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The Duce's Cheerleaders and the Führer's Vanguard

The Dynamics of a Fascist Network of Girls' Organizations

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Abstract

Regimes in the interwar years went to great lengths to educate young girls into their ideology. Fascist Italy had a few years head start—its *Accademia fascista di educazione fisica femminile* [Fascist Academy of Female Physical Education] was regarded as innovative from likeminded governments of the time, including Nazi Germany, and was the object of visits and attention. This article explores the arc drawn by relationships between Italian and German girl organizations, focusing on encounters between *Orvietine* and *Bund Deutscher Mädel* (BDM) members. It focuses on two exemplary moments in the history of the network: the 1937 trip to Berlin by 150 students of the Orvieto Academy, and the one-month observation visit in winter 1941 by Ursel Stein, a rising star of the BDM administration. By analyzing and comparing the dynamics, rituals, and actors of the two occasions the article points out at the different roles given to girl organizations by Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy and raises questions concerning the agency of the members of this women network.

Keywords

Italy – Germany – Fascism – National Socialism – women fascist networks – female youth organizations – Bund Deutscher Mädel (BDM) – Opera Nazionale Balilla (ONB)

Introduction

On one afternoon in June 1937, 150 young Italian students from the *Accademia fascista di educazione fisica femminile* [Fascist Academy of Female Physical Education] stood at the corner of Wilhelmstraße in Berlin, having just paraded through the streets of the Nazi capital. Here, at the Reich Chancellery, in the heart of political power, they listened to a speech given by Adolf Hitler on the importance of friendship between the youth of Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany. However, Hitler was hardly a polyglot and spoke only German. Almost none of them could understand much of what the *Führer* was saying. German language was not (yet) part of the curriculum of the Academy, which educated its female pupils for a career as sport teachers or as youth leaders of the *Opera Nazionale Balilla* (ONB), later *Gioventù Italiana del Littorio* (GIL). The Fascist regime had launched the Academy in 1932 with the intention of shaping an urgently needed generation of new women.

During its ten years of activity, the Academy drew increasing international attention from youth organizations from all over the world, particularly from the Nazi *Bund Deutscher Mädel* (BDM). The five years between the international debut of the *Orvietine* in June 1937 in Berlin and the founding event of the European Youth Association (EYA) in September 1942 in Vienna, saw the development of the first fascist cross-border network between girls' organizations—including the establishment of rituals specific to these kinds of interactions. And yet, despite the rhetoric of friendship ties, the June 1937 visit proved that fostering camaraderie was far from being the sole purpose of such encounters. If the Italian leadership staged the *Orvietine* as cheerleaders and instrumentalized their sport skills during mass gatherings to prove Italian youth's support for Mussolini, the long and frequent BDM visits to Orvieto along the years betray a quest for insight into the way the Orvieto Academy worked. This article places itself at the intersectional point between historical research on youth organizations and gender studies. Its main focus, the transnational dimension of women's and girls' organizations and their gendered agency in the 1930s and 1940s, has so far been neglected by most historians, with well-known exceptions including the works of Elisabeth Harvey and Morant I Ariño. Their investigative lenses focus on case studies which helped establish a working chronology of transnational exchanges, with Fascist Italy portrayed as a model for youth organizations at the time, gradually displaced in the 1940s by Nazi Germany. While Morant I Ariño has worked on reconstructing the exchanges between the Sección Femenina of the Spanish fascist party Falange and the NSDAP female organizations,¹ Harvey has researched the international

1 See by Morant I Ariño: 'Politisch auf Reise: Die Frauen des spanischen Faschismus und

contacts between National Socialist women's and girls' organizations, focusing on their agency in Eastern Europe.²

This article will compare the *Orvietine's* ten-day trip to Berlin in June 1937 with the month-long visit of two high-ranking BDM leaders to the Academy in winter 1941. It is true that this is a somewhat problematic comparison. The events compared are five years apart, and during that time there were major political ruptures such as the beginning of the Second World War. Also, I will be comparing examples involving low and high ranks. However, due to a lack of sources, it is the only possible comparison currently available. While presenting some difficulties, the comparison will highlight the problems this women-only fascist network faced, as well as the internal rivalries which often ran amongst its protagonists. Furthermore, the analysis of their rituals aims to provide a better understanding of the different purposes the two regimes gave to their girls' organizations and will shed new light on practices of fascist internationalism.

1932: The Opening of the Female Academy of Physical Education in Orvieto

The education of the body and mind of the younger generation was a central concern for many governments and societies at the turn of the last century. The Fascist regime in Italy was no different: its leadership was convinced that educating children to practice gymnastics regularly from an early age would improve what they referred to as the weak character of the Italians. This in turn would guarantee the shaping of a new generation: a 'race' of strong-willed, courageous new men, one that would more promptly answer the regime's needs.³ The regime had large-scale, albeit very traditional, plans for women as well; despite an initial phase during which women's political requests were supported, most Fascists were convinced that the main goal was to turn young girls and women into strong and healthy Italian mothers, willing to raise their

ihre grenzüberschreitende Zusammenarbeit (1936–1945), *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaften* 27 (2016); 'Mujeres para una Nueva Europa: Las relaciones y visitas entre la Sección Femenina de Falange y las organizaciones femeninas nazis (1936–1945)' (PhD diss., University of València, 2013).

