

Marrying Mussolini: *La Giornata della Fede*, Women, and Political Ritual in Fascist Italy

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I. Introduction

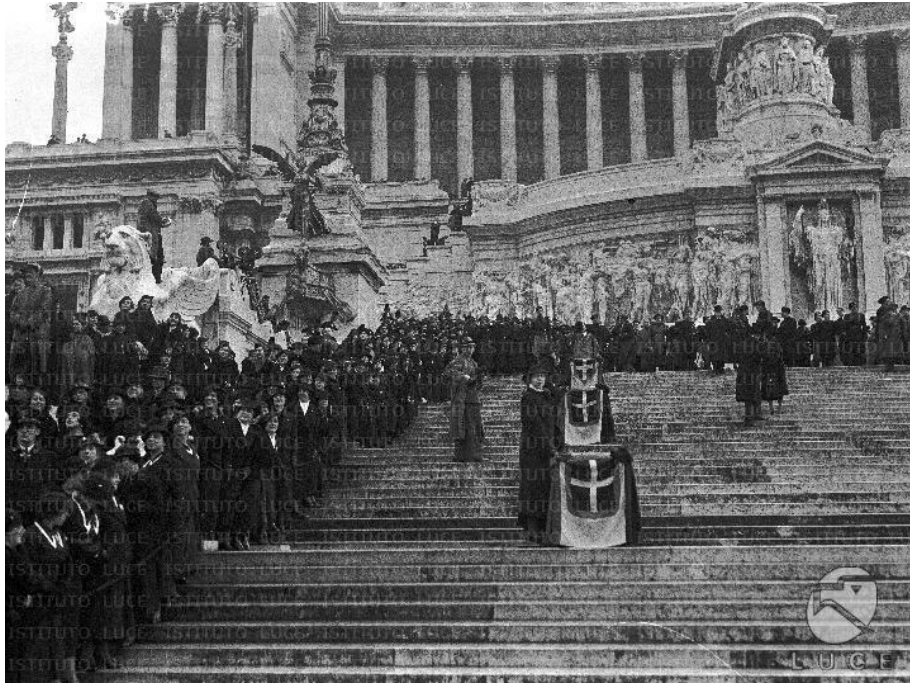


Figure 1. Women wait at the Altare della Patria in Rome during the Giornata della fede in December 1935.

A line of women in dark clothing snakes down a set of marble steps; the stairs lead to a large monument with marble statues and imposing Corinthian columns.¹ Near the center

¹ See Figure 1. Archivio Luce, *Persone attendono in fila sulla scalinata dell'Altare della Patria nella giornata della fede*. (December 18, 1935, Rome), <https://patrimonio.archivioluce.com/luce->

of the frame, three women stand holding banners of Italy's royal tricolor flag. The whole affair seems orderly, as if each woman waits for something to begin. The photograph captures an event held on December 18, 1935 at Rome's famed *Altare della Patria*, the "Altar of the Fatherland."² On that day, throughout Italy women queued in similar lines, all waiting for their turn to surrender their wedding rings. From Benito Mussolini's wife, Rachele, to the unknown Sicilian peasant, as each Italian woman slipped the ring off her finger and placed it into the hands of an official or into a ceremonial vessel, she participated in a new Fascist ritual: *la Giornata della fede*, the "Day of Faith."³

During the *Giornata della fede*, the women pictured—and people around the country—turned out in droves to surrender their wedding rings and other precious metallic objects, ostensibly to fund Fascist Italy's invasion of Ethiopia, which had begun only two months before. A complicated confluence of political and economic conditions had motivated the event. By December 1935, Mussolini's government was in dire financial straits, as the country still struggled from the aftereffects of the global Great Depression.⁴ The economic situation was so serious that it fundamentally threatened the Fascist state's authority as public concern mounted. As an agent of the Italian secret police wrote in summer 1935, "Many people fear the worst, above all from the financial and economic point of view."⁵ In addition, international opposition to Italy's war in Ethiopia grew, including the imposition of sanctions by the League of Nations, and the invasion itself stalled.⁶ As these economic and political crises worsened, gold seemed to be the answer. The Fascist media depicted gold donations by the Italian people as being spontaneous

[web/detail/IL0010032505/12/persona-attendono-fila-sulla-scalinata-altare-della-patria-nella-giornata-della-fede.html?startPage=0](https://www.archiviodelmuseo.it/web/detail/IL0010032505/12/persona-attendono-fila-sulla-scalinata-altare-della-patria-nella-giornata-della-fede.html?startPage=0).

² The *Altare della Patria* is a monument to Victor Emmanuel II, the first king of unified Italy.

³ Herein I distinguish fascism as a general concept from Fascism, the specific iteration thereof that dominated Italian politics from 1922 to 1943.; Archivio Luce, *Donna Rachele Mussolini ripresa nell'atto di offrire la propria fede alla patria* (December 18, 1935, Rome), <https://patrimonio.archivioluce.com/luce-web/detail/IL0010032525/12/donna-rachele-mussolini-ripresa-nell-atto-offrire-propria-fede-alla-patria.html?startPage=0>.

⁴ Petra Terhoeven, *Oro alla Patria: Donne, Guerra e Propaganda nella Giornata della Fede Fascista*, (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2006), 37.

⁵ "Molti temono il peggio soprattutto dal punto di vista economico-finanziario," Confidential report from Rome, 24 August 1935, cited in Terhoeven, *Oro alla Patria*, 35.

⁶ Gerhard Feldbauer, for example, writes that Italy "was not successful in subduing Ethiopia completely," as both Italian and Ethiopian casualties mounted. ("Es gelang indessen nicht, Äthiopien völlig zu unterwerfen.") Gerhard Feldbauer, *Marsch auf Rom: Faschismus und Antifaschismus in Italien, Von Mussolini bis Berlusconi und Fini* (Köln: PapyRossa, 2002), 38.

and voluntary, though neither was wholly true, under the national program, *Oro alla Patria* ("Gold to the Fatherland"). For example, a newspaper in Italian-occupied territory in modern Croatia reported in October 1935 that the local youth "in a surge of heart overflowing with patriotic love, agreed to offer to the Fatherland and to the *Duce* the sacrifice of a tribute of gold."⁷ This effusive rhetoric had helped to establish the precedent of public gold donations as a means of aiding the government in a time of financial and political woes, a precedent upon which the *Giornata della fede* would capitalize.

But why wedding rings? Was collecting personal jewelry truly an effective way to fund the war effort? The striking choice of collecting the public's wedding rings indicates that the event was more symbolic than practical. Wedding rings, though the primary focus of the event, were not the only precious metallic objects donated at the *Giornata*. Writer Luigi Pirandello, for example, donated the medal from his Noble Prize for Literature to be melted down.⁸ In some areas, as many as 90 percent of potential donators - of which over two thirds were estimated to be women - surrendered their rings to the collectors at, or within a matter of days after, the *Giornata*.⁹ How the state exactly used the rings to further the invasion, however, is largely unclear. This phenomenon suggests, as Petra Terhoeven claims, that "the symbolic effect of the act would have been considered much more important than its material gains."¹⁰ As a result, my analysis will focus on the event's "symbolic effect."

