counted among the objectives of the new government the creation of: “a republic that will be united at the political level and decentralized at the administrative level and with an utmost pronounced social content”.⁴¹ It is anyway possible to verify the functioning of the ONMI in the centre-north through an analysis of Provincial Federations, in particular the one of Milan. An examination, even a quick one, of the files listing all deliberations of the Federation in the years 1943–44–45 allows to ascertain that the activity of the Milanese Federation never suffered significant interruptions, neither during the transition from the Fascist to the RSI management nor during the transition between the RSI and the Committee of National Liberation of the North (CLN) management, followed by the final Rome based management. Therefore the Federation of the Lombard centre, as well as those of Brescia, Ferrara and Cuneo, to mention the ones which could concretely be verified, never suffered activity interruptions, and mothers and children kept receiving assistance even during the most complicated phases of jurisdictional and administrative power shift between governments. With regard to this, Sergio Onger wrote: “During the Social Republic, the progressive dissolution of the political-governmental organization was balanced by a difficult but constant resistance of the ONMI”.⁴² Or better resilience, in my opinion. It is now necessary to verify whether this remains valid also in the other Northern Provinces; one possible way to do so is the analysis of the quantitative and qualitative changes of the welfare forms offered by ONMI. The Milanese institution in 1944 had an availability of 19 Homes for the mother and the child, a total of 135 obstetrical, paediatric and dermosyphilopathic clinics, 23 canteens for mothers, 3 nurseries and 1 mother nursery. A considerable patrimony, considering that the total of the Homes on the peninsula in the same year amounted to 158. The Province of Milan alone, therefore, held 12% of them.⁴³ The global analysis of these data is sufficient to confirm that it is correct to speak of “resistance” of the Milanese ONMI.⁴⁴ Such a resistance, however, derives on the one hand from the previous activity of the institution in the regime years, during which it had been commended as one of the Federations that worked the most and the best, really matching the “fascist” spirit of the foundation law of ONMI;⁴⁵ on the other hand it depends on its effective networking ability with the solid presence of other philanthropic organizations, thus managing to limit

40 L. Gaeta e A. Viscomi, *L'Italia e lo stato sociale*, p. 249; L. Klinkhammer, *L'occupazione tedesca in Italia. 1943–45*, pp. 249–250.

41 G. Bocca, *La repubblica di Mussolini*, Milano 1994, p. 41.

42 *Ibidem*, p. 247.

43 In Italy the obstetrical clinics were 2,725, the obstetrical clinics 3,673 and 113 dermosyphilopathic clinics.

44 *Relazione tecnico sanitaria al 1946 dell'IPPAI di Milano*.

45 S. Fabbri, *Fra un anno e l'altro di lavoro per la protezione della maternità e dell'infanzia*, Testa a stampa, Milano 1930.



the sufferance of Milanese mothers and children. The whole of the data of 1944 assumes an even greater value if confronted with the conditions of degradation, exponentially grown in those two years, which the ONMI managers had to deal with, still achieving satisfying results. In a frame of complete defeat of the whole political and administrative staff, which in the Social Republic tried to “play the card of formal legality and institutional neutrality”, what remained was the role of protection of the social order ensured by a “good governance, attentive to the necessities and needs — especially material needs — of the whole community.”⁴⁶

Truth be told, this was not easy for the administrators to achieve, in particular for the Province chiefs, who, as the analysis of Luigi Ganapini shows, held a power that was delegitimized at a formal level and were stuck between the pressure of the extreme wing of their party and the German occupation apparatus; in spite of all this, they tried to repress each and every sign of discontent and disagreement, thus appearing quite intransigent and scaring their privileged interlocutors (urban and rural middle classes), who on the contrary should have been the main objective to conquer in the social and political conflict in Italy in the years 1943–45.⁴⁷ Such a conquer would have been possible first of all by assisting the middle class in its daily struggles, of which hunger was surely the worst. Therefore, besides a quantifiable documentation of data, what emerges from the study of these papers is a further confirmation of the uninterrupted activity of the Federation, with all its limits and good results. After ensuring the functioning of clinics, the Federation concentrated more efforts on the organisation of canteens for mothers where to host breastfeeding mothers and wet nurses. In total, the Milanese Federation assisted 5,000 women, serving them 233,363 meals.

Also this figure is rather significant, as it constitutes 9.6% of the 51,568 Italian women admitted in total in ONMI kitchens in 1944. Along with kitchens, first aid centres were established, in addition to the “Office of ONMI assistance for evacuated mothers and children” [Ufficio di assistenza ONMI alle madri e ai bambini sfollati e sinistrati].