2 See by Elisabeth Harvey, 'International Networks and Cross-Border Cooperation: National Socialist Women and the Vision of a "New Order" in Europe,' *Politics, Religion and Ideology* 2 (2012); 'Emissaries of Nazism: German Student Travellers in Romania and Yugoslavia in the 1930s,' *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaften* 22 (2011).

3 Niccolò Zapponi, 'Il Partito della Gioventù: Le organizzazioni giovanili del fascismo,' *Storia Contemporanea* 13 (1982): 569–663.

(hopefully many) children in a spirit of complete devotion to the regime. Sport and gymnastics were acknowledged as the tool to reach these goals.

Furthermore, preoccupations over the state of health, physical shape and discipline of women led to a growing interest within the Fascist regime towards the education of women and especially in their sport skills. As the preparation of girls for their role as mothers moved closer to the center of the regime's policymaking, it was deemed increasingly necessary to incentivize sports in their life, and so the formation of a centralized and homogeneous system for training female sport teachers became more and more evident.⁴ However, Fascist Italy lacked the infrastructure and trained instructors needed to achieve this goal.⁵

In 1926, Renato Ricci was assigned by Benito Mussolini with the task of shaping the Italian youth by organizing their time outside of school, and to that purpose he founded the ONB.⁶ This initially included only boys. It was to them that Ricci dedicated his first efforts towards the education of sport excellency as well as to new teachers. The Fascist Academy of Physical Education was opened in 1927 in the Foro Mussolini sports complex in Rome.⁷ However, Ricci had not forgotten the urgency of training young girls—the women of tomorrow—and the need to promote motherhood and strong health in the name of obedience to the *Duce*. In 1929, existing girls' organizations were formally absorbed by the ONB. The lack of qualified female trainers and youth leaders officially became a significant problem.⁸ In 1930, Ricci suggested the town of Orvieto, specifically the empty complex that once hosted Aquinas's university, was the best location to build the new female Academy of Physical Education where future sport teachers and female youth leaders would be trained.

However, when the first students entered the building in September 1932, during its official opening, the building project was far from complete. The academy was established in an imposing complex, and its construction and restoration were only achieved by the middle of the 1930s. Surrounded by large gardens, the Academy included a dormitory, dining-room, kitchen, swimming pool, library, theatre, an infirmary, several laboratories and classrooms, a church and even a stadium. Located on a green hill near the old town of Orvieto,

4 Gaetano Bonetta, 'L'uomo è tanto più forte quanto più sana e robusta è la donna,' in *Accademiste a Orvieto: Donne ed educazione fisica nell'Italia fascista*, eds. Lucia Motti and Marilena Rossi Caponeri (Perugia: Quattroemme, 1996), 20–43.

5 Alessio Ponzio, 'A Forgotten Story: The Training for the Teachers of Physical Education in Italy during the Fascist Period,' *Sport in Society* 1 (2008): 44–45.

6 Zapponi, 'Il Partito,' 602–604.

7 Ponzio, 'A Forgotten story,' 44.

8 Gigliola Gori, 'Physical Education and Sporting Activity for Women during the Fascist Era' (PhD diss., University of Göttingen, 2000), 17.

it was a strictly female-only community of pupils, teachers and other members of staff who lived separated from the old town's inhabitants.

In the year of its opening, the criteria for admission to the Academy were age (specifically, between seventeen and twenty three years old), being unmarried, and a healthy and robust physical constitution. Even if the admission policy was relatively inclusive and did not differentiate between social classes, the Academy was not cheap. The yearly admission fee of five thousand Lire covered food and accommodation. Books, travelling expenses and the uniforms had to be paid for by the families. As the Italian economy was struggling with the effects of the Great Depression well into the 1930s, many could not afford such financial sacrifices. Those who did were rewarded by their daughter's prospects after graduation: financial independence and a safe career as a sport teacher in public school or as a full-time youth leader of the *Piccole Italiane*. Furthermore, after an additional special training course and an examination, they had a higher chance of joining the ONB management staff.⁹

June 1937: The Orvietine Visit Berlin

Five years after the opening of their school, the *Orvietine* had their international debut. On Saturday 12 June 1937, more than one thousand young students of the ONB Academies reached Munich, where they were solemnly welcomed by representatives of the German Youth organization partners. It was the starting point of a gathering that was meant to take a total of 1,350 Italian youngsters (1,200 boys and 150 girls) to Berlin, representing a unique case in the short Nazi German-Fascist Italy youth exchange history.¹⁰ The girls' delegation was led by Elisa Lombardi, the *Comandante* of the Academy in Orvieto. Participating in such international gatherings was not necessarily a novelty for boys, who acquired travelling experiences throughout previous contacts with the Hitler Youth (HY). It was, however, a groundbreaking event for the young students of the Orvieto Academy, who were rarely given the opportunity to travel abroad. It was, in fact, the first time they had ever left their Academy and not gone to Rome.¹¹

