Women as bystanders in Nazi Germany and beyond  
Female writings and narrations of society in European fascisms (1920s-1940s)

What did “ordinary women” think about National Socialism and European fascisms? How did they experience the societal changes in the interwar period, and in which spheres? How did they observe, describe and interpret such changes in their personal diaries, letters, notes, postcards and drawings, stored in many European archives and museums? What is the meaning of their reflections and comments in analyzing and problematizing historiographically the issue of consent and the relation between fascisms and the national communities they addressed? Taking such questions into account, this project aims to critically study the voices and the agency (and non-agency) of ordinary women in fascist societies between the 1920s and the 1940s, thus extending the multifaceted and variously interpreted concept of “bystanding” beyond its original place, the Holocaust Studies.

The central case study will be Nazi Germany. The attention will be focused on the written materials produced by women who were neither eminent nor well-known, neither deeply involved with the Nazi hierarchies, nor persecuted as Jews, members of minorities or political opponents; and who not only carried out their traditional roles on the basis of what has been called the “three Ks” (Kinder, Küche, Kirche), but also studied and worked, thus themselves somehow contributing to life under the regime and often backing it, more or less openly and more or less uncritically. Through their reflections and reactions, it will be possible to observe the way in which Nazism acted within, and likewise affected, German society. On account of the very nature of female writing, in which often the subjectivity, the narration of the self and the political-social sphere are inextricably intertwined, these topics have been so far identified in the macro categories of work, welfare, family, politicization of daily life and exclusion. However, if the female writings about Nazi society will be privileged, the examples of other European experiences will be analyzed, too, always through the same lens. Among these countries, which can be analytically juxtaposed to Germany as they initiated political projects that can be summarized under the wide umbrella of fascisms, although with autochthonous forms and different timings, are Italy, which appears as a second fundamental case study, together with Austria, Spain and Portugal. The archival research will allow to verify the heuristic validity of a systematic comparison between these countries on the explored topic.

Methodologically, the project takes an Alltagsgeschichte approach to social history, the gender studies, the Volksgemeinschaft studies and a transnational attention to the history of fascisms as points of departure.

Proceeding from the many grassroot testimonies written or recorded in the past decades, a separate part of the project will also be dedicated to the issue of a gendered memory of fascisms by ordinary women in a European perspective. This way, the research will not only include the coeval reactions to interwar totalitarian societies, but also the (manifold) way(s) in which they have been interpreted retrospectively in female sensibilities and worldviews.