Despite the massive scale of the *Giornata della fede*, academic study of the event has been relatively limited, including in histories of gender, ritual, and propaganda under Fascism. One of the definitive texts on women under Fascism, Victoria de Grazia's *How Fascism Ruled Women: Italy, 1922-1945*, mentions the *Giornata della fede* in the context of the place of women in the Fascist family.¹¹ Though a number of other monographs

⁷ "In uno slancio del cuore traboccante di amor Patrio, decisero concordi di offrire alla Patria e al Duce il sacrificio di un tributo d'oro," *L'oro della donne. Un battagliero manifesto della Delegata Provinciale dei Fasci femminili*, in *Il Regime Fascista*, 13 November 1935, quoted in Terhoeven, *Oro alla Patria*, 40.

⁸ Arthur Pomeroy, "Classical Antiquity, Cinema and Propaganda." in *Brill's Companion to the Classics: Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany*, (Boston: Brill, 2000), 278.

⁹ Terhoeven, *Oro alla Patria*, 311-312.

¹⁰ "L'effetto simbolico del gesto fosse considerato molto più importante dei suoi proventi materiali," Terhoeven, *Oro alla Patria*, 307.

¹¹ Victoria de Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women: Italy, 1922-1945*, (Berkeley: Uni. of California, 1992), 78-79.

mention the event, Petra Terhoeven's *Oro alla patria: Donne, guerra e propaganda nella giornata delle Fede fascista* remains likely the only one entirely devoted to the *Giornata*. Terhoeven lays much of the contextual groundwork for understanding the *Giornata della fede*, though notably she addresses newsreels made of the event only in brief. The *Giornata*'s filmic record, whether in documentaries or newsreels, has been a lesser focus of study.¹² Scholars have generally interpreted the *Giornata* as a means of incorporating women into the Italian imperialist project or as part of political mobilization of women by the state.¹³ Some scholars have also seen the event as symbolic of a new union between the Fascist state and Italian women, though the extent to which women actually felt this union is debated.¹⁴ In this essay, I will analyze the event's visual record specifically to understand how it functioned within the Fascist state's relationship to women and to its citizens more broadly.

This visual record, which includes newsreels, posters, and photographs, offers a window into the ways in which the Fascist state understood the *Giornata della fede* as well as how it wished for the event to be understood by the Italian populace. Drawing on this body of imagery, I will demonstrate how the 1935 *Giornata della fede* modeled a gendered expectation of ideal Italian womanhood under the Fascist regime. First, I will argue that the *Giornata della fede* was a mass public ritual typical of Mussolini's government intended to control every member of the Italian public. Second, I will demonstrate that this mass public ritual was gendered in its linking of women's public and private lives through the rhetoric of marriage and faith. Third, and finally, I will locate the

¹² Federico Caprotti argues that a documentary of the event, "L'atto difede del popolo italiano," is an attempt to convey a sense of consensus among the populace about the Ethiopian war in "The Invisible War on Nature: The Abyssinian War (1935–1936) in Newsreels and Documentaries in Fascist Italy." *Modern Italy* 19, no. 3 (2014): 316-17. Paul Corner mentions *Giornata* newsreels in the context of the state's mandating the people's enthusiasm in his "Italian Fascism: Organization, Enthusiasm, Opinion." *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 15, no. 3 (2010): 383.

¹³ Overall, scholars have recently focused on women's formal political participation in the Fascist party, including against the sanctions. Perry Wilson sees the event as a specific reaction to the League of Nations sanctions put into place against Italy shortly before the event in "Empire, Gender and the 'Home Front' in Fascist Italy." *Women's History Review* 16, no. 4 (2007): 487-500. Similarly, Lutz Klinkhammer calls the event a successful example of the "mobilization of femininity" ("Mobilisierung der Weiblichkeit") in "Mussolinis Italien zwischen Staat, Kirche und Religion" in *Zwischen Politik und Religion*, (Berlin: Gruyter, 2016), 75.

¹⁴ For example, Kate Ferris writes, "How and how far the women themselves experienced this new level of union is open to question," in *Everyday Life in Fascist Venice, 1929-40*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 123.

importance of the construction of womanhood displayed in the *Giornata della fede* within the broader context of Fascist propaganda and the ways in which the Italian state communicated with the Italian masses. In this way, the *Giornata della fede* serves as a significant platform for assessing the intersections among the Fascist state and the experiences of women's private lives under Fascism before World War II.

II. "The Sacralization of Politics": The *Giornata della fede* as Public Ritual

The function of public ritual as a tool of political and cultural power contributing to the "sacralization of the state," a concept historian Emilio Gentile pioneered, has been a major topic of study and debate in the historiography of Fascism.¹⁵ Gentile argued that the totalitarian state adopted its "own system of beliefs, myths and rituals [that] centered on the sacralization of the state" and aimed to permeate all aspects of Italians' lives, including their thoughts.¹⁶ Indeed, Mussolini himself termed Fascism "a religious phenomenon of vast historic proportions."¹⁷ This "religious phenomenon" manifested in public ritual, including those performed for and by women. In this section, I will analyze newsreels of the *Giornata della fede* from the perspective of this ritualism and "sacralization of the state." I will demonstrate how the *Giornata della fede* contained all the elements of the political rituals typical of the Fascist regime described by Gentile, while highlighting the unique role that women, religion, and the institution of marriage played in this ritual.

A common thread among the many propaganda films that document the *Giornata della fede* is the omnipresence of a massive parade, an image that serves symbolically to demonstrate the control of the state over its inhabitants in its strict command of their behavior. Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi has argued that the Fascist state constructed an

¹⁵ Gentile's work, including *The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy* (Cambridge: Harvard Uni., 1996) and *Politics as Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006) are among the central works in this field.; Emilio Gentile, "Fascism as Political Religion," *Journal of Contemporary History* 25, no. 2 (1990), 230.

¹⁶ Ibid.; Hannah Arendt asserted that Mussolini's Italy was not totalitarian before 1938, but "just an ordinary nationalist dictatorship" in her seminal *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace 1951), 256. Though this view long proved definitive, it has come increasingly under scholarly scrutiny. Indeed, Gentile insists that totalitarianism is central to and "cannot be excluded from a definition of Fascism" ("non può essere escluso da una definizione del fascismo"), *Fascismo: Storia e Interpretazione*, (Roma: GLF, 2002), 63.

¹⁷ "Il Fascismo è un fenomeno religioso di vaste proporzioni storiche," Benito Mussolini, *La Dottrina del Fascismo: Dagli Scritti e Discorsi del Duce*. (Roma: La Libreria dello Stato, 1936), 14.

image of the Italian war effort in Ethiopia as a melodrama “of epic proportions” between good and evil.¹⁸ Spectacular public parades were key to that melodrama. As pressure from the League of Nations mounted for Italy to cease the war in Ethiopia, public demonstrations of mass support were more important than ever to prove the Italian people’s supposed enthusiasm for the war effort.¹⁹ Whether or not this enthusiasm was authentically felt, however, is unclear, as attendance at the *Giornata*, as with many other public events, was mandatory.²⁰ Beyond the existence of this genuine enthusiasm, or the lack thereof, mass demonstrations like parades were central to the Fascist state’s self-image. In the *Giornata della fede*, the government could openly display Italian women in “the throws of patriotic convulsions” *en masse*.²¹ In one film of the *Giornata della fede*, for example, shot in Pescara, capital of the Abruzzo region, images of the population in huge parades abound, a dynamic that reinforces the image of a happy, controlled Italian populace. The first shot of the clip shows a large number of women in peasant garb, large amphorae perched on their heads, as they walk down a street.²² They smile, seemingly guided along by a man in a uniform of the *Partito Nazionale Fascista* (PNF, National Fascist Party) in the background. The presence of the PNF member reminds the viewer that the party orchestrated the whole affair. Because the shot features only one PNF member, moreover, it seems as though the regime can control its people with seemingly little effort. The women pictured range in age from young to elderly. The figures soon begin to blend together, however, all with white head coverings and many with amphorae above; they all rush along together across the frame and towards the camera. Importantly, no single individual stands out. The impact of this dynamic is that the individual in the parade seems far less important than the wider picture, than the scale of the event as

¹⁸ Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi, *Fascist Spectacle: The Aesthetics of Power In Mussolini's Italy*, (Uni. of California Press, 1997), 170.