How did the 150 Italian girls spend their time during their ten days in the Nazi capital? The top priority, which kept them occupied during the first half

9 Gori, 'Physical Education and Sporting Activity,' 170.

10 Heinrich Satter, 'Unsere Gäste: Musik im Blut,' *Reichsportblatt*, June 22, 1937.

11 Maria Luisa Maccaferri De Mattia, 'Accademia di Orvieto negli anni 1935-1937,' (Bologna: Ponte Nuovo, 1995), 12.

of their stay in Berlin, was the intensive training for the big event taking place on the evening of their fourth day.¹² There was no time for sightseeing or for exchanging with local youth organizations. Their efforts were rewarded: On the Wednesday, the military parade on Unter den Linden and Wilhelmstraße, as well as the gymnastic display at the Deutschlandshalle, were cheered by thousands of spectators and highly praised by the German press (the Italian press hardly covered the girls' presence in June 1937).¹³ After having marched in the streets of Berlin Mitte,¹⁴ and following the performances of male pupils of the Fascist Academy, the *Orvietine* demonstrated a complex and graceful exercise using bows and hoops.¹⁵ Their skillful performance was regarded as so impressive that they were asked to perform again on the following Monday, immediately before one of Goebbels's speeches.¹⁶ The smiling faces of the Orvieto girls ended up on the front page of the June edition of the *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung*.¹⁷

However, as pioneering the marching and gymnastic exercise of 150 young Italian women in the streets of Berlin may have been, and despite the interesting amount of visibility granted to them by the press, German newspapers praised both boys and girls equally, but did not provide further information on the Orvieto Academy and its educational concept. Instead, journalists preferred to focus on other topics. The German press duly complimented the elegant and smart uniforms worn during the parade as well as the perfect synchronization achieved between the movement of the athletes' bodies and the classical music.¹⁸ It also strongly focused on the development of friendship ties. After all, this visit did take place shortly after the diplomatic rapprochement of Italy and Germany and only a few months before the visit of Mussolini himself. Both the German and the Italian press echoed in its pages the great efforts of the two regimes to bring their people closer. This can be especially seen in the speech the *Führer* gave at the end of the parade as he addressed the Italian Fascist youth, shortly before their performance in the Deutschland-

12 Alessio Ponzio, *Shaping the New Man: Youth Training Regimes in Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany* (Milwaukee: University of Wisconsin, 2015), 134.

13 F.B., 'Gioventù del Littorio a Berlino,' *Il Messaggero*, June 19, 1937.

14 F.B., 'Gli accademisti fascisti presentati ad Hitler,' *Il Popolo d'Italia*, June 17, 1937; Press cutting 'Le Orvietine Marciano sulla Wilhelmstr.,' unknown newspaper, June 1937. Photo Album nr. 3., Lombardi collection, Orvieto State Archive (hereafter Album 3, AL, ASO).

15 Ponzio, *Shaping the New Man*, 135.

16 Press cutting 'Gli accademisti dell'Opera Militare Balilla ripetono il saggio ginnico militare dinnanzi ad oltre centomila persone,' unknown newspaper, 1937. Album 3, AL, ASO.

17 *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung*, front page, June 1937.

18 Satter, 'Unsere Gäste.'

halle. In his speech, he directly mentioned the young women of the female Academy, strongly praised the German-Italian friendship, and called the new ties between the youth of the two countries a strong weapon against common enemies.¹⁹

After this ceremony was over, the *Orvietine* were able to relax and use their time in the capital for other activities. The days after their performance were devoted to sightseeing. Together with the pupils of the male sport Academy, they visited the most common sightseeing spots of the capital and the nearby city of Potsdam.²⁰ A special ball was organized for the Italian guests: the HY, BDM, ONB and Academy leadership attended the *Ballo della Giovinezza* [Youth Dance] organized by the Italian-German Society.²¹ This notoriously Nazified organization of the Third Reich was no stranger to devoting energy and resources to events that would help foster the reciprocal knowledge of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy.²²

What was the motivation for organizing such a trip? What goal motivated its organizers? Did Baldur von Schirach or other Hitler Youth leaders specifically request the Orvieto girls to be there? Or did the Fascist authorities and Ricci themselves come up with this idea, to better showcase the preparation and accomplishments of such skillful students? The sources stay silent on this matter; however, Ponzio's research indicates that the gathering taking place in June 1937 was driven by Fascist Italy's desire to give a strong demonstration of the national unity and preparation of the Fascist youth. The activities engaged by the Italian guests during the second part of their stay seem to further prove this: the academicians were met and greeted by an impressive number of important political personalities. Not only were they formally introduced to Göring, Goebbels and the *Führer* himself, but also to smaller but still powerful diplomatic actors.

