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# Empowered Yet Constrained: Women's Role and Agency in the Greek Resistance Movement (1941-1944)

## Empoderadas pero Limitadas: El Papel y la Agencia de las Mujeres Griegas en el Movimiento de Resistencia (1941-1944)

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**Abstract**: During World War II (1941-1944) and the triple occupation of Greece, Greek women entered the public sphere on an unprecedented scale despite their lack of political rights. Most joined or supported the National Liberation Front (EAM), which combined the struggle for national liberation with a vision of greater equality. Initially, women expanded their traditional roles into public advocacy, leading mass demonstrations and providing crucial support to the Greek People's Liberation Army (ELAS). In rural areas, their work was vital to the Free Greece, where they gained voting rights and held local leadership positions. Organizations such as National Solidarity and the Free Young Women mobilized them to play supporting roles. However, the harsh conditions of the occupation, together with patriarchal ideologies, limited their role in resistance organizations, whereas collaborators treated them with extreme cruelty. After the country's liberation in 1944, the defeat of the EAM/ELAS in Athens unleashed the White Terror, which targeted women who had led or fought in the resistance. Those who refused to renounce their activism faced torture, exile or execution. Social recovery was further interrupted by the dictatorship period (1967-1974). Only after 1974, in the Third Greek Republic, could partisan women share their stories and preserve their legacy for future generations.

**Keywords**: Women, World War II, Greek Resistance.

**Resumen:** Durante la Segunda Guerra Mundial (1941–1944) y la triple ocupación de Grecia, las mujeres ingresaron en la esfera pública de una manera sin precedentes, a pesar de carecer de derechos políticos. La mayoría se unió o apoyó al Frente de Liberación Nacional (EAM), que combinaba la lucha por la liberación nacional con una visión de mayor igualdad. Inicialmente, las mujeres expandieron sus roles tradicionales hacia la defensa pública, liderando manifestaciones masivas y brindando apoyo crucial al Ejército Popular de Liberación de Grecia (ELAS). En las zonas rurales, el trabajo de las mujeres fue vital para la Grecia Libre, donde obtuvieron derechos de voto y ocuparon cargos de liderazgo local. Organizaciones como Solidaridad Nacional y la Joven Mujer Libre movilizaron a las mujeres para brindar apoyo. Sin embargo, las duras condiciones de la ocupación y las ideologías patriarcales limitaron su papel en las organizaciones de resistencia, mientras que los colaboradores les infligieron una crueldad extrema. Tras la liberación en 1944, la derrota del EAM/ELAS en Atenas desató el Terror Blanco, que se enfocó en mujeres que habían liderado o luchado en la resistencia. Aquellas que se negaron a renunciar a sus acciones enfrentaron tortura, exilio o ejecución. La recuperación social fue aún más interrumpida por la dictadura (1967–1974). Solo después de 1974, en la Tercera República Griega, las mujeres de la resistencia pudieron contar sus historias y preservar su legado para las generaciones futuras.

**Palabras clave**: Mujeres, Segunda Guerra Mundial, Resistencia griega.

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## Introduction

In times of crisis, such as armed conflict, women often find opportunities to expand or even transcend their traditional roles within society. Despite this potential for transformation, warfare continues to be predominantly framed as a male domain. The act of participating in battle is frequently viewed as a demonstration of masculinity and is regarded as a significant social contribution to the nation. In the aftermath of war, male soldiers are typically celebrated as heroes, receiving accolades and societal recognition for their sacrifices and valor.[1] This glorification of war and the associated heroism reinforcing the notion that bravery and martial prowess are inherently male traits. In stark contrast, traditional roles assigned to women are often linked to peace, caregiving, and advocacy. Women are typically expected to uphold the social fabric during times of conflict, focusing on nurturing and maintaining the home front. This dichotomy underscores the persistent gender norms that define societal expectations, where women's contributions are frequently marginalized or overlooked in the broader narrative of war.