¹⁹ Corner, "Italian Fascism," 380.

²⁰ Ibid.; Ferris argues that in Venice, women’s enthusiasm was mostly inauthentic, giving the example of two women’s purchasing of rings to donate to save their own (Ferris, *Everyday Life*, 122). This question of enthusiasm relates to one of the central scholarly debates in the history of Fascism, whether a culture of “consent” (historian Renzo de Felice’s *consenso*), coercion, or a mix of both existed between the Italian people and the regime. This debate, in turn, relates to important broader historical and ethical questions about blame for Fascism’s wrongs.

²¹ Corner, "Italian Fascism," 383.

²² See Figure II; *La giornata della Fede*, dir. by Gemmiti, Arturo (1935; R.C.A.), Archivio Luce, patrimonio.archivioluce.com/luce-web/detail/IL5000020704/2/la-giornata-della-fede.html.

gathering, the women as a united whole. All women, young or old, seem equally enthusiastic in their participation.



*Figure II. PNF member (on right) oversees women in the Pescara Giornata parade.
(Image has been lightened for clarity.)*

This enthusiasm is not merely generic; it is specifically an enthusiasm for Fascism, as the sequence emphasizes the state's support of and control over its people. The Pescara film next flashes to a quick shot of the *fascis*, the symbol of Fascism that gave the ideology its name, and a sign praising *il Duce* on a city wall before quickly returning to an image of a parade.



Figure III. Members of the youth paramilitary group ONB at Pescara. (Image has been lightened for clarity.)

By interspersing these ideological images between shots of the parade, the sequence indicates that Fascism and the parade are one and the same, united in passionate support for the state and for the war.

The sequence continues with a marching group of children in paramilitary uniforms.²³ Juxtaposed with the women in the earlier shot, the inclusion of the children indicates that all of Italy, regardless of age or gender, is equally committed to the regime. Their uniforms also point to the state's ability to organize its people. The uniforms are those of the *Opera Nazionale Balilla* (ONB), a Fascist youth organization from 1926 to 1937. The ONB trained children as young as age eight in the ways of Fascism, and their uniforms are another indication of the broad-reaching power of the state.²⁴ The following shot underscores this message of overwhelming popular support, as it shows a large group of men walking in the parade. Though the film's quality somewhat obscures the men's faces and clothing, they are still physically larger in the shot, a size difference that the large banners they hold emphasize. The men thus appear more dominant in the frame than the women or children of previous shots; the implication is that while everyone participates, the men are still the most important, a phenomenon in line with the Fascist emphasis on virility and masculinity.²⁵ Within this constructed structure of power, the sequence emphasizes that all Italians, women, men, and children, are devoted to the regime and to the successful completion of its goals.

This crafted message of national unity specifically operated within terms of the sacred. At the same time as the different groups parade by, the clip's voiceover proclaims, "Everyone participates with holy enthusiasm in the *Giornata della fede*," with pointed

²³ See Figure III.; Ibid.

²⁴ R. J. B. Bosworth notes that newsreels increasingly featured squads of children as "courageous and audacious little legionaries of the new Italy" as the dictatorship developed in *Mussolini's Italy: Life under the Dictatorship, 1915-1945*. (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 290. Youth education of Fascism and other authoritarian states is a growing subject of scholarly interest. See Angela Teja, "L'ONB tra educazione fisica e sport" in *Le Case e Il Foro: L'architettura dell'ONB*, (Firenze: Alinea, 2005), 13-35, and Alessio Ponzio, *Shaping the New Man: Youth Training Regimes in Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany*, (Wisconsin: Uni. of Wisconsin, 2015).

²⁵ For notable discussions of Fascist masculinities, see George L. Mosse, *The Image of Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity*, (New York: Oxford Uni., 1996) and Lorenzo Benadusi, *Il Nemico dell'Uomo Nuovo: L'Omosessualità nell'Esperimento Totalitario Fascista*, (Milano: Feltrinelli, 2005).

emphasis on the word “everyone.”²⁶ The inclusion of the word “holy” adds to the impression of a specific ritual with the overtones of religious devotion, a dynamic that adds to the ritualistic nature of the footage and the event itself. The film sequence continues with more images of the masses marching down the streets of Pescara: young girls, young women, and men. Throughout these subsequent shots, each group walks in step together, and again the parade seems to meld the individual into the one, larger body politic, controlled by some outside force. That outside force, of course, is Fascism. In this way, the beginning of the Pescara clip demonstrates the state’s desire to paint the *Giornata della fede* as a display of Italians’ unified support of the Fascist government and, by extension, its actions in Ethiopia. The people’s public support supposedly begot their participation in the events, even if that participation may have been obligatory.

The ritual of the *Giornata della fede* did not end with the parade, however; the event culminated in the offering of the ring, which often took place at locations important to the Fascist national mythology. These symbolically important places added to the event’s religious overtone and its politicized blending of the religious and secular, even as the offering serves as a physical representation of the individual’s devotion and subordination to the state. The Rome event, for example, took place at the *Altare della Patria*, a monument to the first king of unified Italy. The *Altare* was “the place designated to represent the meeting between power and the masses [and] the most frequented and familiar place of patriotic ritual” under Fascism, Bruno Tobia claims.²⁷ Just as Italy had been unified territorially, now it had unified spiritually behind Fascism, the setting implies. As well, this emphasis on the sacredness of the venues for the *Giornata* is evidenced throughout the day’s news clips. For example, one film shows Milan’s *Giornata della fede* at the *Monumento ai Caduti* (Monument to the Fallen), one of the city’s monuments to the Italian casualties of World War I.²⁸ After a title card with the word “Milano,” the film shows a number of different perspectives of the monument; these shots establish the setting of the event as one central to Milanese public life. The character of the venue inexorably

²⁶ “Tutti partecipano con sant’entusiasmo alla Giornata della fede.” *La giornata della Fede*, dir. by Gemmiti, Arturo.

²⁷ “Il luogo deputato a rappresentare l’incontro tra il potere e le masse... [e] il luogo più frequentato e conosciuto della ritualità patriottica,” Bruno Tobia, *L’Altare della Patria*, (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1998), 5-6.

²⁸ *Il rito della Fede a Milano e Forlì*, dir. by Gemmiti, Arturo (1935; Rome: R.C.A.), Archivio Luce, patrimonio.archivioluce.com/luce-web/detail/IL5000020761/2/il-rito-della-fede-milano-e-forli.html.

draws comparison between the mortal sacrifice of the Italian soldiers killed during World War I and the sacrifice the masses are about to make of precious gold at the *Giornata della fede*.²⁹ Since most of the participants shown are women, the choice of location suggests that participating in the *Giornata della fede* is a woman's equivalent of dying in war. If women cannot ship off to Ethiopia, they can donate their rings and honor the Italian war dead. In this way, the scene elevates the ritual action of offering the ring; since the site of the activity is holy, so too is each woman's golden sacrifice.