The Orvieto Academy and its *Comandante* had their own women-only diplomatic schedule, which included meetings between women and girls of the Academy and representatives of female organizations and institutions from other countries, not only Germany. Such meetings, typically ignored by the press, can only be documented and reconstructed through the photos kept in the rich Orvieto archive. These pictures show that if it was Ricci who officially

19 'Adolf Hitler sprach zur Jugend des faschistischen Italiens,' *Völkische Beobachter*, June 18, 1937.

20 Photograph 'Verso Potsdamm—Giugno 1937,' June 1937. Album 3, AL, ASO.

21 Photograph 'Ballo della Giovinezza,' June 1937. Album 3, AL, ASO.

22 F. Perrotti, 'I rapporti culturali fra donne italiane e tedesche attraverso l'Associazione Italo-Tedesca,' *La Donna fascista*, January 15, 1941.

represented the academy to the HY leadership, it was Elisa Lombardi, the young new *Comandante* of the academy, who escorted the girls on their trip to the Nazi capital and who therefore took up a fairly unconventional job for a woman of her age and experience at the time.

Lombardi, daughter of a bourgeois family from Torino and one of the first students to have graduated from the Orvieto Academy in 1934, had been working during the previous years in the ONB of Bolzano, before being summoned as new director of the academy by Renato Ricci himself at the beginning of 1937.²³ Escorting the girls to Germany was one of the first official tasks she carried out as such, after having held the position for only four months. In her memoirs, written when she was over eighty years old, Lombardi did not dwell on her trip to Germany, making it hard for historians to detect ambition in her actions. However, by escorting the *Orvietine* and representing the prestigious academy in the Nazi capital that June of 1937 she got the opportunity to expand the range of her actions well outside the scope of the academy.

An example was the meeting that took place one afternoon following the show at the Deutschlandhalle, when the girls were introduced to Mrs. Attolico, the wife of the Italian ambassador in Berlin.²⁴ On this occasion, the two women shook hands and spoke with each other. Afterwards, Mrs. Attolico gave a little speech to the girls. No newspaper, German or Italian, took notice of this encounter, as journalists focused on the meeting between the ambassador himself and the hundreds of ONB boys.²⁵

The diplomatic consequences of Lombardi's position as highest female representative of the delegation best expressed itself at an informal meeting organized during her visit in Berlin which was attended by the BDM Reich Deputy at the time, Trude Bürkner,²⁶ and Carmen de Icaza, a representative of the *Sección Femenina* (SF) of the Spanish Falange, which included a girls section.²⁷ The series of photographs taken on the terrace of a restaurant somewhere in Berlin document the informal breakfast which took place between BDM girls, *Orvietine* and their leaders: in more than one shot Elisa Lombardi is shown sitting at a table with the BDM Reich Deputy.²⁸ Bürkner is also captured while discussing and laughing together with Carmen de Icaza, at that time assessor of the SF,

23 Gigliola Gori, *Italian Fascism and the Female Body* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

24 Photograph 'L'ambasciatrice Attolico,' June 1937. Album 3, AL, ASO.

25 Giuliano Balbino, 'Gli accademisti del Foro Mussolini,' *Il Popolo d'Italia*, June 25, 1937.

26 Michael Buddrus, *Totale Erziehung für den totalen Krieg: Hitlerjugend und nationalsozialistische Jugendpolitik* (Munich: Saur, 2003.), 1130–1131.

27 Morant i Ariño, 'Politisch auf Reise,' 172.

28 Photograph 'Berlino: La Reichsreferentin Trude Burgner e Carmen de Icaza,' June 1937. Album 3, AL, ASO.

later responsible for propaganda and who eventually became National Secretary of the SF. So far, only De Icaza's attendance at the national congress of *Kraft durch Freude* in Hamburg from the 10th to the 13th June 1937 was known. However, these pictures prove that the SF-leadership had decided a trip to Berlin was worth the occasion. No written record of the three women's conversation survived, but it seems fair to assume that such a meeting was regarded by its initiators as a first step towards the closer cooperation between the three organizations. One of the pictures taken on the occasion shows Lombardi, Mohr and De Icaza sitting together next to each other at the table,²⁹ an eloquent precedent for the one photo that their successors shot in September 1942 at the founding event of the European Youth Organization.³⁰ The fact that Lombardi, a simple director of an elite sport Academy, was the only female member of the delegation in a position to represent an Italian girls' and women's organization is significant. In June 1937, the *Fasci Femminili* were still recovering after a long phase of sole subordination to the male party hierarchy that had begun in 1926 as the newly appointed national leader, Elisa Majer Rizzioli, was stripped of her office.³¹ In the summer of 1937, none of Lombardi's future rivals had yet emerged from the internal struggles of the *Fasci Femminili*, leaving no other possible representative of the women's and girls' organizations available to escort the girls to Berlin than herself.