This article does not aim to position women merely as an "added value" within existing historical narratives; rather, it aligns with Joan W. Scott's assertion that gender serves as a "useful category of historical analysis".[2] This perspective acknowledges the significance of gender not only as a social construct but also as a dynamic element that influences historical interpretation. Furthermore, the article recognizes the performative aspects of gender,[3] emphasizing that the understanding of women in the 1940s was shaped by distinct social constructions, institutional frameworks, everyday practices,

[1] Judith Hicks STIEHM: "The protected, the protector, the defender", *Women's Studies International Forum* 5:3/4 (1982), pp. 369-372.
[2] Joan W. SCOTT: "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *The American Historical Review* 91/5 (1986), pp. 1053–1075. See also Scott's revisit of the concept in "Gender: Still A Useful Category of Analysis?", *Diogenes* 57/1, (2010), pp. 7–14.
[3] See Judith BUTLER: *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York, Routledge, 1990.

and power relations that differentiated them from men. In this context, gender is conceptualized as a critical analytical category, functioning as a constitutive element of social relations that arise from perceived differences between the sexes. It serves as a primary lens through which power relations are articulated and understood. By examining gender as a foundational aspect of social dynamics, this article seeks to illuminate the ways in which power is negotiated and expressed within historical contexts, particularly during the tumultuous period of the 1940s.

The Second World War (1939-1945) represents a pivotal moment in the history of women's participation in warfare. During this period, women significantly contributed to combat efforts, particularly within the resistance movements across southeastern Europe, including Italy, France, Yugoslavia, and Greece. Additionally, women served in the armed forces of the United States, the United Kingdom, and notably the Soviet Union. Women's participation continued to be crucial in anti-colonial movements in countries such as China, Vietnam, Angola, and Algeria.[4] A prevailing observation is that women's engagement in warfare tends to increase in response to critical or dire circumstances.

During the critical decade of the 1940s in Greece, women played a significant role in all three major conflicts, despite lacking formal political rights. These conflicts included the Greek-Italian War (1940-1941), the subsequent triple occupation by Italy, Germany, and Bulgaria, which was accompanied by a remarkable resistance movement (1941-1944), and the Greek Civil War (1946-1949). In the initial conflict, women participated primarily through traditional roles, supporting the war effort from the home front. However, the resistance movement and the civil war represented total wars, where the distinctions between civilians and combatants became increasingly blurred.

Women were actively invited to join the ranks of the resistance, contributing to the efforts of the least powerful army during its most challenging political and military phases. Their involvement not only challenged the prevailing patriarchal norms of Greek society but also significantly altered the social status of women within that context. Despite their critical contributions, the actions of women during this tumultuous period were often silenced or underestimated, reflecting a broader tendency to overlook women's roles in historical narratives.

As a consequence of the Greek civil war, the documentation of women's experiences remains notably limited. The primary means of reconstructing their memories and contributions are the surviving resistance newspapers and women's memoirs. In the course of my research aimed at understanding the motivations that led these women to participate in the resistance and to amplify their voices, I collected nearly 100 life stories during the 1980s and 1990s. These narratives encompass women from both urban

[4] See Nicole A. DOMBROWSKI: *Women and War in the Twentieth Century: Enlisted with or without Consent*. Routledge, 2004.

Athens and rural areas, many of whom were members or leaders within political or military organizations. Some had endured the harsh realities of concentration camps, while others faced exile or imprisonment.[5] All had experienced various forms of violence. Throughout my research, I also engaged with the collectives these women established and participated in their commemorative events. The women of the resistance who managed to preserve some documents generously donated them to the Archives of Contemporary Social History (ASKI), which proved to be an invaluable resource, providing critical insights and information regarding their experiences and contributions.[6]

**Historical Background**

Greece entered the Second World War on 28 October 1940, under the dictatorial regime of Ioannis Metaxas: the slogan Homeland - Religion - Family and anti-communism were key elements of the regime's ideology: hundreds of citizens were sent into exile and some 50,000 were forced to sign repentance declarations, declaring that they were neither communists nor atheists who wanted to dismantle the family, the cell of the nation.[7] Although Ioannis Metaxas did not establish a formal political party, he concentrated his efforts on mobilizing the youth of Greece through the creation of the National Youth Organization (EON). EON operated directly under his leadership and marked a significant development in the political landscape of Greece, as it organized young people on a mass scale for the first time. By March 1940, EON boasted an impressive membership of 1,000,607 individuals, of whom 328,092 were girls. EON published the magazine *I Neolaia* [The Youth], which served as the official organ for the spiritual, religious, ethical, social, and political education of its members.[8] Notably, the magazine included dedicated sections for girls. One of the prominent contributors to *I Neolaia* was Sitsa Karaiskaki, who played a significant role in shaping the magazine's content. However, following the liberation of Greece in October 1944, Karaiskaki aligned herself with the German occupiers, leading to accusations of collaboration.

