

BOOK REVIEW

Un nuovo Corpo dello Stato. La polizia femminile in Italia (1961–1981)

by Liliosa Azara, Rome, Viella, 2023, 236 pp., €26 (paperback), ISBN 9791254693056

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In Italy, unlike other Western countries, women were not allowed to join the police until the creation of the Italian Female Police Corps (*Corpo di polizia femminile*), which was established in the 1960s and disbanded in the late 1970s. This Female Police Corps is the subject of Liliosa Azara's latest book, which is organised into a brief introduction and five chapters. In the introduction, Azara defines the goals of her study and describes the sources of her work. Her sources are various and many: to write her book, she studied international historiography on the subject and analysed Ministry of the Interior documents filed in the State Central Archive. She also used articles published at the time in Italian newspapers and in women's magazines that covered Italy's first policewomen.

The first chapter is about the role of women in policing internationally before the creation of the Female Police Corps in Italy. The author describes the efforts of the League of Nations to include women in the police forces of member states and then two different models that could have inspired Italian legislators while proposing the introduction of women into the Italian police system: the female police forces in the Weimar Republic and Poland, and the model developed in the USA and UK. The author describes women's policing in the UK and the USA as a 'long-term' (p. 30) experience that began after the First World War in the UK and even earlier in the USA. In both countries, policewomen's duties were mostly preventive and involved social care for minors, women and prostitutes. In contrast, the Weimarian and Polish examples in the interwar period ended with the Nazi rise to power and the start of the Second World War. For a brief time in these two countries, policewomen had more repressive duties than their European colleagues. For example, Polish policewomen specialised in investigating and fighting human trafficking in Poland, which was 'accused by the League of Nations to be one of the most important European rings for trafficking in women' (p. 28).

The second chapter describes the parliamentary process that led to the creation of the Italian Female Police Corps. It begins with a description of the Merlin law, named after the socialist senator Lina Merlin who proposed it to parliament in 1948 (it was approved in 1958). This law dictated the suppression of Italian legalised prostitution and established the creation of a female police institution to monitor prostitutes after the closure of brothels. Then, the author describes the public discussion that followed the law and the reticence of Italian institutions to open up careers in policing to women, who were still considered unsuitable for a role traditionally held by men.

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Next, the author describes a second law connected to the creation of the Female Police Corps, which was proposed by Christian Democrat member of parliament Maria Pia Dal Canton and some of her colleagues in 1955. Dal Canton's proposal foresaw the institution of a Female Police Corps with a 'precious role, starting from the field of prevention' (p. 56), including duties regarding social care and assistance to members of society, including minors, women and prostitutes. Azara also considers public opinion, the long parliamentary process, and opposition from traditionalist Italian institutions such as the Ministry of Interior – whose personnel still mostly comprised people employed during the Fascist era – to the Dal Canton draft law (which eventually became law at the end of 1959). The law foresaw the employment of 503 policewomen, a number similar to their West German colleagues (815) but very few compared with their British counterparts (2,311).

In the next two chapters, Azara considers the work of the new Female Police Corps and its development, analysing how the *questure* – local police headquarters – employed the Corps, the evolution of duties, the public debate on the Corps's role in society, and institutional reluctance to consider them equal to their male colleagues. She also describes the many gender-based inequalities faced by women in policing, including lower salaries than their male counterparts. This pair of chapters is especially strong because of the source base the author draws upon to describe the work in detail, using both archival documents and reports published in the print media of the time.

The fourth chapter ends with the disbanding of the Female Police Corps after the promulgation of the Anselmi law in 1981, which foresaw gender equality in Italian public administration, including the police, and ultimately saw women assimilated into the regular Italian police. The last chapter of the book is an interesting study on how policewomen were portrayed, analysing the evolution of their depiction in Italian magazines and newspapers, in the movies, on television and in erotic comics. From sceptical articles to erotic films, open opposition to paternalistic sexism, this chapter is a well-rounded description of the ways in which a mentality evolved over the 20-year existence of the Female Police Corps.

Liliosa Azara's book is clear and rich in detail. It combines the general context with the particular and is enriched by many examples. The author also successfully conveys the international context in which the Italian Female Police Corps arose, its organisation, work and duties, as well as its impact on society and the difficulties it faced. As such, the book makes a significant contribution to scholarship, offering a new lens to understand the experience of working women in society through history. The author uses her sources skilfully, drawing out key details. The only question that the book cannot answer is what role the socialist and communist parliamentary opposition played in the creation of the Female Police Corps.

The key quality of Azara's book lies in the author's analysis of gender dynamics, which is enriched by a history of work framework and the integration of the institutional perspective. In capturing the mentality of the age, her book goes far beyond the Female Police Corps, offering a study of gender conflicts more broadly.