The pictures taken on a sunny Berlin terrace were published as a proof of friendship between the female leaders. But do they truly reflect the atmosphere of the gathering? Despite the example of their leaders and the omnipresent rhetoric of friendship employed by the press, these series of photographs do not really show BDM and *Orvietine* blending and sitting together. In fact, the BDM groups are clearly detached from their Italians counterparts at the beginning or end of the meal.³² The only pictures showing some kind of interaction are those clearly arranged, as demonstrated by the one showing the BDM deputy in Rome, Elka von Wedel.³³

Other clues point to the conclusion that, despite the rhetoric of friendship, the 150 *Orvietine* were taken to Berlin merely as 'cheerleaders' and instruments

29 Morant i Ariño, 'Mujeres para una Nueva Europa,' 363.

30 Jutta Rüdiger, *Ein Leben für die Jugend: Mädelführerin im Dritten Reich* (Preußisch Oldendorf: Deutsche Verlagsgesellschaft, 1999), 33.

31 Perry Willson, 'Group Portrait: The "Ispettrici Nazionali" of the Italian Fascist Party 1937–1943,' *The Historical Journal* 2 (2018), 3.

32 Photograph 'Berlino: La Reisreferentin Trude Burgner e Carmen de Icaza,' June 1937, Album 3, AL, ASO.

33 Photograph 'Alla città Olimpica,' June 1937, Album 3, AL, ASO. On Elka von Wedel, see: Buddrus, *Totale Erziehung für den totalen Krieg*, 1225.

of the regime's political goals. For example, as 'thrilling' as it could have been to be addressed by Adolf Hitler in person at the end of the parade, the question of how much these girls (and boys) could understand of his speech, remains open.³⁴ At that time, the teaching of German was not a part of the Academy's curriculum,³⁵ and technology to offer simultaneous translation was only developed in 1945 at the International Military Tribunal in Nuremberg. So one must conclude that such speeches and public addresses must have been quite meaningless for most of the *Orvietine* listening to it. This may in part explain why, many years after this gathering, none of those involved went into details when recalling the experience, like Maria Maccaferri de Mattia, who only vaguely recalled the long hours of training spent in the pouring rain preparing for the performance.³⁶

Further clues betray the real aims of a youth gathering that did not put boys and girls at its center, but mainly focused on the political goals of its organizers. In the academy's journal, edited by the young *Orvietine* and offered to Ricci as a present at the end of their studies, the girls dedicated a short column to their Berlin experience. Without mentioning any direct contact with BDM members or any Germans, they seem to have understood and seen the sole purpose of their traveling and performance in Berlin as a way of satisfying the *Duce's* expectations of them and to show Germany that Italy's youth was 'finally wearing a uniform and was strong, healthy and disciplined'.³⁷

A few months after returning from Berlin, shifts of power inside the Italian Fascist Party meant structural changes for the Orvieto Academy. The ONB was dissolved and the task of administrating and educating boys and girls in their free time went to a new organization. With the Royal Legislative Decree of 27 October 1937, the ONB was suppressed and all competencies regarding physical, sports, political and military education of the youngsters were taken over by the newly founded *Gioventù Italiana del Littorio* (GIL). This meant big changes for the regime Sport's Academies as well. The Academies in Rome and Orvieto, though being didactically and disciplinarily autonomous, now fell under the direct control of the party.³⁸ New faces were introduced to the administration: the task of representing female organizations abroad was taken up at the end

34 'Adolf Hitler sprach zur Jugend des faschistischen Italiens.'

35 Report card of Teresa Berghiu, 1935, Box 7, Folder 3, Lombardi collection, Archivio Storico Orvieto, Orvieto, Italy.

36 Maccaferri, 'Accademia di Orvieto,' 14.

37 'Gioventù italiana a Berlino,' in *Accademia fascista di Orvieto-Fortitudo*, 40. Box nr. 1, AL, ASO, AL.

38 Ponzio, *Shaping the New Man*, 51.

of 1937 by Olga Medici del Vascello, the female secretary of the Fasci all'Estero and Penelope Testa.³⁹ Testa was named Inspectress of the *Fascio Femminile* in charge of the female youth organizations of the party, including the Orvieto Academy.⁴⁰ All that is known about her is that she was, at the time of her nomination as GIL inspector in 1937, unmarried,⁴¹ and that her relationship towards the *Comandante*, Elisa Lombardi, was anything but peaceful and smooth, as she most probably saw the *Comandante* as her rival.⁴² Lombardi's reputation in Italy and abroad may well have been one further reason for the animosity between the two women, as the *Comandante's* name was quite known.⁴³ Of Testa, however, only casual mentions and pictures survive, where she is portrayed as a still fairly young woman, probably between thirty and forty years old. Despite her rivalry towards Lombardi, and despite her own dependence on the party thanks to her formal title of GIL inspectress, she became a relevant actor in the exchanges between the Academy and BDM.