The standards set by the EON for Falangist women were modesty and adhering to Greek-Christian traditions.[9] But just as the Nazi ideal woman was not fragile, but

[5] See Tasoula VERVENIOTI: *The Woman of Resistance: Women's Entrance into Politics*, Athens, Koukkida, 2013 [1994]. [in Greek].
[6] See ASKI: https://wirerepository.latempesta.eu/greece/ and https://wirerepository.latempesta.eu/ [access 10/10/1024]
[7] Vassilis GOUNARIS: *Of known social beliefs. Social and other aspects of anti-communism in Macedonia during the Civil War (1945-1949)*, Thessaloniki, Paratiritis, 2002, p. 162. [in Greek]
[8] Dimitris KATSIKAS: "The Politics of Youth in the Metaxas Regime", *International Journal of Balkan Studies*, 15/2, (2009), pp. 145-162.
[9] *I Neolaia* [The Youth], Official Organization of Spiritual, Religious, Moral, Social and Political Education of the "National Youth Organization of Greece", 43 (1939), p. 1412 & 86 (1940), p. 1093.

strong, robust, athletic, ready and able to do any work the state needed, [10] the Greek version retained some of the elements of modernity (exercise and sport, the abolition of the corset and cleanliness, excursions and summer camps), while putting women in their traditional place: in the home, priestess of the family and, above all, mother.[11] The EON functioned as a laboratory of femininity, oscillating between tradition and modernity. The regime's main concern was to educate girls to become "real" Greek women, to be patriotic and aware in the performance of their duties as mothers, housewives and educators of their children. And with war fast approaching, young women were often reminded of their duty to stand by the fighting men and the fighting nation.[12]

During the Greek-Italian War (1940-1941), the Greek army achieved a notable victory against Mussolini's troops, marking a significant moment in the nation's military history. This conflict was characterized as a conventional war, and women participated primarily through traditional roles. Many served as Red Cross volunteers, providing medical assistance to wounded soldiers, while others, as housewives, knitted gloves and socks for the troops and sent letters to boost their morale. Women living near the front lines were also recruited to carry ammunition and food supplies on their backs, a task traditionally assigned to women in Greek peasant society. In this context, it was considered degrading for men to carry such loads. The army's recruitment of women for these logistical roles was necessitated by the challenging terrain of the Pindos mountains, where battles were fought. The limited availability of motorized vehicles, which struggled to navigate the rough paths, and the insufficient number of mules and donkeys made the contributions of these women essential. These courageous women became known as the "Heroines of Pindos" or the "Heroines of 1940". Their remarkable deeds, while not extensively documented in formal historiography, have been celebrated in popular iconography, reflecting their vital role in supporting the war effort.[13]

In the spring of 1941, the attack of Nazi Germany led to the triple occupation of Greece (German, Italian and Bulgarian) and the creation of a large resistance movement, both political and armed. As it was a total war, 760,000 of the 880,000 victims were civilians.[14] Moreover, it had no specific front; it was fought in the cities and in the mountains. The word "mountain" became synonymous with the armed resistance, with the *andartes* [guerrillas]. In the mountain villages, it was not just armed men in military

[10] Leila J. RUPP: "Mother of the 'volk': the image of women in Nazi ideology", *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 3:2 (1977), pp. 362-379.
[11] *I Neolaia* [The Youth], 1 (1938), pp. 17 & 95 (1940), p. 1400.
[12] Hara KOUKI: "The Role of Women in the Metaxas Regime: Gender and National Identity", *Feminist Review*, 89/1 (2008), pp. 45-62; Rosa VASILAKI: "Women and Femininity under the Metaxas Regime in Greece", *Fascism*, 11/2 (2022), pp. 237-259.
[13] Efthymia PAPASPYROY-KARADIMITRIOY: *The epic of the 40s. Folk iconography*, Athens, Historical and Ethnological Society of Greece, 1987, pp. 55, 63, 67, 69, 73, 75. [in Greek]; Vassilis PAPADOPOULOS: "The Role of Women in the Greek Resistance: A Historical Analysis", *Social History*, 34/3 (2009), pp. 345-362.
[14] Bank of Greece. *The First Fifty Years of the Bank of Greece 1928-1978*, Athens, NBG, 1978, p.212.