The next shot of the Milan film reinforces this impression of sacredness, as it shows the line of participants approaching the collection site in a sort of ritualistic procession.³⁰ Lines of people on either side lead up to a massive classical statue that dwarfs everything in the frame.



Figure IV. *Il rito della fede a Milano e Forli*, dir. by Gemmiti, Arturo.

Just as each person in the Pescara newsreel seemed one among many, the juxtaposition of the huge statue with the many people below serves as a representation of the Fascist

²⁹ Perry also notes that the location could have served as a reference to women's role as war widows, as a national organization for war widows participated in the *Giornata*. Perry, "Empire, Gender and the 'Home Front,'" 489.

³⁰ See Figure IV.

state's ideal relationship to its citizens: the many dominated by a single virile strength. The large statue depicts Saint Ambrose trampling the seven deadly sins beneath his foot, a depiction that lends greater religiosity and symbolism to the scene. As the people calmly approach the statue, they seem to be under the statue's authority as well as its gaze. The imagery of the orderly lines of people approaching the statue is reminiscent of the distribution of the Eucharist in Catholic Mass, a dynamic that further suggests that the proffering of rings is a public ritual that blended the religious and political, much as Gentile describes. More specifically, the shot emphasizes the specific role of women and their devotion in the ritual, both religiously and politically. Indeed, a fact inescapable to the scene clip is that the vast majority of people participating in the event are women.

The climax and completion of the ritual comes later in the Milan film in the moment of removing the ring from one's hand, a moment in which the individual's subservience to the state is complete. The shot is split in two: on one side, the women giving up their rings, and on the other, women collecting them.³¹ This split highlights the transition of the ring's ownership from the private individual to the public collective.



Figure V. The moment of ring donation and replacement with a government-issued iron ring.

³¹ See Figure V., *Ibid.*

While one might expect men to receive the rings in a show of dominance, the transferal of the ring from one woman to another perhaps indicates a message of complete dedication by Italy's women to the event and subordination to its goals. They not only participate in the *Giornata della fede*, but also administer it in this shot. The motion of each woman sliding the ring off her finger is central to the shot and directly mirrors the public assistant's replacing it with another, state-issued ring. The symbolism of that act is clearly sacramental; as soon as the individual gives something to the state, the state instantaneously replaces it, metaphorically and literally taking the place of the original. Women leave the event with a physical reminder of their support of the state, as well as the state's omnipresence, on their finger each day for the rest of their lives. The viewer then sees the many collected rings in a military helmet, again emphasizing the event's especial blend of the public and private, the personal and the political, the military and the civilian. The shot also represents a sort of masculinization of the ring; it is no longer feminine jewelry, but brought together with the aggressively masculine military helmet to serve the war effort. The collection of so many rings again reinforces that each person is subordinated beneath the greater collective in support of the state. The Milan clip as a whole demonstrates how the *Giornata della fede* was portrayed as a ritual of the state, not only as a display of public support (and subordination), but also as a reflection of the state's total control over every Italian.

These newsreels, however, were not the only means through which the *Giornata della fede* functioned as a Fascist political religious ritual. The broader *Oro alla Patria* program leveraged the rhetoric of ritual to suggest total dedication on the part of the Italian people. For example, the headline of the Cremona newspaper *Il Regime Fascista* proclaimed in late November 1935, "The offering of gold to the Fatherland has become a mystic rite: the people, sure of victory, spontaneously react to the unfair state of economic siege."³² This headline communicates the state's explicit claim that the offering of gold was a "mystic rite." The Italian public was allegedly so dedicated to and unified with the

³² "Economic siege" is presumably a reference to the League of Nations-imposed sanctions after the Ethiopian invasion.; "L'offerta d'oro alla Patria è divenuta un mistico rito: Il popolo spartanamente, sicuro della vittoria, reagisce all'iniquo stato d'assedio economico," *Il Regime Fascista* (Cremona, December 18, 1935).

state and its success that it was akin to religious “mystic” unity. This show of religious fervor, it seems, proved effective in the eyes of the regime, as iterations of the *Giornata della fede* repeated annually for years after the original event.³³ Considering the regime’s obsession with militancy, order, and war, the role of military symbols like the helmet, among others, in the proceedings demonstrates the vitality of the *Giornata della fede* as having been vital to broad Fascist goals and commitments. The *Giornata della fede* thus neatly reflects the Fascist state’s conscious “sacralization of politics,” while granting, coercively, Italian women a place in the process.

III. “A New Union”: Marriage and Faith in the *Giornata della fede*

The Fascist state did not invent a wholly new ritual in the *Giornata della fede*. Rather, the *Giornata* was fundamentally based in the idea and ritual of marriage through an emphasis on the concepts of commitment and faith. Nor did those ideas exist in a vacuum; indeed, one common Italian expression for the wedding ring itself is *fede*, faith. Thus, *la Giornata della fede* could just as easily be translated as “the Day of the Wedding Ring” as “the Day of Faith.”³⁴ This fact alone points to the event’s foundation in culturally specific understandings of marriage and of its associations with womanhood and the family. In this section, I will briefly outline the Fascist approach to the family and marriage before explaining how the *Giornata della fede* event leveraged the symbolism of matrimony grounded in faith, as a gendered instrument through which to blur the lines between women’s public and private lives. In this way, I will argue, the *Giornata della fede* aimed to extend the Fascist state’s totalitarian control over women, and to counter state anxieties about women’s status in private and public life. Mussolini’s regime considered the family “the constituent cell of the new Fascist society,” Paul Ginsborg writes.³⁵ As such, state rhetoric touted the strong Italian family with many children as the foundation

³³ Terhoeven, *Oro alla Patria*, 220.

³⁴ In general, the event is referred to in English as “the Day of Faith,” both in current scholarship and in contemporary writing. For a contemporary example, see Wireless to the New York Times, “Queen Gives Rings To Italy's Cause.” *New York Times* (New York; December 19, 1935).

<http://search.proquest.com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/docview/101273815?accountid=11311>.

³⁵ Paul Ginsborg, “The Politics of the Family in Twentieth-Century Europe.” *Contemporary European History* 9, no. 3 (2000): 420-22.

of its success. Indeed, the regime deemed production of children vital, as Mussolini focused on demographics as a means of conducting public policy.

By 1926, contraception and abortion, which Fascist media disparaged as “neo-Malthusianism,” were illegal.³⁶ As part of a demographic campaign to increase Italy’s population launched in 1927, rituals similar to the *Giornata della fede* aimed to promote reverence for fertile mothers and their families.³⁷ One such ritual was the *Giornata della Madre e dell’Infanzia*, the Day of the Mother and Childhood. First held on Christmas Eve in 1933, the Day centered on a parade overseen by Mussolini in which the most prolific mother from each of Italy’s ninety provinces marched in front of the *Altare della Patria*.³⁸ Each woman’s number of live births was trumpeted as she passed in front of the *Duce*.³⁹ The Fascist state clearly aimed to forge an image of Italy as a country made strong by the size of its families. Similar to the *Giornata della fede*, moreover, the Day of the Mother and Childhood exemplified the way in which the state leveraged mass rituals in public spaces to transmit and reinforce its values to the population, in this case expressly and insistently to and for women.