1941–1942: Visiting the Academy

It is a telling detail yet to be analyzed that Jutta Rüdiger, the BDM Reich Deputy who held this position for the longest time (from 1937 to 1945), is unlikely to have ever personally visited the Fascist Sport Academy in Orvieto. She never explored the Academy building and probably never even personally met its *Comandante*, Elisa Lombardi. Despite this, the connections and exchanges amongst the *Bund Deutscher Mädel*, the GIL and the Orvieto Academy went through a blooming phase between 1940 and 1942. During the second half of the year 1941 alone, four BDM delegations, amounting to a total of thirty-eight BDM leaders, travelled through Italy and paid at times longer or shorter visits to Orvieto. Furthermore, what initially appeared to be exchanges and visits with the purpose of showing off and impressing each other took a different turn at the beginning of the 1940s. It was Baldur von Schirach who, in January 1941, took the initiative and requested that the district leader Ursel Stein be

39 Willson, 'Group Portrait,' 2.

40 Paola Alferazzi Benedetti, 'Gioventù Italiana del Littorio,' in *Almanacco della donna italiana*, ed. Gabriella Garuch Scaravaglio (Florence: Bemporad, 1938), 204.

41 And stayed unmarried at least until 1941. On the significance of being married and politically active in a fascist sense, see Willson, 'Group Portrait'.

42 Ursel Stein, *Bericht über den Einsatz an der Accademia Femminile in Orvieto* (21.11.–20.12.41), RAV Rom-Quirinal, Kult 7 Nr. 1, 1394a, Federal Foreign Office Political Archive, Berlin, Germany (hereafter cited as PP AA, RAV).

43 Stein, *Bericht über den Einsatz*.

allowed to pay the Orvieto Academy a longer visit, to become better acquainted with its concept and working methods. In so doing, he gave new priority to what had so far looked like a sequence of courtesy visits.⁴⁴ Stein was born in 1910 in the Klaipėda Region (today's Lithuania), and had worked until 1939 in the administration of the BDM. She had only recently become director of the first gymnastic school of the BDM's *Glaube und Schönheit* Society in Traunstein.⁴⁵ As the plan was to have Stein named director of the first BDM Sport Academy in Berchtesgaden, Schirach insisted in his letter to the Italian authorities that it would have done Stein good if she 'could have taken a look at how a sport academy in other countries worked'.⁴⁶ Ursel Stein and her colleague Bärbel Meger ended up spending one full month at the Academy, in November 1941.⁴⁷

BDM leaders were not the only ones to have taken interest in the Orvieto Academy at the turn of the decade. The National Socialist Women's League was curious as well. In March of the same year, Dr. Adele Petmecky notified Rome of her interest in a personal visit.⁴⁸ Shortly before, the academy was visited by Gertrud Scholtz-Klink, leader of the National Socialist Women's League.⁴⁹ Delegations came also from other corners of the world. By 1943, female delegations from Albania, Bulgaria, Japan,⁵⁰ Spain,⁵¹ and Croatia had been guests at the Orvieto Academy on more than one occasion, thereby attesting to a significant increase in the amount of visits the school received from the second half of the 1930s onwards.⁵² Most of these visits were meant to last just for one day and seemed to have had some fixed elements. For example, the guests usually travelled from Rome and were escorted to Orvieto by official representatives of the GIL or of the *Fascio Femminile*. The Inspectress, Olga Medici del Vascello,

44 Correspondence from Martin Luther to the German Embassy in Rome, 16 January 1941, PP AA, RAV.

45 Buddrus, *Totale Erziehung für den totalen Krieg*, 1209.

46 Correspondence, Luther, 16 January 1941, PP AA, RAV.

47 Ursel Stein, 'Die Schule von Orvieto,' *Mädel—eure Welt! Das Jahrbuch der deutschen Mädel* (1943): 319–324.

48 Correspondence from Martin Luther to the German Embassy in Rome, 1 March 1941, PP AA, RAV.

49 Press cutting, 'È partita la Reichsführerin delle organizzazioni femminili tedesche,' unknown newspaper, 1940. Album 2, AL, ASO.

50 Stein, *Bericht über den Einsatz*.

51 Photograph 'Pilar Primo de Rivera e l'Ispeatrice Olga Medici del Vascello,' 1939. Album 2, AL, ASO.

52 For an overview of the visits based on the archival material available, see: Lucia Motti and Marilena Rossi Caponeri, eds., *Accademiste a Orvieto: Donne ed educazione fisica nell'Italia fascista* (Perugia: Quattroemme, 1996), 242.

the Secretary responsible for international partnership, was usually present.⁵³ Upon their arrival at Orvieto train station the visitors were picked up by a formal delegation of *Orvietine* and offered a complete tour of the academy, or as the Italians called it, an *ispezione*, usually conducted by Lombardi herself. The second part of the visit in Orvieto was less formal. Depending on the amount of time available, the *Orvietine* gave a small demonstration of their skills to the guests, or took them to visit the medieval cathedral that stood in the center of the old town. A communal meal or snack was usually included, before seeing the visitors off to the station. As Stein noted in the report that she submitted to the HY leadership in December 1941, after having experienced herself the welcoming of delegations from Bulgaria and Japan, such visits were designed and organized in a way that was meant to leave a favorable impression on the visitors.⁵⁴

It is unlikely the freedom to walk around on their own was granted to the guests, nor were translations or opportunities for interaction provided that might allow visitors to freely question the girls. During these short visits no actual theoretical presentation was given concerning the pedagogical concept of the academy. The goal was to provide the guests with a broad overview of the institution, and the GIL organizers with an occasion to present to their foreign partners an innovative, one-of-a-kind accomplishment that they could be proud of.