uniforms who took part; the whole population was involved, especially women, because the work they had traditionally done was urgently needed. The contribution of women was crucial, but the women of resistance, like the "Heroines of 1940", are not considered soldiers. The main argument for the latter is that they didn't carry weapons. But armed women did exist during the resistance. Women also played an important role in underground organizations.[15]

**The Fight for National Liberation**

Women in Greece, driven by their national feelings, had a significant presence in wars: in the Balkan wars (1912-1913) and in the First World War, during which the Greek state doubled its territory. The most important figure is Anna Mela Papadopoulou (1871-1938), known as the "Mother of the Soldier", who acted on all fronts until 1922; she was the sister of the hero Pavlos Melas, who died fighting for the liberation of Macedonia.[16] It is also worth mentioning that Avra Theodoropoulou (1880-1963), an important figure in the feminist movement, founded the "Soldiers' Sisters Association" in 1918 and the "League for Women's Rights" two years later. She was a pioneer in the struggle for the right to vote in the inter-war period and the League was in charge of fifty refugee camps, orphanages and vocational schools for women.[17]

During the Second World War, the victorious Greek-Italian war opened the way for resistance against the occupying forces and for national liberation. Women took actions that went beyond their traditional roles and created cracks in the ideology of patriarchy. The harsh conditions of the occupation also contributed to this. The destruction of property in the city, due to hunger and the black market, and in the countryside due to the clearance operations against *andartes*, as well as the insecurity and uncertainty about the future caused by the war had weakened the role of the family. The inability of men to protect "their" women weakened the control they exercised over them.[18] This was another reason for allowing women to act in the public sphere.

During the occupation of Greece, national liberation organizations emerged across the ideological spectrum, ranging from leftist groups to royalists. These organizations engaged in various forms of resistance, including sabotage and espionage, with some maintaining connections to the Allied headquarters in the Middle East. Many of

[15] See also, Hara KOUKI: "Women and the Greek Resistance: The Role of Women in the Anti-Fascist Struggle in Greece (1941-1944)", *Journal of Modern Greek Studies*, 23/1 (2005), pp. 1-25; Dimitris KOUTOUPIS: "Women in the Greek Resistance: A Study of Gender and Memory", *Feminist Review*, 89/1 (2008), pp. 45-62.
[16] Antonis T. STAVRIDIS: *Anna Mela Papadopoulou. Where people do not die*, Athens, Militos Publications, 2007. [in Greek]
[17] Aliki GIOTOPOULOU-MARAGKOPOULOU: "Avra Theodoropoulou as a person", *O Agonas tis Gynaikas* [The Woman's Struggle], 2 (1964), p. 24. [in Greek]
[18] Hara KOUKI: "Gender and War in Greece: The Impact of the Second World War on Women's Roles", *Gender & History*, 20/3 (2008), pp. 345-362.

these groups were particularly active in Athens, the capital, where women played significant roles in their operations. One notable figure was Ioulia Biba, a member of the Pan-Hellenic Union of Fighting Youths (PEAN). On 20 September 1942, Biba and her comrades executed a daring act of sabotage by blowing up the offices of the Greek Nazi organization ESPO (National Socialist Patriotic Organization) in central Athens. Tragically, Biba met a grim fate; after being sentenced to death twice in Greece, she was ultimately deported to Germany, where she was beheaded with an axe.[19] In contrast, Artemis Petrandi, the director of the women's prison, provided critical assistance to detainees involved in the resistance. Her efforts to support these individuals led to her secret escape to the Middle East with her young daughter, highlighting the diverse ways women contributed to the resistance movement during this tumultuous period.[20]

One of the most prominent figures was Lela Karagianni, a mother of seven children. She gave her network the name of a heroine of the Greek War of Independence of 1821: Bouboulina. The imagery of the revolutionary women of 1821 was exploited and by the Communist Party; on the one hand, to emphasize the Greek national heroic tradition and, on the other, to signal female agency; to link the emancipation of women in the resistance movement and, in particular, in the combat units.[21] Karagianni was arrested by the Special Security and executed a month before the liberation.[22]

The important but often isolated figures in the Greek resistance movement were primarily urban women, typically from Athens, who were wealthy and educated. While acknowledging the heroism of these individual women and their significant contributions to the resistance, this article will focus on the unprecedented mass mobilization of women, both in urban centers and rural areas, particularly through their involvement in the ranks of the National Liberation Front (EAM). This mass action represented a transformative moment in the perception of women's roles in society and highlighted their agency in the struggle for national liberation.