The role of marriage within the ideal Fascist family is more complicated. While divorce was briefly legal in some areas of Italy in the early 1860’s, it was quickly outlawed again during the unification process.⁴⁰ Indeed, legal equality in Italy between men and women in marriage did not exist until 1975.⁴¹ Italy’s stance on marriage is closely tied to

³⁶ de Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women*, 44, 58.

³⁷ Ginsborg, “The Politics of the Family,” 426. Mussolini wrote in 1937 that among the greatest achievements of his regime had been to pass laws for the “protection of motherhood and childhood” (“protezione della maternità e dell’infanzia”). Benito Mussolini, *Ordini, Consegne, Direttive del Duce sui Problemi della Vita Italiana e Internazionale*. (Roma: Pinciana, 1937), 230. For more information on women in Fascist demographic policy, see Lesley Caldwell, “Reproducers of the Nation: Women and the Family,” in *Rethinking Italian Fascism: Capitalism, Populism, and Culture*, (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1986), 110-141.

³⁸ de Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women*, 71.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Daniela Saresella, “The Battle for Divorce in Italy and Opposition from the Catholic World (1861–1974).” *Journal of Family History* 42, no. 4 (2017): 402.

⁴¹ Ginsborg, “The Politics of the Family,” 438. As a young socialist, Mussolini had been personally opposed to the Church and religious marriage. Renzo de Felice writes in his influential biography *Mussolini* that the leader “maintained that he who did not consider the Church an enemy was betraying the fundamental thought of socialism...[which was] a position of intransigent atheism.” (“Mussolini, al contrario, sostenne che chi non considerava la Chiesa un nemico tradiva il pensiero fondamentale del socialismo... una posizione d’intransigente ateismo”), Renzo de Felice, *Mussolini*. (Torino: Einaudi, 1965), 39.

its relationship with the Vatican and Catholicism in general. The 1929 *Concordato*, part of the Lateran Treaty between the regime and the Vatican, granted religious weddings civil recognition.⁴² This point proved significant, Daniela Saresella claims, as the state also conceded “jurisdiction in court cases concerning the validity of marriage, thereby recognizing the Church’s supremacy in regulating matters of matrimony and the family.”⁴³ While many issues were contentious between the state and the Vatican, in this instance the Church seemingly won; marriage had “returned to its canonic bosom.”⁴⁴ Due to the Church’s dominance over marriage, then, the *Giornata della fede* was intimately intertwined with Catholicism itself.

Key to the event’s relationship to marriage and religion was not only its emphasis on faith, but also its related conflation of religious faith and personal commitment to the state. This conflation not only lent the event an air of sanctity in line with the day’s ritualism, but also implied that the participants’ devotion to Fascism was as intense as religious zeal. To promote this message, the event centered heavily on religious imagery; its apex came in the form of actual clerical participation. A clip from the northern town of Forlì, for example, shows a Roman Catholic priest presiding over the ring ceremony. He wears the full vestments of the Mass, where a Catholic wedding or other Holy Sacrament would occur. The priest’s presence reinforces that the event symbolically constituted a large wedding between women and the state, with its emphasis on commitment and the exchange of rings.⁴⁶

⁴² The Lateran Treaty was a February 1929 agreement between the Vatican and Italy that settled several issues, including the sovereignty of the Vatican and Rome’s status in Catholicism. For a discussion on the link between Catholicism specifically and the *Giornata*, see Lucia Ceci, *Il papa non deve parlare: Chiesa, Fascismo e Guerra D’Etiopia*, (Roma: Laterza, 2010).; Saresella, “The Battle for Divorce,” 402.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Scholars comment that though Fascism in its early years was in many ways more socially progressive, it quickly accorded with the Church’s conservative social policies. Arendt notes, for example, that Italy’s “initial anticlerical flavor of Fascist nationalism subsided rather quickly.” Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 259; Mark Seymour, *Debating Divorce in Italy*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 161.

⁴⁶ *Il rito della Fede a Milano e Forlì*, dir. by Gemmiti, Arturo.



Figure VI. *Giornata propaganda poster of Jesus approving ring donation.*

Religious imagery is also omnipresent in the day's propaganda posters. In one promotional image, for example, Jesus Christ floats over two hands exchanging rings over a field of donated rings.⁴⁷ Jesus himself thus seems to approve of the *Giornata*, an impression made more explicit by the image's caption, "*Per la Santità della Causa*," "For the Sanctity of the Cause." The image also reinforces the idea that the *Giornata della fede* is as sacred and binding as a marriage or is itself a sort of marriage between individuals and the state. The parallel between religious and personal commitment drawn in the event is apparent, and the "sacralization of politics" is quite literal.

Alongside this conflation of faith in religion and faith in the state is an emphasis on the word "faith" itself. Faith, Gentile notes, had come "to assume an inherent value" in Fascist ideology and was transformed from a religious phenomenon to a political one.⁴⁸ This redefinition of faith was explicit, as Mussolini wrote, "If Fascism were not a faith, how would it give stoicism and courage to its followers? Only a faith, which has reached religious altitudes" could do so.⁴⁹ This attitude is reflected in the *Giornata* films as well. The second-to-last shot of the Pescara newsreel, for example, shows a crudely painted sign labeled in large black letters, "*PIAZZA DELLA FEDE*," or the "Square of Faith."⁵⁰

⁴⁷ See Figure VI. *Per la Santità della Causa*, illustrated postcard, 1935-6, reproduced in Terhoeven, *Oro alla Patria*.

⁴⁸ Gentile, *The Sacralization of Politics*, 100.

⁴⁹ "Se il Fascismo non fosse una fede, come darebbe lo stoicismo e il coraggio ai suoi gregari? Solo una fede, che ha raggiunto le altitudini religiose..." Mussolini, *La Dottrina del Fascismo*, 15.

⁵⁰ *La giornata della Fede*, dir. by Gemmiti, Arturo.

Thus, faith and devotion to the state defined even the physical space of the event, enough to rename the square itself for the occasion. The final shot of the film shows a raucous crowd in the square, uproarious in applause. In addition to the masses' approval of the event and the regime, the image speaks to the power of this newly named space; their faith is evident in their applause. Of course, this faith-based devotion was heavily staged; women were required to participate, a mandate the Fascists likely enforced strictly, as in other mass rituals.⁵¹ Even so, this visual imagery still intends to imply that women were independently motivated to worship the state, just as they were in religious worship.

The *Giornata della fede* was not just about political devotion *per se*, however; it was specifically about *women's* political devotion filtered through an imitation of marriage. If the idealized Fascist man were represented by the violent Blackshirts, willing to leap into battle or a street riot at any moment, women had to have their own model of Fascist existence.⁵² Men dominated the public sphere and demonstrated their Fascism by going to war, participating in sporting events, and even fighting.⁵³ What could women do? They could marry. At its core, the *Giornata della fede* was an exchange of precious rings, a physical representation of women's commitment through sacrifice to the state. In line with the broader symbolism of commitment of wearing a ring, the messaging of the *Giornata della fede* implied that giving up a woman's wedding ring was perhaps her greatest sacrifice. It also suggested that her commitment to the state outweighed or replaced her commitment to her husband, ameliorating any anxiety about women potentially prioritizing their personal relationships over her relationship to the state. As de Grazia comments, the *Giornata della fede* "did indeed appear to seal a new union between Italian women, their families, and the fascist state."⁵⁴ This "new union" was itself a new marriage in which women were vowing subservience to the state just as they had to their husbands.⁵⁵

⁵¹ Gentile, *The Sacralization of Politics*, 88.

