

The Women of Ventotene

Article by Antonia Ferri

December 4, 2023

While their names are not as widely known as those of the male authors of the Ventotene Manifesto, women played a decisive role in the development and dissemination of European federalist thought. A conversation with historian Antonella Braga reconstructs the link between the personal lives and political involvement of Europe's "female founders".

One has intelligent eyes and her hair pulled up; the other is tall, with dark hair, mocking eyes, and a strong independent streak. They are Ursula Hirschmann, a Jewish German intellectual, and Ada Rossi, an Italian anti-fascist militant. Their objective is a federal Europe, and the end of what Ada calls the "radical evil": war.

Conventional history remembers these two women mainly as wives, Ada of Ernesto Rossi and Ursula of Altiero Spinelli (and before that, of the anti-fascist Eugenio Colorni), the authors of the Ventotene Manifesto. But the story of the Manifesto, written in 1941 with the title *For a Free and United Europe* and regarded as one of the foundational texts of the European Union, is not only one of men.

In fact, Ada Rossi and Ursula Hirschmann, free to travel to and from the island of Ventotene, where their husbands were being held captive by the Fascist regime, were the ones who brought the Manifesto to the Italian mainland, and from there to Europe.

Here, despite the threat of repression that they had already experienced in the past, they distributed copies of the Manifesto and began to spread European federalist ideals, born of the experience of Nazi-fascist resistance, to create a common political, economic, and social framework that would guarantee peace.

Hirschmann translated the text into German to distribute it to the anti-Nazi resistance movement. In Bergamo, Rossi had the text typed up by partisan Mimma Quarti, and distributed it in anti-fascist circles and universities. This clandestine act resulted in her arrest and confinement, and separation from her beloved Ernesto until August 1943, when she was released.

The private is political

"In those years among the women committed to the federalist movement, there was surely awareness of the need to also fight a gender battle," explains Antonella Braga, an expert in the European anti-fascist and federalist movement. "But it was a question that came later. At that moment, the priority was to defeat Nazi-fascism and make a new Europe and in this, the role of women existed and was important."

Hirschmann and Rossi were not considered to be co-authors of the Manifesto, and in contrast to the Germans Hilda Monte and Anna Siemens, they did not play a direct role in its theoretical elaboration. Their most important contribution to the anti-fascist and federalist cause was centred on distribution: "They acted as connecting officers, like postal workers, or, as the Communists called them, 'flamingos'."

Nevertheless, both actively participated in the exchange of ideas. In a letter to her husband Ernesto, Ada wrote that in the first draft of the Manifesto she found fundamental themes that they often discussed, such as “the horror of war, the demonic face of nationalism, and the project for a federalist Europe”, in addition to the foundations for socialist, liberal reform.

Women’s political commitment and the history of federalist movements are intertwined with personal lives.

Their dedication to the cause and the solidity of their interior ideal did not waver, even in the face of private lives full of responsibility. Women’s political commitment and the history of federalist movements are intertwined with personal lives, friendships, passions, and love stories. Hirschmann had three children from her first marriage with Eugenio Colorni, and another three from her relationship with Altiero Spinelli, whom she met in Ventotene.

Colorni was also confined on the island, and it was her relationship with him, passionate as much as it was tormented, that led to her participating in the discussions that preceded the writing of the Manifesto. Colorni is not listed among the authors, but once he returned to Rome, he became the first editor of the text.

The circle of friends that was created around the Manifesto and its authors gave way to the European Federalist Movement, founded on 27 to 28 August 1943 in the home of the Waldensian anti-fascist Mario Alberto Rollier in Milan. Subsequently, federalists from Italy, France, Germany, and all over Europe joined the movement, drawing their inspiration for a united, federalist Europe from Nazi-fascist oppression and the horrors of the World Wars.

Rollier’s anti-fascist circle included the Spinelli siblings, Gigliola and Cerilo, as well as Altiero, freed from Ventotene, and Eugenio Colorni. His final break up from Hirschmann came about in Milan, where she consolidated her relationship with Spinelli. The group also included Ada Rossi and the writer, painter, and militant Luisa Villani Usellini, who became involved with Colorni and later followed him to Rome. Even though not very well known, Usellini left significant marks in the political and social circles she participated in, explains Braga.

Dedication and disappointment

These romantic relationships reveal a human side to the anti-fascist political movements of the postwar period, and in this sense, they go beyond gossip. The private lives of the proponents of a united Europe also reflect their political stature and the emotional consequences of the losses and tribulations inflicted by the regimes and their wars.

This is even truer for the women of federalism. For the sake of Ernesto, nihilistic and often suffering from depression, Ada Rossi renounced having children even though she wanted them, and did all she could to create a serene family environment, surrounded by caring people.

This difficult private situation was compounded by the disappointment felt regarding the failure of the federalist project when, following the war, a Europe of nations took shape, divided into two opposing blocs based on the imperialist powers of the Cold War.

Hirschmann and Usellini experienced similar disappointments. In March 1945, Hirschmann, as Spinelli's partner, contributed to organising the International Conference of European Federalists in Paris, which was also attended by Albert Camus and George Orwell. For years, Hirschmann was the secretary of the Roman branch of the Federalist movement, and she stayed by the side of Altiero despite repeated failures in the attempt to build a European political union.