In recent years, historiography has acknowledged the diversity of human experience and highlighted the complexity of their identities. According to the concept of *intersectionality*, social mechanisms of oppression and discrimination create different experiences for each person, depending on their gender, social class, religion, age, place of origin, place of residence, and so on.[23] Recognizing the different identities of women in Athens and those in the countryside, as well as the different perceptions of the

[19] Evanthis HATZIVASILEIOU: *PEAN (1941-1945). Panhellenic Union of Fighting Youths,* Athens, Association for the Dissemination of Useful Books, 2004. [in Greek]
[20] Kiki GIOTSA-PETRANDI: Interview 15 Οκτωβρίου 1987.
[21] Margaret POULOS: *Arms and the Woman: Just Warriors and Greek Feminist Identity*. New York, Columbia University Press, 2009.
[22] Efrosini KAFETZI: *The Role and Contribution of Women in Greece in the Turbulent 1940s*, unpublished master's thesis, University of Peloponnese, 2023, pp. 20-22. [in Greek]
[23] Nira YUVAL-DAVIS: "Intersectionality and Feminist Politics", *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 13/3 (2006), pp. 193-209.

occupation by young and old, educated and illiterate, rich and poor, etc., we will try to outline the actions of the women of EAM who believed that they could change society and their position in it by fighting for national liberation and social reform.

**The Fight for Social Reform**

In the 1940s, Greece had a population of approximately seven million, with two-thirds of this population comprised of poor peasants residing in villages and cultivating the land using primitive agricultural methods. In stark contrast, Athens emerged as a bustling city characterized by factories and public transport, highlighting a significant cultural and economic divide between urban and rural populations. The economic policies implemented by the occupying forces—marked by confiscations, requisitions, and the seizure of all productive resources—further exacerbated the impoverishment of the entire country. During the winter of 1941-1942, Athens was not the only city grappling with famine; widespread starvation affected many regions, leading to tragic scenes where individuals succumbed to hunger in the streets, often buried in mass graves.[24] For numerous women, this struggle for survival became the impetus for their involvement in resistance activities, as they sought to protect their families and communities from the devastating effects of occupation.

The harsh conditions of the occupation, the suffering endured under the Metaxas dictatorship, and the victorious war against fascist Italy fostered a widespread belief that "something" had to change in Greek society. This sentiment created an expectation among the populace that, following the end of the war and the defeat of fascism, the foundations for a more just and equitable society should be established. Consequently, the scope of resistance and the demand for social change expanded to encompass large segments of the population. As Eric Hobsbawm noted, during the anti-fascist struggle in Europe, the left successfully appropriated the flag of national identity from the right, reshaping the narrative around national liberation to include broader social justice themes.[25]

The largest resistance organization that most women joined or supported was EAM: a coalition of small parties in which the Communist Party of Greece (KKE) had the leading voice. The EAM/KKE set the goal of national liberation and at the same time Laocracy [People's Democracy]; a better society in which women would have an equal place. The vision of *Laocracy* was an essential reason for women to join EAM's ranks. The Greek People's Liberation Army (ELAS) was the armed branch of the EAM. In the mountainous and semi-mountainous areas, it created Free Greece: a liberated territory where women were given the right to vote; several were elected to local

[24] Konstantinos TSOUKALAS: "The Greek Economy during the Occupation: A Historical Perspective", *Journal of Economic History*, 38/2 (2005), pp. 123-145.
[25] Eric J. HOBSBAWM, op. cit., pp. 203-207.

government committees and people's courts. In 1944, even in occupied Greece, women were given the opportunity to vote in the election of the National Council, which resulted in the Political Committee for National Liberation or the "Government of the Mountain".[26]

Another significant resistance organization associated with the EAM/KKE was the National Solidarity (EA), founded in May 1941. This organization was predominantly composed of women, with approximately one million members, making it a crucial entity in the resistance movement. The EA undertook various responsibilities typically managed by modern state ministries, including health care, education, welfare, and cultural initiatives. Its activities encompassed providing health services, establishing schools, feeding the needy, and caring for the homeless and victims of fires, thereby addressing the urgent social needs created by the occupation.