⁵² The Blackshirts were the Fascist paramilitary organization that catapulted Mussolini to power and led 1922's March on Rome. They were notorious for their distinctive black clothing and focus on street violence.; Lorenzo Benadusi, *Il Nemico*, 28-31.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁵⁴ de Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women*, 78.

⁵⁵ Gigliola Gori also calls the Day of Faith a new marriage, though more in a civic context. She writes, "In an attempt to evoke the Roman empire, religious faith and Fascist civic duty converged once again, as the rings helped to symbolize a kind of wedding between Fascism and Italian women." Gigliola Gori, *Italian Fascism and the Female Body: Sport, Submissive Women and Strong Mothers*. (London: Taylor and Francis, 2012), 67.

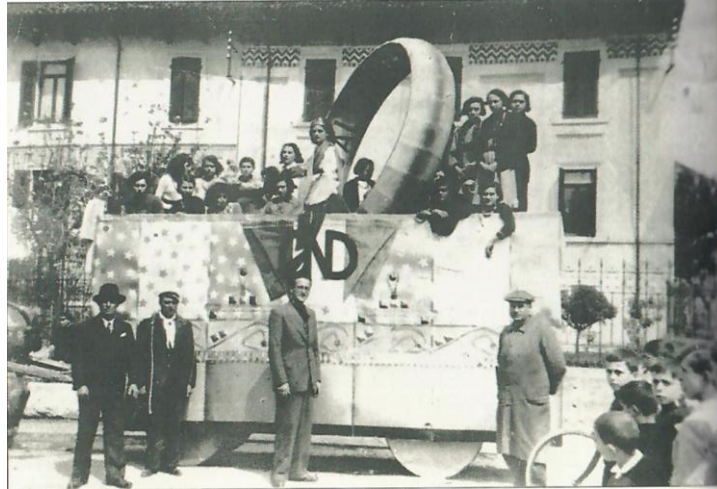


Figure VII. Cremona float with giant wedding ring and woman representing Victory at center.

In addition, in exchanging her personal wedding ring for an iron ring provided by the state, a woman offered up both a piece of literal wealth and something with deep sentimental meaning.⁵⁶ Newspapers referred to Queen Elena's wedding ring given at the event as her "dearest possession."⁵⁷ Though the donation of rings was mandatory, the rhetoric of sacrifice of a "dearest possession" constructed women's state devotion as part of this pseudo-marriage. An image of the *Giornata* parade at Cremona shows a parade float with a giant wedding ring sculpture bigger than any of the women riding it.⁵⁸ Standing in the center of the ring is a woman dressed as *Vittoria*, Victory. The float's emphasis on the ring reinforces the literal and symbolic message of a woman giving up her ring, an act with meaning greater than a small piece of metal.

The wedding ring, the symbol of woman's private sacrifice to public life, transcended the immediate context of a wedding to take on greater political and national meaning, further integrating the gendered symbol within the fabric of Fascist rhetoric. A

⁵⁶ While in some Day of Faith ceremonies men gave up their wedding rings as well, there is less evidence they received new rings in return as women did.

⁵⁷ Wireless to the New York Times, "King and Queen of Italy Give Wedding Rings to Mussolini for Defense of their Country." *New York Times* (New York; December 05, 1935,) <http://search.proquest.com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/docview/101279429?accountid=11311>.

⁵⁸ See Figure VII, photograph from Francesco Zaffanella private archive, reproduced in Terhoeven, *Oro alla Patria*.

propaganda cartoon from December 1935, entitled *La Fede che Stritola*, “The Wedding Ring that Crushes,” shows a number of caricatures of different countries stuck inside a giant wedding ring.⁵⁹ The ring is engraved with the phrase “18 DICEMBRE XIV,” “18 December 14,” a reference to the *Giornata della fede* on that date.⁶⁰ Inside the huge ring, six figures of different countries struggle to escape. One figure, presumably representing China, for example, has an Asian conical hat, a thin, stereotypical mustache, a vaguely Asian-looking tunic, and a version of Japanese traditional footwear. The image is deeply stereotypical, yet the viewer is drawn to the way the figure dangles on the edge of the ring by his chin, totally immobilized, rendered helpless by the ring.

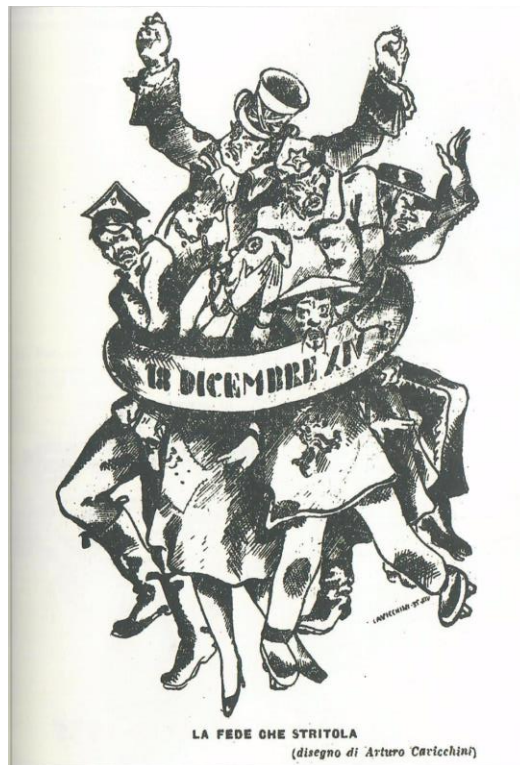


Figure VIII. “The Ring that Crushes” poster showing large ring containing different national figures.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 218.; See Figure VIII. Arturo Cavicchini, *La fede che Stritola* (“La Voce di Mantova,” December 18, 1935), reproduced in Terhoeven, *Oro alla Patria*.

⁶⁰ The Fascist government used a dating system called the *Era Fascista*, the Fascist Era. The Era started on October 29, 1922, the day of Mussolini’s ascension to Prime Minister, as Day 1 of Year 1. 1935 is *Anno XIV*, Year 14.

The ring thus becomes not only a symbol of private commitment, but also one of state power and its ability to overtake and contain whole nations. The propaganda image illustrates the way in which the *Giornata della fede* extrapolated the meaning of the wedding ring and marriage itself onto a broader, national, even geopolitical scale of power and allocated a role for women within that power structure.

In this way, the *Giornata della fede* linked the private and public of women's lives under Fascism. It laid claim outright to the private, married experiences of women, and re-defined them as a form of public political participation in Fascism. If, as Hannah Arendt explains, "the organization of the entire texture of life according to an ideology can be fully carried out only under a totalitarian regime," marriage is certainly part of the "entire texture of life."⁶¹ The *Giornata della fede* is thus key to the "organization" of women's lives under totalitarianism. In de Grazia's words, the *Giornata della fede* joined "household to nation, and peaceable domesticity to fascist militarism," a phenomenon reflected in the visual record discussed above.⁶² It bridged a woman's place in marriage and in the home with her new place within the broader fabric of the nation. In theory, Italian women would wear government-issued rings for the rest of their lives, a daily reminder of their sacrifice to the state. Just as the ring now occupied space in public life, the *Giornata della fede* and the state that organized it occupied space in the private daily lives of Italian women. As wedding rings usually symbolize a daily commitment to a marriage, the iron rings, too, would symbolize a daily commitment to the state. The *Giornata* was an exercise in women's role in the state; within the culturally coherent confines of marriage, made even more conventional through an emphasis on religion and faith, women could contribute to the war effort and demonstrate their patriotic allegiance. If women could not die in Ethiopia, they could donate their rings, just as women in the United States could grow Victory Gardens during World War II.⁶⁴

⁶¹ Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 363.