RSI AND KINGDOM OF THE SOUTH: A GLOBAL PICTURE

At the current state of research, it is hard to determine how much the work of northern Federations, the Milanese one first of all, was the result of an already developed presence of the ONMI in the Fascist years, and how much on the contrary it was promoted during the last years of war by the attentions of RSI, or better, its administrators. For sure it is possible to affirm that where the ONMI had been able to plant deep roots during Fascism, these were not lost during the Social Republic period. This is not an attempt to question the intrinsic institutional weakness of the Social Republic,

⁴⁶ L. Ganapini, *La Repubblica delle camicie nere*, p. 295.

⁴⁷ S. Onger, *L'assistenza alla maternità e all'infanzia nel bresciano durante la seconda guerra mondiale*, *Sanità, scienza e storia*, 1990, n. 1, p. 247.

whose fragility is now well known. However, the experience of the ONMI may serve to acknowledge the work of the Salò administration.⁴⁸

In effect, besides the work carried out in favour of mothers and children, it is worth mentioning that the activism and vivacity of the Milanese Federation, like those of other North Italian Provinces, allowed continuing after the 25th of April a never interrupted work. The new administrators found concrete bases where to operate; of course they needed to be strengthened and reconsidered in the light of possible new republican dispositions, but they made it easier to start new welfare plans. The ONMI's case confirm how Northern Italy during the RSI conserved a minimum connective tissue, in terms of administration and management, and this allowed, after the end of the war, to return on the way of normality with greater speed and smaller traumas.⁴⁹ And indeed, the Milanese Federation, after the experience of war and Salò government, still had an availability of 19 Homes for the mother and the child, 74 obstetrical and paediatric clinics, another 9 exclusively paediatric clinics, 19 canteens for mothers, 1 canteen for children, 1 mother hostel and 5 dermosyphilopathic clinics.⁵⁰ Even when, later on, UNRRA aids for Italian women and children arrived, the ONMI was chosen as a privileged interlocutor and the presence of an already solid structural network on the territory represented one of the main ways to manage and convey such aids.⁵¹ This result was mainly achieved, according to Gian Enrico Rusconi, through a minimum credibility space gained by the institutional apparatus with the presence of "a class of functionaries legitimating their own activity as a work of protection of the civil society against the German occupant"; within this class soon a gap came to light, "a growing hiatus between the politicized and militarized minorities of Neofascism and the civilian apparatuses".⁵²

The South of the country, conversely, was initially characterized by a moment of complete disarticulation, arising from the power void produced in Rome. As soon as the new central headquarter was instituted, after the Liberation of the capital, management and administration questions took all the place, along with the problem of the purging of the staff. What most prevented the concrete assistance activity was the need to administratively and often also materially rebuild the existing centres, many of which had been confiscated by military troops or destroyed by bombings.⁵³

48 G. Paladini, *Per un profilo giuridico del concetto di guerra civile*. In: M. Legnani e F. Vendramini (a cura di), *Guerra, guerra di liberazione, guerra civile*, Milano 1990, pp. 78–80.

49 G. Parlato, *Fascisti senza Mussolini. Le origini del neofascismo in Italia (1943–45)*, Bologna 2006, p. 193.

50 Provincial Archives of Milan, *Comando Alleato-CLN, IX scatolone, f. 132, Elenco trasmesso al Comando Alleato in data 30 aprile 1945*.

51 On the relationship between ONMI and UNRRA see: S. Salvatici (a cura di), *Not enough food to feed the people*, pp. 96–97.

52 G. E. Rusconi, *Resistenza e postfascismo*, Bologna 1995, pp. 50–51.

53 Silveira wrote: "In some instances the ONMI buildings have been destroyed, and their supplies and equipment stolen. Even though income places the services is the local ONMI Centre cannot be restored, the other services should not be ignored." In: ACS, ACC, bo. 400 D, UA Headquarters Allied Commission (10000) Public Health, (163)/413, *Welfare Relief ONMI, Subject: Reconstitution of ONMI* (E. Silveira), 15 agosto 1944.



Nevertheless, not even the ONMI of the Kingdom of the South, as confirmed by the case of Naples, completely stopped providing its welfare services, even if it was forced to drastically reduce them. This, however, was possible only thanks to the support of the Allies at first and of the UNRRA later. Indeed, it seems correct to affirm that in this part of the country it was this external support that allowed the global restarting of the ONMI activities. Opposed to this, it seems that the governments of the Kingdom of the South did not act much in favour of the ONMI, both in terms of projects and allocation of economic resources. In addition to that, it is important to remember that the goods of the institution had remained with the Upper Italy Headquarter. Of course, in such conditions it was impossible for the ONMI to fulfil the many needs of the mothers and children of the city, but it is also true that the Neapolitan institution had not been able to fully reach its welfare goal even in the previous years of peace.⁵⁴