The last years of Hirschmann's life also demonstrated her feminist side. "There is a beautiful story that I discovered in the private archives of Luisa Villani Usellini. It was a note that Ursula Hirschmann sent to Luisa, saying: 'Take care of Eugenio'," says Braga. She understood that there was more than a simple friendship between Usellini and her first husband.

As for Usellini, Braga describes her as an active partisan in the fight against fascism and a point of reference for many other women. During the war, her tasks were providing connections, political training, and the production and distribution of clandestine press. From July 1944 to March of the following year, she directed *La Donna Socialista* [The Socialist Woman], a biweekly supplement to the Roman socialist newspaper *Avanti!*. "When she began her life with Colorni, Usellini experienced an important moment of independence and emancipation from her former husband [the anti-fascist screenwriter and writer Guglielmo Usellini], who had sometimes limited her as a woman." When Guglielmo was released from prison, Luisa remained in Rome instead of following him to Switzerland.

Together with Colorni, Usellini entered a period of political activism that led to her federalist commitment, born after reading the Ventotene Manifesto, where "the war was not presented as an unavoidable fatality, but as the consequence of the international anarchy and division of Europe into sovereign nations", explains Braga.

Usellini had a tireless sense of duty. After her husband's incarceration, she wrote in her diary, "There's really not much left to write, it's time to see what I can do." Her tenacity did not waver even after the sudden death of Colorni, which pained her greatly. Seriously injured during a fascist attack by the Banda Koch, an anti-partisan militia known for its violence and cruelty, Colorni died on 30 May 1944, just five days before the liberation of Rome and almost a year before the liberation of Milan on 25 April 1945.

While Ernesto Rossi, Spinelli, and Hirschmann continued to pursue the federalist ideal from their exile in Geneva, Usellini found herself in a liberated Rome. "Rome experienced a sort of advance post-war period, and the militants felt the need to return to dedicating themselves to the political battle through the parties they belonged to. Usellini therefore felt disappointed and abandoned by her former companions." Although she was a socialist, Usellini was above all a federalist who believed in the urgent need to create a Europe made for people and not for nations.

In this she stood in contrast with the Partito Socialista di Unità Proletaria (Socialist Party of Proletarian Unity, PSIUP), which, in the new bipolar world, was moving nearer to the Partito Comunista Italiano (Italian Communist Party, PCI). "She then understood, having seen it up close, that the Anglo-Americans had no intentions of embracing federalism," explains Braga. Together with Veniero Spinelli, Altiero's brother, and his wife Ingrid Warburg, Usellini established the Movimento Autonomista di Federazione Europea (European Federation Autonomist Movement, MAFE).

"The MAFE was aligned to French federalist thinking and envisioned a global revolution that would overtake many different sectors: political, social, cultural, and also religious. It was a radical federalist project. The idea was a revolution that would develop on various levels, starting from the bottom in municipalities, then leading to a series of regional federations, a European federation, and finally a

global federation.”

With greater ambitions came greater disappointments, however. Even so, Usellini’s experience allows us to understand how the idea of federalism from the top down through the institution of a national power converges with federalism from the bottom up, which builds on a system of local autonomies. These two approaches together form the ideal of a political power that reduces the centrality of nations. “It is an original project that was somehow betrayed. A project that did not require the death of the nation-state, but the sharing of sovereignty on several levels of government.”

Unity as emancipation

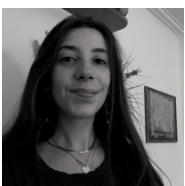
This tension is still at play in today’s Europe. “The upcoming European elections are fundamental. We must make people understand that we need to take a step towards a pathway of political unification, legitimised by a constitution, or otherwise Europe risks becoming diluted into an area of free exchange that will slowly come apart.”

Spinelli, Ada and Ernesto Rossi, Hirschmann, Usellini, Colorni and all the other European federalists cherished an ideal that would have led to the end of all wars. Internal disagreements took a place in the background. “These federalist women had profoundly independent political ideals, and they acknowledged value in their political commitments. Today, gender battles are often aimed at affirmation at an economic level. Instead, these women took a front-line role in political activism at a time when this was not easy for women.”

A Europe that was above all founded on rights and liberty meant women would have an even better possibility of emancipation.

Hirschmann continued to be politically active until she suffered a severe stroke in early 1976. A year prior she had founded the association Femmes pour l’Europe [Women for Europe]. “She understood that building a Europe that was above all founded on rights and liberty meant women would have an even better possibility of emancipation.”

In the 1970s, Hirschmann tried to engage those feminist movements that were both opposed to bourgeois society and hostile to the European project in the federalist cause. She wanted these two worlds, which did not speak the same language, to find common ground. She did not consider herself Italian, German, or Jewish, but one of the “uprooted with nothing to lose but our chains in a united Europe”. “And therefore,” she wrote, “we are federalists.”



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GREEN EUROPEAN JOURNAL

Article in English

Translation available in Italian

Published in the *Green European Journal*

Downloaded from <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/the-women-of-ventotene/>

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