

Introduction

The Struggle Over the Family. A Different View on Postwar Europe

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1 Introduction

Most studies of contemporary Europe treat the family as a private matter, separated from and largely irrelevant to political history. The few accounts of the postwar period that pay attention to family life tend to depict it as dominated by unstoppable processes of individualisation and fragmentation, presenting postwar families as small, isolated, and increasingly removed from political participation. After years of terrible upheavals brought about by a long and devastating war, the postwar period seemed to mark the return to the safety of home and the private sphere, conceived as a space of separation and protection from the realm of political confrontation. In this book, by contrast, I will show that families cannot be confined to the private sphere nor treated as a specific (if not marginal) field of history.

In the middle of the twentieth century, European families found themselves at the centre of radical social and political transformations that affected both the realities of daily life and the way in which family life was discussed in the public arena and regulated by the law. Both in Western and Eastern Europe, families represented an essential dimension of the political, social, and economic history of

the postwar era. The battle fought over the regulation of family and marriage shaped the postwar social and political landscapes.

While most analyses of postwar Europe have concentrated on either the eastern or western half of the continent, this book will cross the iron curtain to compare two countries, Italy and Poland, rarely brought together in historical analyses. The pervasive logic and imagery of the Cold War still encourages us to treat the East and the West as somewhat incomparable entities.

Taking families as our starting point, however, will help us to see new convergences and new points of departure. To start with, many of the challenges that families had to confront in the aftermath of the war were common across both sides of Europe; throughout the continent families had to come to terms with unprecedented losses, of loved ones as well as of material possessions. Although manifesting themselves with different intensity, phenomena such as housing shortages, forced and voluntary migration, and unwanted separations shaped family life across the East-West divide. Postwar reconstruction, while largely dependent on families' participation, transformed ways of living throughout Europe. As political life resumed, new political battles were fought around the family, its social role and regulation. While countries' specific political set up determined the battles fought and their outcome, in some cases analogous ideological competitions took place over the family, despite the apparently very different political conditions that existed on the ground. This was the case in Italy and Poland.

2 The Struggle Over the Family

The competition discussed in this book was first and foremost over the way in which people should conduct their private lives. Its main protagonists were not only state officials, but also lawyers, scholars, social workers and priests, as well as families themselves. It was a competition that took place not between states governed by different political systems, but within countries themselves.

The main contending parties discussed in the present book were Communists and the Catholic Church. Both in Italy and in Poland, Communists and Catholics tried to assert their influence on family life, seeing in it a crucial tool of social penetration and control, and tried to shape it, according to their vision of the world.

Communists and Catholics seemed to hold irreconcilable visions of family life. Communists saw family as an institution shaped by changing economic relations; Catholics understood it as an immutable institution governed by divine law. Communists advocated women's economic equality to men, Catholics saw women as the cornerstone of family life, a role incompatible with their full participation

in economic and public life. Communists saw fertility as something that could be controlled, Catholics condemned any such effort.

And yet, the comparison proposed in this book shows not only differences, but also some important similarities.¹ Although for radically different reasons, both Communists and Catholics disliked capitalist competition, consumerism, and individualism. Both saw materialist culture as inherently dangerous and corrupting; both held a totalising view of the world, in which only one true interpretation of reality could exist. Even the positions held on family life were not as at odds with each other as the skirmishes of the post-war years could suggest. To start with, both Catholics and Communists assumed that individual decisions should be subordinated to the good of a higher entity, and they both saw the family as an institution governed by principles formed outside of it. The socialist family should act according to socialist morality, the Christian family according to the teachings of the Church. In their competition for the soul of the nation, both Catholics and Communists saw mothers and children as central tools of intervention, and competed with the State to assert their influence over them.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, the western and eastern parts of the continent could reasonably appear destined to move in inexorably different directions. The fall of the Berlin wall, however, showed not only that Europe's East and West could find new political convergences but also that significant similarities existed at a social and cultural level.

In the case of Italy and Poland, even a cursory look at the regulation of family life, sexuality, and procreation reveals an enduring attachment to traditional norms and principles, which seems at odds with the transformations that have taken place in most other European countries. Both in Italy and in Poland, legal reforms in the fields of family law and reproduction (from equal marriage to medically assisted procreation) remain highly controversial even today and a highly *familistic* approach dominates.² This is not an accidental convergence, but rather the result of long-established cultural patterns and of a complex history of State-Church relations. One of the suggestions advanced in this book is that the dynamics that took place in the aftermath of the Second World War will help us to shed light on contemporary politics.

