



The Lost Wave: Women and Democracy in Postwar Italy

By Molly Tambor

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As Italy emerged from World War II, the first women entered the national government. The 45 women who became parliamentarians when Italian women were first entitled to vote in 1946 represented a "lost wave" of feminist action, argues Molly Tambor.

In this work, Tambor reconstructs the role that these female politicians played in Italy's new democratic Republic. They proved critical in ensuring that the new Constitution formally guaranteed the equality of all citizens regardless of sex, translating the general constitutional guarantees into direct legislative rights and protections. They used a specific electoral and legislative strategy, "constitutional rights feminism," to construct an image of the female citizen as a bulwark of democracy. Mining existing tropes of femininity such as the Resistance heroine, the working mother, the sacrificial Catholic, and the "mamma Italiana," they searched for social consensus for women's equality that could reach across religious, ideological, and gender divides. The political biographies of woman politicians are intertwined with the history of the laws they created and helped pass, including paid maternity leave, the closing of state-run brothels, and women's right to become judges.

Women politicians navigated gendered political identity as they picked and chose among competing models of femininity in Cold War Italy. In so doing, *The Lost Wave* shows, they forged a political legacy that affected the rights and opportunities of all Italian citizens.

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Editorial Review

Review

"Molly Tambor has produced a thoughtful and highly original study of an often forgotten but influential generation of Italian feminist activists. The achievements of these women-Communist, Socialist, Republican, and Catholic-is especially remarkable because they succeeded in working effectively across the religious and political divides of the Cold War. In so doing they went a long way toward promoting full citizenship, equality, and civil rights for women and helping the new Italian Republic survive by providing a stable foundation for parliamentary democracy. This work, carefully argued and impeccably researched, will be of compelling interest to everyone concerned with the Cold War, women's history, and modern Italy. Tambor tells the moving story of the women who transformed the progressive Italian constitution into a living reality for all." --Frank Snowden, Yale University

"In demonstrating the critical although long neglected political achievements of the women ('the first forty five') who entered Italian politics after the Second World War, Molly Tambor's excellent new book raises questions that have far-reaching and important implications for our understanding of gender and democracy in the post-war political reconstruction of Europe." --John Davis, University of Connecticut

"In this engagingly-written study, Molly Tambor gives its rightful place in history to a forgotten group of combative Italian women who in a country destroyed by fascism-and still very male dominated-built the foundations of a new and more inclusive democracy. An important contribution to the history of women's rights and citizenship in the postwar Republic." --Silvana Patriarca, Fordham University

"Molly Tambor deftly handles the complexities and contradictions that marked the period as Italy moved from Fascism and war to a new Republic and mass democracy. She builds an intricate web of people who shaped the national and international political landscape. At the center of that web is the collective biography of the 45 women elected to the first parliament. As time marched onward, they were 'lost,' blamed, forgotten, or misjudged by many, but the voices of these women provide witness to a constitutional woman who helped to form a postwar state. Tambor's analysis includes not just women and their relationships to home, work, and education but also the men of the postwar Italian world. This is gender history at its very best!" --Jane Slaughter, University of New Mexico

"Tambor's work is a good contribution to the historical literature and clears the way for scholars who might want to expand our understanding of women's roles in postwar Italy."- Spencer Di Scala, *Journal of Modern History*

About the Author

Molly Tambor is Assistant Professor of History at Long Island University.

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