The United Pan-Hellenic Youth Organization (EPON) was founded in February 1943 and quickly grew to an estimated membership of 800,000, with approximately half of its members being girls. EPON played a significant role in supporting the National Solidarity, particularly in areas such as hospital care, the establishment of kindergartens, and cultural initiatives. During this period a vibrant cultural movement emerged, marked by notable achievements such as the creation of *andartes* songs and the establishment of the "Theatre of the Mountain". EPON's slogan, "We fight and we sing", encapsulated the spirit of resistance and cultural expression.

Since the spring of 1943, the EAM resistance movement and the participation of women in it began to develop rapidly; the victories of the Allied forces on the war fronts diversified the objectives of the resistance organizations, the tactics they used and the way they were treated by the occupying forces. In March 1943, the *andartes* liberated the city of Karditsa (said to be the first liberated city in Europe) and the territory of Free Greece began to grow rapidly. The EAM encouraged and accepted the mass participation of rural women in its ranks to support the armed resistance. At the same time, large demonstrations were organized in Athens in which women played a militant role. Because of the increased problems caused by the occupation, women from the lower-class districts, especially the refugee neighborhoods, took active part. The vision of *Laocracy* also attracted young girls: from university students to domestic servants.

The autumn of 1943 was also a turning point. The Italian armistice provided ELAS with weapons and the number of *andartes* increased. On the other hand, the collaborationist government created the Security Battalions, made up of Greeks armed by the Germans. Women's hatred was directed more against the Security Battalions and

[26] Tasoula VERVENIOTI: "The Adventure of Women's Suffrage in Greece" in Claire DUCHEN & Irene BANDHAUER-SCHOFFMANN (eds), *When the War was Over. Women, War and Peace in Europe, 1940-1956*. London and New York, Leicester University Press, 2000, pp. 103-118.

other armed groups, namely the Greek "traitors", than against the occupiers. According to Claudio Pavone's seminal account, the resistance is, in its essence, a civil war.[27]

In 1944, terrorism intensified: blockades, arrests, mass executions, burning of houses and villages. Then, in the bloodiest phase of the occupation, there was the largest and most dynamic emergence of rural women: The EAM adopted exclusively female mobilizations and demonstrations as a means of struggle. Subsequently, women's platoons were created in the ELAS. The *andartisses* [female guerrillas] were between 17 and 23 years old; they were members of EPON from the surrounding villages.

The mass participation of rural women in the resistance movement significantly challenged one of the fundamental axioms of village society: the perceived superiority of men over women and the dominance of the older generation over the young. Young people, benefiting from compulsory education and better educated than their parents, played a pivotal role in shaping the tone of the resistance. The involvement of women, both in urban centers like Athens and in rural areas, diversified the social landscape and contributed to a reconfiguration of traditional gender roles. Their collective actions and demands sought to overturn many entrenched societal norms, as they made dynamic and unified calls for improvements in their lives. In the context of Free Greece, the vision of *Laocracy* appeared increasingly attainable. The Women's Committee of the EAM in Western Macedonia articulated this sentiment in its newspaper, *Synagonistria* [Female Comrade], in March 1944, stating, "We are on the eve of the happiness of a free world".[28] This declaration encapsulated the hope and determination of women involved in the resistance, as they envisioned a future marked by equality and social justice.