For all their differences, Communists and Catholics found a fundamental convergence in a paternalistic and patriarchal vision of so-

¹ On the risks and benefits of comparison in historical research, see Marc Bloch's classic work, Bloch, "Pour une histoire comparée", and for more recent considerations, Cafagna, "La comparazione e la storia contemporanea"; Kocka, Haupt, "Comparison and Beyond"; Rossi, *La storia comparata*; Salvati, "Storia contemporanea"; Sartori, "Comparing and Miscomparing"; Skocpol, Somers, "The Uses of Comparative History".

² See Bernini, "Saggio introduttivo", 5-21.

cial relations. If Catholics warned against the dangers of women's work, Communists treated them as the most flexible component of the workforce, to be included and excluded from production according to changing economic needs. While Catholics openly asserted women's essential maternal and domestic duties, Communists endorsed the principle of women's equality but without creating the instruments necessary to their actual emancipation from domestic and care work. While radically different in institutional and political terms, Poland and Italy shared an unshakable reliance on families and on women's unpaid work as the only social institutions able to provide individual care and collective welfare. Catholic and communist paternalism converged in ensuring that traditional structures of gender power would be maintained through the upheavals of the Cold War. The long-term consequences of this can be seen until today.

3 Overcoming the Public/Private Split: Politics, Kinship, Religion

Since the nineteenth century, the conceptual split between kinship and politics has represented one of the central tenets of Western self-understanding and a defining trait of modern liberal thinking. It is a divide imprinted in public discourse and political practice, as well as in much scholarly work.³ Similarly pervasive has been the idea that in *modern* societies, religion should be largely insignificant to political dynamics and best relegated to the private sphere. As Casanova observed, the "modern *privatisation* of religion" represented not only a descriptive account of "institutional differentiation", but a prescriptive notion establishing "the proper space for religion in social life".⁴

In modern societies, both kinship and religion were assigned to the sphere of the domestic: a realm supposedly alien to politics and power, and constructed as a quintessentially female domain.⁵ The idea that family and kinship should be less and less relevant to the working of 'modern' societies has been supported through time by influential sociological narratives describing neat paths of transformation from the complex kinship structures of the past to the nuclear family

³ Relegated to either the past or to non-Western societies, kinship became a way of contrasting divergent paths of development, and has been often seen as a hindrance to economic and bureaucratic modernisation. Bouquet, *Reclaiming English Kinship*; Bamford, Leach, *Kinship and Beyond*.

⁴ Casanova, *Public Religions*, 64; on the role played by the Catholic Church in the third wave of democratisation, Philpott, "The Catholic Wave", 102-16; Stepan, "Religion, Democracy, and the 'Twin Tolerations'", 37-57.

⁵ McKinnock, *Toward a Feminist Theory*.

of the present.⁶ According to this model, home is where the individual is supposedly free to express her/his own preferences in terms of sexuality, emotions, and faith, unhindered by the influence or control of politics. What home stands for is here much broader than “the physical space of the household”, encompassing “the sphere of love, expression, intimacy, subjectivity [*sic*], sentimentality, emotions, irrationality, morality, [and] spirituality”.⁷

Only recently have historians started to rethink long-held assumptions concerning both the declining relevance of kinship in modern European societies (largely thanks to the influence of anthropological work), and the supposed irrelevance of religion to the working of contemporary politics.⁸

This book carries forward the reassessment of the role and meaning of both kinship and religion in postwar Europe. It shows that far from representing a safe haven from aggressive Cold War politics, families were right at the centre of its ideological and economic struggles, while religion exerted a crucial political and social influence, contributing to form individuals’ political understandings and influencing public policies and interventions.

More than any other postwar phenomena, the ‘marriage boom’ symbolised the desire to return to a normality of sort, recovering individual projects frustrated by the war. More than any other activity, getting married and having children signified the attempt to bring back some kind of order after the upheaval of the conflict. It was an investment in the future that was not missed by contemporary observers. Families became a privileged topic for political discussions, sociological investigations, and economic debates.

The idea that creating viable postwar societies required the reconstitution of a strong domestic sphere cut across the East-West divide.⁹ In Eastern Europe as in the West, politicians used families to advertise social transformations and visions of the future, moralists and commentators to examine social reality, priests and bishops to defend the prerogatives and powers of the Church against the men-

⁶ On the impact of industrialisation on family patterns, Goode, *World Revolution*.