Perhaps because of this, it appears that not all guests were satisfied with this short visit format. The visit of the BDM district leader Stein in November 1941 and that of the Ustaše girls from Croatia in 1943 betray a deeper interest in the way the academy worked and suggest the possibility of scouting for know-how from the part of the visitors, since they were guests for more than one month.⁵⁵ BDM membership for all German girls became mandatory in 1936, and the organization was struggling to find a solution to the lack of trained leaders for its thousands of new members.⁵⁶ Perhaps because of this, the delegations sent on trips to Orvieto always included leaders of the organization, and, in most cases, at least middle to high ranking ones. As criteria for the selection, the BDM

53 Press cutting, E.M. 'Falangiste spagnole a Orvieto visitano l'Accademia femminile della G.I.L.', unknown newspaper, 1939. Album 2, AL, ASO.

54 Stein, *Bericht über den Einsatz*.

55 Goran Miljan, 'Young, Militarized and Radical: The Ustasha Youth Organization, Ideology and Practice, 1941–1945' (PhD Diss., Central European University, 2015), 101–106.

56 Jörg Johannes Lechner and Birgit Retzlaff, *Bund Deutscher Mädel in der Hitlerjugend: Fakultative Eintrittsgründe von Mädchen und jungen Frauen in den BDM* (Hamburg: Kovač, 2008), 132.

leadership picked those youth leaders who had proven their devotion and commitment towards the organization. Furthermore, it was strongly recommended that the chosen leaders were those whose careers were already looking promising and were most likely to reach at least the grade of senior district leader.⁵⁷ An example of such is the selection of Bärbel Meger, Stein's companion during their stay in Orvieto. Having already been promoted to the rank of deputy district leader in 1940, Meger's career was a long list of subsequent promotions, until she became the official BDM senior official for physical exercise in the HY in 1944.⁵⁸ Since only middle to high ranking members of the organization were chosen for travelling to Orvieto, the later interviews of former simple members of the BDM contain no mention of Italy when recounting the experience of summer camps.⁵⁹

But such a flow did not develop only in one direction. Genuine interest towards the professionalization of young female youth leaders and how this was achieved in other countries did not only come from Berlin; it had also sparked from Rome. In July 1941, on the occasion of Schirach's visit to the Fascist capital, the Italian partners strongly solicited an exchange between the German and Italian youth leaders of girls' organizations. Together, they decided that that very summer twenty Italian female youth leaders, including some from the Academy itself, would go on a trip to Germany to visit the BDM schools for youth leaders, while at the same time a BDM delegation would travel to Italy and Orvieto. From the 10th until the 20th of September 1941, fifteen BDM leaders traveled through Italy and visited Orvieto,⁶⁰ while a delegation of twenty GIL leaders chaired by Penelope Testa travelled to Berlin.⁶¹ This request attests of a wish from the side of Italy's GIL Commando for better insight into the functioning of the BDM as an organization and the preparation of its leaders. In their letters, the Italian authorities clearly stated that the whole point of such visit was for the Fascist youth leaders to visit the BDM schools as well as the HY Academy in Braunschweig.⁶² It is unclear who exactly stood behind such a request, which due to its tim-

57 Dorothea Saalbach, *Italienreise von fünfzehn höheren BDM-Führerinnen*, July 26, 1941, PP AA, RAV.

58 Buddrus, *Totale Erziehung für den totalen Krieg*, 1187.

59 See for example: Sabine Hering, 'Doris Hoffmann, Interview mit Frau Doris Hoffmann,' in *Das BDM-Werk Glaube und Schönheit: Die Organisation junger Frauen im Nationalsozialismus*, eds. Sabine Hering and Kurt Schilde (Opladen: Leske und Budrich, 2004) 183.

60 Correspondence from Martin Luther to the German Embassy in Rome, July 9, 1941, PP AA, RAV.

61 Memorandum of Heinz Wilke, August 26, 1941, PP AA, RAV.

62 Correspondence from M. Möckel to Dr. Orfeo Sellani, August 12, 1941, PP AA, RAV.

ing could even be interpreted as an extra condition demanded from the GIL Commando before allowing Ursel Stein's stay scheduled for the following winter.