**Transforming Agency from the Private Sphere to the Public Realm**

> Well, in the general explosion that took place at that time, the explosion of women was much stronger. If, let's say, Greece's explosion was ten megatons, the women's explosion was a hundred megatons. Such a thing! Such a reversal; complete! Inconceivable to the mind of today's people what a great change has happened.[29]

Women who participated in the resistance movement were not all members of the political or armed organizations of EAM. The boundaries between organized and unorganized were not clear. A woman did not need to be a member to contribute to the National Solidarity's fundraising, to participate in a protest for children's milk, to hide an

[27] Claudio PAVONE: *A Civil War. A History of the Italian Resistance* (Trans: Peter Levy with the assistance of David Broder; introduced by Stanislao G. Pugliese). London, New York, Verso, 2013.
[28] *Synagonistria* [Female Comrade], Organ of the Women's Committee of the EAM of Western Macedonia, 2 (1944), p. 2. [in Greek]
[29] Maria KARAGIORGI: Interview 24.10.1988.

outlaw or to wash the *andartes*' clothes. In Free Greece, the mother of an ELAS *andartis* would offer to secretly take the weapons out of the village so that her son would not be in danger. She would also take care of the *andartes* who came to her village. This type of action mainly concerns mothers, but also sisters or wives. In this kind of action, there is a passage from the private to the public: from supporting their family members to also supporting the "other" fighters.

Women's participation in the resistance movement stemmed from deeply rooted social and personal sentiments rather than a mere acceptance of ideological frameworks derived from theoretical texts. Emotional connections to loved ones—such as the persecution of a son, father, or brother, or affection for a communist—played a crucial role in motivating their involvement. Additionally, emotions that might traditionally be considered conservative often led women to embrace new and radical paths. The national sentiment instilled in them from a young age compelled women to fight for their country and adopt anti-fascist stances. Their Christian values, coupled with a profound sense of compassion for their neighbors and a philanthropic desire to alleviate the suffering of others, not only drove them to join resistance organizations but also facilitated their acceptance of the communist ideology aimed at creating a more equitable society, encapsulated in the vision of *Laocracy*. This complex interplay of personal, emotional, and ideological factors highlights the multifaceted nature of women's engagement in the resistance movement.

The transition from the private to the public sphere—acting outside the family framework for the common good—was often a natural progression for women, particularly in rural villages where agricultural work was a communal effort. In conditions of extreme poverty, especially in the mountainous villages that constituted the core of Free Greece, as well as in impoverished urban districts, solidarity became essential for the survival of the community. Historically, both the private and public spheres have been politically constructed to reinforce women's subordination. However, women began to expand their public lives by extending their activities beyond the confines of home and family into the broader society.[30]

Initially, women's participation in the resistance movement was an extension of their traditional roles as housewives, mothers, sisters, and companions. They engaged in activities addressing the practical everyday problems that arose as a result of the occupation. In Athens, women from lower socio-economic classes confronted dire challenges, including navigating the black market, coping with severe shortages of food, water, and soap, and dealing with overflowing cesspits and disease-carrying garbage. These pressing issues necessitated collective action and organized struggle. By joining the resistance movement, women were able to confront these difficulties in solidarity, fostering a sense

[30] Gerda LERNER: *The Majority finds its Past: Placing women in History*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1979, p. 161.

of community and mutual support. Their involvement broadened their sphere of action. Initiatives such as the establishment of soup kitchens directly challenged the domestic ideal, effectively shifting their activities from the private sphere into the public realm.

In the countryside, the plundering and the clearing operations of the Germans forced women to defend their family's property; it had been created by their own efforts. They proved to be more determined and daring than the men. A resistance newspaper reported that on March 10, 1944, two "fascist bastards" went to a village to loot. They took a sheep without any reaction from the shepherd. But his wife ran to the village, called four other women and they all started to chase the German soldiers. They reached them, took the sheep, and brought it back.[31] In a village in Aegialeia, the Security Battalions locked all the women in the church and threatened to kill them if they did not tell where the *andartes* were. None of them revealed any information.[32] The *andartes* were members of their family, of their village, of their nation.