Comparing more closely the concrete activities carried out by the Federations of Naples and Milan, another detail emerges. The southern Federations offered almost only food assistance, whereas the northern Federations worked in a broader and more articulated picture with various welfare initiatives, which had consolidated their roots during the twenty years of Fascism. In any case, it was the different socio-economic level of the population of the two cities that imposed the Milanese Federation to meet other needs. A good example was the request for nurseries where to host the children of working mothers; in the South this was not perceived as a need in that moment. Some data can exemplify these affirmations. First of all, it is important to consider that both Naples and Milan were highly populated cities: 1,700,000 the first, 2,150,000 the second. In 1944, 5,280 children and 1,560 women were taken care of in Neapolitan clinics, insignificant numbers if compared to the Milanese ones, which amounted respectively to 23,764 and 7,952. Relating these data to the global activity of the institution, it can be observed that a bit more than 2% of the Milanese took part in it, versus about 0.4% of the Neapolitans. The picture becomes even harsher considering that Naples had a greater children population than Milan, because of the high birth rate of the southern city.⁵⁵ It is impossible for us to determine whether this gap could have been reduced by comparing other kinds of welfare activities, such as the external aids (home visits, food packages, hosting in other structures etc.). For sure, though, the only rate which grew in 1944 was the one indicating the employment of children in farms, in particular illegitimate children recognized only by the mother: the number increased from 7,859 in 1943 to as much as 17,130 in 1944, decreasing to 8,937 in 1945. In 1944, therefore, a considerable number of children were entrusted to private citizens. This practice seems to have been common in particular in the South. In effect, while in Milan the children entrusted to farmers were just 107, Naples holds the record.⁵⁶ A further detail differentiating the two ONMI realities is the activism of

54 D. La Banca, *Assistenza o beneficenza? La Federazione napoletana dell'Opera nazionale Maternità e Infanzia (1926-39)*, Contemporanea. Rivista dell'800 e del 900, 2008, n. 1, pp. 47-72.

55 In 1947, 58,294 children were born in Naples, while in Milan 36,154.

56 In 1942 a total of 2,337 children were affiliated, half of them in Naples.

local functionaries: is not very evident in the southern context, where they constituted just the intermediaries between the Allies and the civilians, while in the North they promoted initiatives and organisational innovations.

These were the conditions of the institution from the point of view of the offer. However, it is unknown whether such a strong difference can also be imputed to a different request of ONMI services on the part of users. Nevertheless, this hints once again to the fact that during Fascism, the ONMI has had a broader coverage in the North than in the South; consequently its goals and services, thanks to a methodical propaganda,⁵⁷ had become part of the set of social rights of the feminine population, and as social rights they had started being demanded.⁵⁸ The South, on the contrary, still lacked this kind of consciousness, and in addition to that institutions in this period suffered a dramatic fall of credibility.⁵⁹ Assuming the validity of this consideration, it is possible that the smaller activity of the southern ONMI partially derives from an inferior request of its services, perhaps connected with a lack of trust in the institutions on the part of society.

What obvious test to prove the effectiveness of the work of the institution was still the trend rate of infant mortality. Interesting in this regard is an analysis of Professor Alessandro Molinari, one of the leading analysts of the Italian statistical phenomena, which made comparisons demographics year periods immediately before and after the two world wars. What emerged clearly from the comparison was the overall decrease in mortality: during the First World War was increased from 18 ‰ (1912–1914) to 18,5 ‰ the post-war (1919–21), and during the second world war had gone from 13,8 ‰ in the prewar period 1936–37 to 12 ‰ in 1946. However, the mortality of children under one year had dropped from 104 deaths (per thousand live births) of the biennium 1937–39 to 84 in 1946–47: the lowest level achieved up to that point, despite food shortages and lower real incomes of the population.⁶⁰ It should be stressed that the reduction in infant mortality, which has an almost constant in the following years, was much higher than that recorded in other European countries and in the peninsula; also, it would continue to be a great inequality between the regions of the North and those of the South. These data confirm an improvement in the long term indices of infant mortality national, but at the same time, denounce a clear behind the rest of Europe.

The ONMI, during the fascism and during the occupation period, had contributed to lower rates of infant mortality, but few results had obtained in its equally important tasks prophylactics, social and moral aimed to improving the environmental conditions of the child.

57 On the propaganda activity of ONMI see: D. La Banca, *La Giornata della madre e del fanciullo: un esempio di propaganda fascista*, Genesis, 2008, n. 1, pp. 157–188.

58 C. Saraceno, *Costruzione della maternità e della paternità nell'Italia fascista*, Storia e memoria, 1994, n. 1, pp. 31–49; Sabina Donati, *A Political History of National Citizenship and Identity in Italy, 1861–1950*, Stanford 2013.

59 G. Chianese, *Napoli nella seconda guerra mondiale*, Italia contemporanea, 1994, n. 195, pp. 350 e ss.

60 A. Molinari, *Anatomia in cifre dell'Italia*, M&I, 1947, n. 1, pp. 124–125.