⁶² de Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women*, 78.

⁶⁴ Gori, *Italian Fascism and the Female Body*, 67.

IV. Understanding the *Giornata della fede* on Film

Studying the *Giornata della fede* primarily through the lens of the propaganda produced of it, particularly in film, allows us to understand how the Fascist state itself viewed the event and how the state wished for the event to be viewed. In this final section, I will contextualize the function of the propaganda film under Fascism and locate the *Giornata della fede* clips within a broader history of Fascist propaganda films, including newsreels. I will first argue that the films served to process the event for its participants, to neatly summarize its symbolic messages and the participants' assigned role within the constructed Fascist worldview. In this way, the films function as positive reinforcement for behavior desired by the state, and evidence its attempts to control its subjects. In addition, the very existence of the films suggests a state anxiety about the role of women in public life, both during the Ethiopian war specifically, and in the long term as a matter of the potential behind their private lives.

The fundamental aim of the propaganda film is to transmit a political message to the masses, whether at home, abroad, or both. As Arendt explains, in a totalitarian state, propaganda “always makes its appeal to an external sphere—be it the nontotalitarian strata of the population at home or the nontotalitarian countries abroad.”⁶⁵ Propaganda is a tool to convince the unconvinced, or remind the convinced, of the reality the totalitarian state aims to construct. Films, including the newsreels discussed in this essay, are no different. They do not reflect absolute reality, certainly not for every single one of the millions of Italians in attendance at the *Giornata della fede*.⁶⁶ Edward Tannenbaum notes that Fascist newsreels had “no crime, no sex, and no ugliness or brutality.”⁶⁷ They were not objective explorations of current events, but ideals communicated to the people that reinforced the government's political line, including the invasion of Ethiopia.⁶⁸ For the

⁶⁵Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 342.

⁶⁶ Notably, the *Giornata della fede* was celebrated abroad as well: 300 Italian-American women offered their rings to the Fascist state in Rochester, New York, in May 1935, and an Italian government representative gave the women iron rings at a ceremony attended by more than 5,000 people. Wireless to the New York Times, “Il Duce Sends Iron Rings To 300 Rochester Women.” *New York Times* (New York; May 18, 1936),

<https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1936/05/18/87940813.html?pageNumber=11>.

⁶⁷ Edward Tannenbaum, *The Fascist Experience: Italian Society and Culture, 1922-1945*, (New York: Basic, 1972), 230.

⁶⁸ Steven Ricci, *Cinema and Fascism: Italian Film and Society, 1922-1943*. (Berkeley: Uni. of California 2008), 87. As an example beyond newsreels, several military-themed war films were released around the

regime, Cosimo Ceccuti argues, media like newsreels served as a means of not only “neutralizing every opposition, but also consolidating its own images [and] spreading the ‘myths’ of the new Italy.”⁶⁹

Propaganda newsreels played an extremely important role in establishing the Fascist state’s relationship to its public. The newsreels discussed in this essay were produced by *Istituto L.U.C.E. (L’Unione Cinematografica Educativa)*, the Educational Cinematographic Union, often referred to as *Istituto Luce*. The Fascist regime took over the Institute in 1925, then a small private studio, and converted it into a center for filmed propaganda.⁷⁰ Mussolini personally reviewed almost all of the Institute’s works before their national distribution.⁷¹ By the mid-1920s, Italian cinemas were required to project newsreels at least four times a week, and mobile cinemas continuously travelled the lesser-developed countryside.⁷² The first major propaganda film, 1925’s *La Battaglia del Grano* (The Battle for Grain), for example, was copied 120 times and viewed by six million Italians in less than two months.⁷³ At the same time, a large number of new movie theaters opened, and in some areas the price of attendance was as low as only a *lira*, making watching a film both accessible and affordable.⁷⁴ It is thus highly likely that the *Giornata della fede* films were widely shown in theaters and mobile viewings all over Italy.

Also released in 1935, Leni Riefenstahl’s Nazi propaganda film *Triumph des Willens* (*Triumph of the Will*) provides a meaningful comparison to the *Giornata della fede*

time of the invasion of Ethiopia as well. Recent scholarly attention has turned to this “empire cinema.” For further detail, see Ruth Ben-Ghiat, *Italian Fascism’s Empire Cinema*. (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2015).

⁶⁹ “Neutralizzava ogni opposizione, ma consolidava anche la propria immagini, diffondeva i ‘miti’ della nuova Italia,” Cosimo Ceccuti, “Cartoline e manifesti: fonti per lo studio della propaganda nell’Italia fascista,” in *Immagini e Retorica di Regime* (Milano: Museo Civico di Sansepolcro, 2001), 12.

⁷⁰ Pierre Sorlin, “A Mirror for Fascism. How Mussolini Used Cinema to Advertise His Person and Regime.” *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 27, no. 1 (2007): 111.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 112.

⁷² Umberto Famulari, “The Duce on the Screen: The Image of Mussolini in the Newsreels of the Istituto Luce.” *Journal of Italian Cinema & Media Studies* 4, no. 2 (2016): 252.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 253. According to the Istituto Nazionale di Statistica (National Institute of Statistics), the population of Italy in 1935 was 42,870,000 people, so roughly 14 percent of Italians would have viewed *The Battle for Grain* in two months. “Popolazione,” Istat: Serie Storiche. Istituto Nazionale di Statistica. Accessed November 30, 2020,

http://seriestoriche.istat.it/index.php?id=1&no_cache=1&L=0&no_cache=1&tx_usercento_centofe%5Bcategoria%5D=32&tx_usercento_centofe%5Baction%5D=show&tx_usercento_centofe%5Bcontroller%5D=Categoria&cHash=04e5a2e51acfa92f173aac082f0d8872.

⁷⁴ Pomeroy, “Classical Antiquity, Cinema and Propaganda,” 266.

clips. While it is uncertain whether there were any direct dialogue or coordination between the directors of both bodies of work, comparison of the two brings into focus the Italian films' emphasis on the public's political participation.⁷⁵ *Triumph des Willens* is a full-length film that documents the 1934 Nazi Party Congress in Nuremberg, Germany. Both the Nazi film and the *Giornata della fede* newsreels center on mass events in support of a fascist state, its goals, and its ideology, and both intend to overwhelm the viewer with the sheer scale and orderliness of state support. In *Triumph des Willens*, however, the adoring public is shown primarily as spectators to the festivities; in the *Giornata della fede* films, they constitute the event as participants in the ritual, both in the parades and in offering up their rings.⁷⁶ Beyond this key difference, large groups of women specifically are mostly absent from the Nazi film, whereas they are central to the *Giornata della fede* clips. The Italian clips thus offer insights into women's experiences that *Triumph des Willens* simply cannot. News clips, moreover, serve a generally different purpose than a full-length propaganda film like *Triumph des Willens*. Newsreels are immediate, urgent updates, ones with which the Italian public would have been very familiar. For most Italians, surely, the experience of viewing a film that featured events in which they themselves had participated was different and more intimate than the distant ceremonies shown in *Triumph des Willens*. The *Giornata della fede* films, therefore, give a closer view of the totalitarian state's perspective on its most fundamental unit: the individual.