⁷ Casanova, *Public Religions*, 64. For a reflection on the meaning of home in the Polish context, Shallcross, “Home Truths”, 1-11.

⁸ The work of Goody remains here an important point of reference, Goody, *Death, Property and the Ancestors*; *Comparative Studies in Kinship*; and *The East in the West*. See also Verdery, *The Vanishing Hectare*.

⁹ In recent years, historians have given growing attention to the material and symbolic value of the domestic. While a number of historians have engaged with the notion of home and the domestic, however, family life has remained at the periphery of most of these examinations. Yet, if it is true that after 1945 the domestic attracted a remarkable amount of public attention, this was largely because of the concerns attached to the future of the family, On the importance of the domestic to the postwar imagery, see Betts, Crowley, “Introduction”, 213-36.

aces of modernity and the intrusion of the State. In Western Europe, the conviction that a “stable family was the best defence against the profound psychological and social dislocation” brought about by the war informed the approach to social intervention pursued by Conservatives, Christian and Social Democrats alike.¹⁰ While the governing parties of Western Europe made reference to family life to advertise stability and gradual economic transformation, the communist parties of the East used the family to advertise a socialist modernisation that invested the domestic sphere directly and dramatically. For the communist parties of the West, excluded from government by the logic of the Cold War, showing that they too had something to say about families served to affirm their political and national legitimacy.

On both sides of the iron curtain, politicians and religious representatives addressed and made reference to families and their (supposed) needs to promote alternative programmes of transformation and to assert their credentials as pursuers of the common good. Moreover, in both halves of the continent, politicians and social reformers understood that families had to get on board for any type of social and political change to take place. For this reason, in the East as in the West, families became a central terrain of ideological competition.

Moving from the premise that no singular notion of family ever existed, nor any homogeneous experience of family life, this book explores the different and often conflicting agendas that motivated interventions in family life, as well as the way in which such interventions were received, appropriated and resisted.

4 Crossing the Iron Curtain

The decision to bring together a communist country located in central-eastern Europe and a Christian Democratic one from the continent’s southern shore may seem surprising.¹¹ If a sensible comparison should rest on “differing and, at the same time, related realities”, as Marc Bloc posited,¹² then in the case of Italy and Poland the former seem to prevail over the latter.

Italy as an aggressor country and Poland as the victim *par excellence* had different experiences of war and occupation, and followed

¹⁰ Betts and Crowley, “Introduction”, 230.

¹¹ For an analysis of western Europe, Skinner, *Families and States*. The main exception to this trend is the growing field of refugee studies, in which the analysis of humanitarian intervention has successfully crossed the East-West divide, best exemplified by Zahra, *The Lost Children*.

¹² Bloch, *The Historian’s Craft*, 35.

different political and economic trajectories once the war was over. If Italy was the first fascist country, Poland could be proud of having refused any official collaboration with the Nazi occupier; if the military performance of Poland could be popularised in terms of tragic (if sometimes ill-advised) heroism, Italy's war record was much harder to narrate in commendatory terms. Not only is the list of wartime differences long, but the destiny of the two countries continued to diverge in the aftermath of the conflict, when Italy and Poland found themselves on the opposite sides of the iron curtain. Understandably, the different trajectories followed by the two countries since the end of the Second World War relegated them to neatly distinct fields of scholarship. Poland's postwar history has been treated as a variant of the 'communist experience', while Italy has found some space mostly in narratives of Western Europe.

For all the differences that characterised the newborn Italian republic and the People's Republic of Poland (PRL, Polska Rzeczpospolita Ludowa), however, some significant connections existed and are worth exploring.

The Second World War constituted a turning point in political, social, and cultural terms. In aggressor and victim countries alike, the war left not only a trail of unprecedented material devastation, but also a moral anguish that could be traced at individual and family level, as well as at the level of the national community. Recreating viable societies required a process of reconstruction that encompassed all levels of social and political life.

Both in Italy and in Poland, the end of the war resulted in the creation of new political institutions, and in the birth of two republican states, governed by newly introduced constitutions. While very different in nature, both the People's Republic of Poland and the Republic of Italy promised a radical break with pre-war institutions and, in the case of Italy, with 'fascist' responsibilities.