Testa's arrival at Berlin's train station in September 1941 attests of her first, and possibly last, visit to Germany.⁶³ If this supposition were true, it would mean that Testa could only pride herself with this one single experience in Nazi Germany, implicitly putting herself in an inferior position when compared to her colleague Inspectress Del Vascello,⁶⁴ and her rival Elisa Lombardi. The struggle for leadership and power over the development and coordination of the Academy was so intense that even Stein got a hint of it and mentioned it in her report.⁶⁵ Lombardi, whose rank inside the Fascist hierarchy was inferior to that of Testa, not only chaired the delegation of *Orvietine* to Berlin in 1937, and while there acted as a representative for all of the GIL female branch; later on in 1940, she also travelled once again to Germany together with Boldini and visited the Braunschweig Academy, the Nazi institution closest to the Farnesina.⁶⁶

Rivalry amongst women of the GIL, which echoes the bad blood running between Jutta Rüdiger and Gertrud Scholtz-Klink,⁶⁷ probably played a role in the way the network between BDM and the *Accademia* was shaped. While in Germany responsibility for representing the BDM abroad clearly rested with the Reich Deputy, a position which existed since 1932, the situation was less clear in Italy. Testa's position as Inspectress of the GIL was created only in 1940, which left Lombardi and Del Vascello plenty of time for presenting themselves abroad and setting their claws in the partnerships with girls' organizations from other countries.

Conclusion

If the role of the 150 *Orvietine* in Berlin was that of 'cheerleaders', travelling abroad to prove their support to the regime, a clear difference appears between

63 'Penelope Testa arriva a Berlino,' *La Donna fascista*, October 30, 1941.

64 See for example Pilar's visit in Italy and Orvieto in 1939 (Morant I Ariño, 'Mujeres para una Nueva Europa,' 451) and abroad (Harvey, 'International Networks,' 150).

65 Stein, *Bericht über den Einsatz*.

66 Correspondence from Heinz Wilke to the German Embassy in Rome, February 9, 1940, RAV Rom-Quirinal, Kult 7 Nr. 1, 1394a, PP AA.

67 Sabine Hering, 'Interview mit Frau Dr. Jutta Rüdiger,' in *Das BDM-Werk Glaube und Schönheit: Die Organisation junger Frauen im Nationalsozialismus*, eds. Sabine Hering and Kurt Schilde (Opladen: Leske und Budrich, 2004), 135–138.

these girls' role and that which has been defined as 'political travelling' by Harvey and Morant i Ariño.⁶⁸ While the Spanish youth leaders explicitly aimed at learning when visiting Italy and Germany, and BDM girls were trying to export their ideology and political principles to Romania, the *Orvietine* placed themselves in another dimension. They did not travel to observe and possibly learn something from other organizations, but rather were showed off to prove Italian supremacy in the field of fascist youth organization.

After their debut in June 1937, by the beginning of the 1940s the Orvieto Academy was growing famous in Europe. This, in turn, stirred the interest in the Academy on the German side. A increased flow of German female youth leaders, young shapers of consciousness and of an army of 'new women', were interested in the solution Orvieto proposed and so started to visit Italy more frequently. Stein's month-long stay in Orvieto proves the HY was interested in learning exactly how female sport teachers and youth leaders were trained.

The dynamics, programs and intensity of such visits and exchanges suggest a growing reciprocal interest towards the Orvieto Academy as well as its German counterparts. Nazi and Fascist authorities were slowly moving away from 'representative' kinds of journeys—where girls acted as cheerleaders—which characterized the late 1930s and were more willing to admit reciprocal interest in the way the regimes were shaping young women across borders. Such a desire to cooperate and enhance transnational cooperation on the level of exchanges between BDM and GIL leaders may also be explained by developments in the war on the Eastern Front: renewed interest towards collaboration for the 'New Europe' was mentioned by political actors on several occasions, including a meeting of 'International Women' in 1941.

The sources analyzed also demonstrate that although these women actors may well have been the ones actually geographically crossing the borders, they did so as pawns on a chess board, with little power other than that of advisories. Women who worked in the Foreign Office of the BDM, in the GIL headquarters in Rome or at the Orvieto Academy rarely signed any official paperwork or letters. Even though it was exclusively women who welcomed these women-only delegations and groups of young girls travelling to Orvieto or to Berlin, the cross-border cooperation was still planned and designed, at least on paper, by the men of the youth organizations. It was Schirach, Ricci, Bodini and other male leaders who solicited the exchanges between girl leaders and coordinated it. Ursel Stein's stay at the Academy offers a good example: Lombardi's permis-

68 Morant i Ariño, 'Politisch auf Reise,' 172; Harvey, 'Emissaries of Nazism,' 135–160.

sion for Stein's stay was required only from a logistical point of view and she did not have the possibility of expressing approval or disapproval for such a long visit.⁶⁹

The interest of the German side of Orvieto seems to be rather later. Research has established that generally speaking the German interest in Italy waned in the early 1940.⁷⁰

69 Correspondence, Luther, 16 January 1941, PP AA, RAV.

70 Daniela Liebscher, 'Faschismus als Modell: die faschistische Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro und die NS-Gemeinschaft "Kraft durch Freude" in der Zwischenkriegszeit,' in *Faschismus in Italien und Deutschland: Studien zu Transfer und Vergleich*, eds. Sven Reichardt and Armin Nolzen (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2005) 94–118.