Even as newsreels were common in Fascist Italy, what makes the *Giornata della fede* films particularly interesting, especially to the social historian, is the fact that they documented events in which likely the majority of Italians took part. The films had to present a version of events that the viewers would almost certainly have experienced themselves. Umberto Famulari claims that newsreels "provided the audience with the political narrative that the *Duce* projected for the nation. It was not important if the contents

⁷⁵ It is worthwhile to note that Italian Fascism and Nazism were definitively different yet related political ideologies and styles of governance, and defining their relationship is still the subject of much debate. In particular, the question of the existence of "generic fascism" has been held in great contention, with important English-language entries in the field including Stanley Payne, *Fascism: Comparison and Definition*, (Wisconsin: Uni. of Wisconsin, 1983), and A. James Gregor, *Italian Fascism and Developmental Dictatorship*, (Princeton: Princeton Uni., 1979).

⁷⁶ Leni Riefenstahl, dir. *Triumph des Willens*, (Germany: NSDAP, 1935).

of the newsreels did not correspond to the absolute truth.”⁷⁷ Just as I discussed above the *Giornata della fede*’s specific construction of political narrative, part of that narrative was the programmatic processing of viewers’ personal experience and universalizing it across the country. If one participated in the *Giornata della fede* in a small rural town in southern Italy, for example, these newsreels allowed one to see similar events mirrored in the northern metropolis Turin, or in the capital of Rome. Newsreels thus recontextualized individual experience within a national experience and reinforced the idea that Italians everywhere believed in and sacrificed for the state in unison through the *Giornata della fede* ritual. This nationalization is especially important given the intense regionalism of Italian identity.⁷⁸ As people from north to south, Milan to Sicily, participated, they contributed to the government’s project of building a unified Fascist Italy.

Beyond universalizing and nationalizing one’s experiences at the *Giornata della fede*, propaganda films also provided an authoritative interpretation of those experiences. For example, a voiceover provides a succinct, clear explanation of the events depicted for the viewer. When the Pescara film claims, “everyone participates with holy enthusiasm in the *Giornata della fede*,” there is no indication to the contrary. It is a simple claim, ostensibly unquestionable.⁷⁹ When women are repeatedly represented in the ritual of sacrificing their rings, they become subordinated to the state, in the present and in the future. The films present a version of reality, an “ideal Fascist world,” to the Italian people that both already existed and was something to strive for.⁸⁰ Women earned praise for their participation in the events through their depiction on screen, the films positively reinforced their continued, devoted subservience to the state. The newsreels, therefore, simultaneously showed women who they were, who they had become, and who they ought to be.

⁷⁷ Famulari, “The Duce on the Screen,” 261.

⁷⁸ For a discussion of Fascist ideology around nationalization, as well as the development of Italian national identity in general, see R.J.B. Bosworth, *Nationalism*, (White Plains: Routledge, 2007).

⁷⁹ This impression of unabashed enthusiasm carried overseas as well. The New York Times reported on December 17, “The enthusiasm with which Italians have entered into the spirit of giving their rings to the State is extraordinary,” Wireless to the New York Times, “Italians in a Rush to Buy Wedding Rings for Public Donation at Ceremonies Today.” *New York Times* (New York; December 18, 1935), <http://search.proquest.com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/docview/101271509?accountid=11311>.

⁸⁰ Famulari, “The Duce on the Screen,” 251.

This control of women's behavior as demonstrated in the newsreels is tied closely to the state's increasingly precarious situation in the wake of the invasion of Ethiopia. By producing films that depicted its citizens marching and cheering in total unity for the war, the Fascist state hoped to demonstrate the public's support for the war effort. Even so, it is important to note that substantial resources, financial and human, were put into producing these films at a time of great economic stress for the Italian government. Reinforcing the domestic base of their support for the war, therefore, had to have been high priority, at least relative to other propagandistic concerns; the films, therefore, belie a degree of anxiety on behalf of the state about popular support for the Ethiopian war. In December 1935, with the Italian army's advance slowing and the economy in decline, the films aimed to solidify support for the regime by showing a reality in which that support already existed. To ensure the state's control over its citizenry, it had to demonstrate that power through visual imagery. Key to this control was documenting the Fascist claim that the Italian people, men and women, were independently devoted to the state and complied with its mandates with a religious fanaticism.

In addition to rousing enthusiasm for the war in Ethiopia, however, the films display a level of anxiety about securing women's proper place within the ideal Fascist society. Women occupied an often contradictory place in Fascist ideology. Gori describes how Fascist womanhood revolved around "different models of femininity" inspired by "aspirations for modernity, secularization and imperialism with aspirations to safeguard traditionalism, religion and stability."⁸¹ The stress of war would have heightened the stakes of this dizzying list of priorities as women became a greater proportion of the domestic population as men went to the front. In a totalitarian state, every aspect of life is under the state's authority; the state had to control women and their domestic lives in order to legitimize itself and its efforts further. The *Giornata della fede* films showed people all over the country, including women themselves, how women should live under Fascism. The clips were akin to a public service announcement, an instruction for women on how to act and a comforting assurance that they did, in fact, have a prescribed part to play. Any state anxiety about the unknowns of the private life of the citizenry, a private life

⁸¹ Gori, *Italian Fascism and the Female Body*, 54.

centered around women's domain at home, was mitigated by the reassurance that women, too, were as devoted to the state as their male counterparts. If women were primarily charged with the birth and upbringing of the next generation of young Fascists, moreover, they had to be as dedicated as men. Still, they also had their own distinct ritual in the *Giornata della fede*, a female-centered event and place within the state-constructed power structure and ideology.

V. Conclusion

What does the *Giornata della fede*, both as an event itself and as a catalyst for the production of visual imagery, offer scholarship? Indeed, the event may seem like one of many standard Fascist rituals, its newsreels as a few among the scores that were produced, played, and viewed constantly in Italy in the 1930's. In this essay, I have demonstrated that the visual record of the *Giornata della fede* is a significant case study for studying the ways in which the Fascist state interacted with and lived on in the lives of its citizens, particularly women. I have argued that the *Giornata della fede* was a gendered public ritual through which the state hoped to model the ideal Italian woman at the time of the Ethiopian crisis. Propaganda films then served to transmit that model to the Italian masses.

Beyond the significance of the *Giornata della fede* as a political tool for the Fascist regime, however, the event is also worthy of study as it documented an important experience of the people who lived it. The central idea of the *Giornata della fede* is sacrifice for the state; those who participated gave items of genuine personal and monetary value. The event's focus on "national cohesion in sharing sacrifice," indeed, required sacrifice.⁸² Symbolically, moreover, the government-issued rings replaced people's sacrificed items, and so each day women carried the reminder of their sacrifice and their duty to the state on their fingers. The fact that the state sought to capitalize on this dynamic of sacrifice renders it no less impactful on the lived experiences of those Italians who participated, whether or not that sacrifice actually contributed to the furthering of the war effort. In offering up something as cherished and personal as the wedding ring,

⁸² "Coesione nazionale nella condivisione del sacrificio," Terhoeven, *Oro alla Patria*, 216.

participants experienced a basic claim of the totalitarian state: that it can control every single aspect of its citizenry's reality, from what wars they die in to what jewelry they wear. Accordingly, the *Giornata della fede* allows one to appreciate the intimate ways in which state ideology lived out in the lives of women throughout Italy, including in the rings on their fingers.

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