The narratives that accompanied the creation of the new postwar republics shared an insistence on national victimhood, resistance, and rebirth that obscured the most uncomfortable aspects of the war (starting with Polish and Italian responsibilities for the Holocaust of Polish and Italian Jews).¹³ In the Christian Democratic Republic of Italy as in the People's Republic of Poland, the postwar settlements sought their legitimacy in the anti-fascist struggle, although what counted as anti-fascist differed to some extent in the two countries, as we will see. In both countries, the constitutions adopted in

13 On Polish and Italian memory discourse and delayed confrontation with national responsibilities in the Holocaust, Madajczyk, "Experience and Memory"; Fogu, "Italiani Brava Gente", 147-76; Meng, *Shattered Spaces*, 212-22; Lagrou, "Victims of Genocide and National Memory", 181-222.

the aftermath of the war represented not only a catalogue of the new rules that were going to govern the postwar states, but the foundational act of new political communities.¹⁴ While the nature of those communities would rapidly evolve in very different directions, some common themes could be detected throughout the postwar years.

The search for political legitimacy, for instance, represented a major feature of both Polish and Italian politics. In Italy's *blocked* democracy, the Cold War order guaranteed the continuous power of the Christian Democratic party, but it also institutionalised a culture of reciprocal suspicion and delegitimisation, which would remain a long-term feature of the Italian political system. In Poland, the control exercised by the Soviet Union could guarantee that Polish communists remained in power, but could do little to foster their legitimacy within the country.¹⁵

Most crucially for this book, both in Italy and in Poland the postwar years were marked by a mammoth confrontation between catholic and communist projects of social transformation. It was a confrontation between two movements, "each aspiring to enlist all mankind, each with comprehensive but reciprocally contradictory convictions about the nature of the universe and man, and each supported by a far-reaching organisation".¹⁶ The contest between Communists and Catholics pervaded all aspects of social and political life and found in the family a major terrain of engagement.

Somehow surprisingly, even the most recent and attentive historiography of postwar Poland has tended to relegate the catholic question to a rather marginal position, as if of little relevance to the transformations pursued by the communist governments.¹⁷ This is possibly a reverberation of the enduring tendency to look at Eastern Europe as a more or less homogeneous space, shaped by the near-omnipotent power of the party-state. As John Connolly noted, however, "separate national traditions continued through the Stalinist period" in much of central-eastern Europe, "creating different contexts for politics and for social experience".¹⁸

¹⁴ On the meaning of constitutions, see among others Pombeni, *La costituente*; Elgie, Zielonka, "Constitutions and Constitution-Building", 25-46.

¹⁵ The notion of *cultural memory*, best conceptualised by Jan and Aleida Assmann in the field of literary and cultural studies, gives us a key to the understanding of the postwar moment and its representative canons, see Assmann, "Collective Memory" and *Cultural Memory*.

¹⁶ Latourette, *Christianity in a Revolutionary Age*, 41. On the place of Italy and Poland in the Catholic Church's postwar's international strategy, Chamedes, *A Twentieth-century Crusade*, 241-70.

¹⁷ See Fidelis, *Women, Communism, and Industrialisation*; Lebow, *Unfinished Utopia*.

¹⁸ Connolly, *Captive University*, 2. Sabina Mihelj has described the lack of "literature addressing the symbolic mappings of Europe after WWII" as the result of an enduring

The pervasiveness of Catholicism, together with the historical memory of the Russian occupation, constituted the factor that set Poland most apart from other countries in the eastern bloc. Putting an end to the religious pluralism that had characterised much Polish history, the Second World War left the Catholic Church as the only religious institution able to assert voice vis-à-vis the State. It was a strong voice, which found in family affairs an important terrain on which to confront an unwelcome and hostile political power.¹⁹ The Church occupied a much more comfortable position in Italy, where its interests and instances found direct representation in the Christian Democratic party, and a less than hostile reception by a usually accommodating PCI.

Both in Italy and in Poland, the power exercised by Catholicism went well beyond the political and institutional sphere; an even greater influence was exercised over culture and society, informing daily practices, language, and rituals. It was a diffused power that permeated the political and domestic cultures of both countries and from which not even communists were immune.

If we take a look at Italian and Polish Communists, they seem to occupy opposite positions. In Italy, war and occupation had transformed a small revolutionary party in a mass political organisation, whose prestige had been greatly enhanced by the leadership exercised in the resistance movement. The Cold War, however, excluded the PCI from national government. Polish Communists, by contrast, enjoyed a near monopoly of power. Unlike their Italian counterparts, however, they could count on little spontaneous support and scant popularity.

Despite the reversed circumstances in which they operated, both Italian and Polish communists confronted similar challenges vis-à-vis the family, starting with the overwhelming influence exercised on family matters by the Catholic Church.

The comparative dimension of the book is discussed at greater length in chapters 1 and 2. Chapter 1 traces the main lines of the postwar settlements in Italy and Poland, giving particular attention to the position occupied by Communists and Catholics in the two countries. Chapter 2 focuses on the ideological struggles engaging Communists and the Catholic Church and discusses some of the main theoretical and ideological tenets that accompanied postwar debates over issues such as marriage reform, divorce and the changing role of women.

tendency to assume that, during the Cold War ideology, international politics and class trumped culture and nationality. See Mihelj, "Drawing the East-West Border", 277.

¹⁹ See among others Flores and Gallerano, *Sul PCI*, Gozzini, "Italian Communism".

5 Legal Reforms and Social Transformations

This book looks at the family as a social and cultural construct that needs to be understood at the crossroad of political, legal, social, and affective realms. Both in Italy and in Poland, different authorities sought to establish their jurisdiction over family life, setting alternative agendas for transformation and putting forward competing sets of values and world views.

State institutions, political parties, and religious authorities looked at the family as a major terrain of intervention and tried to regulate (and in some cases control) family life and private relations according to different blueprints of social transformation. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 explore the main legal reforms pursued in the postwar years in the field of family legislation, discussing them in relation to different parties' ideological tenets, as well as in relation to the different political and social situations that characterised postwar Italy and Poland. Chapter 3 concentrates on the immediate postwar years, discussing the place occupied by the family in the new constitutions adopted in Italy and Poland in the aftermath of the Second World War and the debates that accompanied the new constitutional settlements. Chapter 4 expands the examination into the sixties and the seventies. This shows the impact that shifts in political power had on the treatment of the family, as well as the importance that the confrontation over the family had over changing political equilibria. While the immediate postwar years were marked in Poland by an open conflict between State and Church, reflected in the introduction of significant reforms in the field of marriage and family life, the same years were characterised in Italy by the overwhelming influence exercised by the Catholic Church over the treatment of marriage and family, an influence already reflected in the Republican Constitution approved in 1947. The sixties and seventies, however, saw the emergence of an opposite tendency in the two countries. While in Poland an increasingly discredited leadership reluctantly sought a compromise with the Catholic Church, in Italy the strong pressure exercised by the new social movements forced reluctant political parties (starting with the PCI) to take over an agenda for social reform that had one of the main fields of intervention in the family. In the seventies, this resulted in a series of reforms of family law, starting with the introduction of divorce in 1970, 25 years later than in Poland. The question of divorce is discussed at length in Chapter 5.

While having lost much of the radical ideas of the twenties in relation to family and gender relations, postwar communists advocated, and when possible engineered, social and legal changes that could still be read as progressive. In the Polish case, the introduction of universal secular marriage in 1945 brought with it the possibility of di-

voiced and affirmed the legal equality of the spouses.²⁰ This opened the first dramatic conflict with the Catholic Church, and with Pius XII, strenuously and vociferously opposed to any intervention aiming to modify the institution of marriage or the gender roles upon which it was supposed to rest.

From an external, secular position, the introduction of universal State marriage and the affirmation of women and men's equality may only appear as a decisive moment of modernisation of family life. That this should take place in the same years that marked Poland's descent into tyranny could seem a paradox. Similarly paradoxical could appear the Italian case, where the transformation of the country from a fascist monarchy into an anti-fascist republic, founded on the ideals of the Resistance, brought no consequences for the regulation of marriage and the family, which until the seventies continued to be regulated by fascist laws.

In this sense, comparing the processes taking place in Italy and Poland and the different political circumstances that shaped them questions the extent to which broad processes of political democratisation and the democratisation of family life proceed hand in hand. The question, to which I will return throughout the book, becomes particularly poignant when we look at gender.

Gender dynamics represent a crucial dimension in the structuring and restructuring of societies, essential to the understanding of social practices and power relations, both within and outside the domestic sphere.²¹ In the aftermath of the Second World War, gender relations represented one of the main fields in which alternative visions of family life, economy, and social relations clashed and found accommodation.

Without denying or ignoring the specificities of the Eastern European context, the Italian-Polish comparison encourages a rethinking of gender dynamics in relation to both Communism and the Catholic Church. The pervasiveness of popular Catholicism and the Marian cult, influenced both the Polish and the Italian understanding of family and gender roles, particularly by promoting a model of maternity based on notions of sacrifice that proved lasting despite the different political and social contexts.²²

Both in Italy and in Poland, moreover, gender relations stood at the core of the complicated transactions and tentative accommoda-

²⁰ According to Małgorzata Fidelis, "Eastern European stalinism was a force that brought radical social change rather than a conservative backlash", in contrast with the Soviet Union, where Stalinist reform could be read as a reaction "against the socially progressive legislation of the first years of Leninism" (*Women, Communism, and Industrialisation*, 9).

²¹ Among others, Frader, "Introduction", 3.

²² Blom, "Gendered Nations in International Comparison"; Banti, *Sublime Madre Nostra*; Bernini, "Patrie, popoli, corpi".

tions that accompanied the social and economic transformations of the postwar era. Although with different intensity, both in Italy and in Poland, postwar women found novel opportunities and roles, but had also to confront enduring gender norms that left upon them the overwhelming responsibility over domestic matters. Even in Poland, where the state put forward aggressive policies aimed to include women in the industrial workforce, services remained marginal, leaving the unpaid work of care almost exclusively on women's shoulders. Earlier than in the West, Polish women experienced the 'double burden' resulting from the combination of new paid work and undiminished domestic roles.²³ What in Eastern Europe appeared as a specific feature of state socialism, was described by the Italian feminist sociologist Laura Balbo as a characteristic feature of a capitalist transformation in which the (late) inclusion of women in the labour market had not been accompanied by a transformation of their role within the family. Defective social policies and an entrenched patriarchal culture left women in the difficult position of having to mediate between production and reproduction, carrying a double burden that would become a characterising feature of their lives.²⁴

6 Conclusions

This book examines the relationship between family and postwar politics by bringing together the analysis of broad political and social transformations, ideological confrontations, and the experience of ordinary families. To this end, the sources used combine official documents, media reporting, and autobiographical narratives of transformation. The outcome confirms at once the importance of the family as a place of political and ideological contest, and the great flexibility of an institution able to bend and adapt to very different circumstances. By looking at families both as ideological constructs and as lived experiences, I aim to question any uniform notion of 'family', pointing out the many tensions, and the great distance that usually separated normative expectation and even expert discourse from the experience of ordinary people.

A focus on the family also helps us to question assumed national or regional specificities. While real socialism certainly left a significant mark on Eastern European societies, it was not the only force

²³ Fidelis among others has sought "to redefine the notion of the double burden of work inside and outside the household as a social phenomenon specific to women's experiences under communism", which "helped perpetuate a subordinate role of women". (*Women, Communism, and Industrialisation*, 12).

²⁴ Balbo, *Stato di famiglia*.

at work, nor the only one that should be taken into account. Long-term influences, starting with Catholicism, were as important in shaping attitudes and values. Moreover, while specific in the power that it was able to assert, Eastern European Communism cannot be completely separated from the Western variant. Although operating in different contexts, and having at their disposal very different possibilities and powers, Western and Eastern communists had to confront some similar issues in terms of their social and cultural influence. How to approach family life and gender relations represented a major question across the iron curtain.

Examining the relationship between family and State across the East-West divide allows rethinking long-lasting assumptions concerning the two halves of the continent. For a long time, the role of the party-state in postwar Eastern Europe has been presented in one dimensional narratives of oppression, incomparable with the role played by Western institutions. A focus on the family, however, reveals a more nuanced situation. The Polish case highlights the importance of the family for a regime determined to modernise the country through forced processes of industrialisation, as well as the response of ordinary citizens to socialist politics. To families, Communists promised the elimination of want, the provision of state interventions able to answer the needs of each citizen, and the creation of a modern and rational society, far removed from the backwardness of the past. To women, the State promised the elimination of their economic dependency and the full recognition of their equality to men. Against this proclaimed agenda, however, very traditional notions of sexual differences and family life persisted.

Both in Italy and in Poland, the battle over the family had social, political, and ideological dimensions. In both countries, Communists and Catholics were the main contenders over family life, its nature and its regulation. In both countries, women and children attracted the greatest attention. For both Communists and Catholics, asserting their influence on the carriers of the nation was more than a symbolic matter. It was a competition for hegemony that found in the family a privileged terrain of confrontation.