> Our motto is "All in our organizations. All on alert". The EAM has become the true bearer of the people's will. The instrument of people's power. Our first task is to join its ranks. And at the same time to organize women's power to make it as effective as possible.[33]

The presence of women gave a universality to the resistance movement. The EAM/KKE cadres acknowledged that women "brought a new air to the organizations"; they brought out a source of ingenuity and encouraged the men.[34] The resilience and resourcefulness of women in coping with the adversities of everyday life during the occupation led them to devise original methods of resistance and struggle, including the use of curses. These curses were primarily directed at the Greek collaborators of the occupiers, and the latter feared them more than the weapons of ELAS. The collaborators had no means to counteract these curses and believed in their potency. In the village of Letchetova, upon learning that Greek collaborators had executed their fellow villagers, women rushed to confront the perpetrators with their hair untied—a gesture rooted in local custom—and unleashed their curses. The intensity of their actions prompted German forces to intervene, seeking to protect the collaborators from the women's "fury". The next day, the National Solidarity organized a demonstration and succeeded to release the three women, who were arrested.[35]

[31] *Allilengyi* [Solidarity], Organ of the Pan-Thessalian Committee of National Solidarity, 10 (1944), p. 2.
[32] Ilias PAPASTERGIOOPOULOS: *Morias in Arms*, Athens, Publications Research and Critique of Modern Greek History, 1975, p. 347. [in Greek]
[33] *Gynaikeia Drasi* [Women's Action], EAM Athens, 17 (1943), p. 1.
[34] Kyriakos TSAKIRIS: interview 10.3.1988.
[35] *Allilengyi tou Laou* [Solidarity of the People], Organ of the Peloponnesian Committee of the National Solidarity, 1 (1944), p. 3.

Through the National Solidarity, women extended their traditional roles of caring for family members to encompass the broader needs of society. They took on the responsibility of caring for the extended family of the nation, providing food, shelter, and support to those who were persecuted, including individuals operating underground, those in detention, and prisoners in concentration camps. In Trikala, for instance, after attending a memorial service, a group of women spontaneously distributed *koliva* (a traditional Greek ritual food) to hungry prisoners. This act of kindness was adopted as a practice by the organization, leading to a vibrant scene on Sundays and holidays when the camp's outer street was filled with women actively showing their support at memorial services, weddings, and baptisms.[36] Additionally, they extended their assistance to the inhabitants of burnt villages, with women from neighboring communities baking bread and sending it to those in need.[37] In the face of extremely difficult conditions characterized by scarcity of goods and the oppressive environment that rendered any demonstration of support illegal and perilous, the National Solidarity played a crucial role in fostering solidarity among the resisting populace. The organization became a vital lifeline for communities, helping to cultivate a spirit of mutual aid and cooperation in the struggle against occupation.

**The Free Young Woman**

The resistance movement can be seen as a youth movement not in the sense that young people made the decisions –quite the opposite– but in the sense that they set the tone. Many 14–20-year-old girls, who had not yet internalized social roles, were involved in the resistance movement. They wanted to take part in a struggle that they felt was just, and the particular historical context gave them the opportunity to do so. In the cities the students and schoolgirls and in the countryside especially the young teachers would be among the first to join resistance organizations. They would propagate with their words as well as with their actions that the vision of *Laocracy* was also linked to a change in their own social position. Some of them would also move towards their autonomy from the family. Usually, because of the risk of arrest, they would leave home and live underground or go to the mountains, where the *andartes* were; they would sleep in other people's houses, travel alone through wild forests to go to the nearby village and talk to other girls about the needs of the struggle and the new society that would be built after the end of the war.

[36] Christos VRACHNIARIS: *The Years of Folk Epopoias*, Athens, Panorama Publications, 1983, p. 90. [in Greek]
[37] *Synagonistria* [Female Comrade], Organ of the Women's Committee of EAM West Macedonia, 1 (1944), p. 4.

> We must fight the same way as men to get rid of the foreign occupier first. Then fight with heart for People's Democracy.[38]

The EAM resistance movement did not have dedicated women's organizations, as the KKE, which provided organizational support, adhered to the belief that the struggle for liberation was a collective endeavor. They maintained that the emancipation of women would occur automatically following the movement's victory. However, there was one notable exception: the organization *Lefteri Nea* [Free Young Woman], which operated in Athens for only a few months. This group originated among university students and subsequently expanded into local neighborhoods. While *Lefteri Nea* was not a women's organization in the traditional sense—focused solely on "women's issues"—its existence facilitated women's participation in resistance activities. The organization helped coordinate not only food rations but also social events such as parties and excursions, where they disseminated progressive ideas, attracted new members, and laid the groundwork for the formation of additional organizations.

The young women of the Free Young Woman movement played a vital role in resistance efforts, engaging in the distribution of underground press materials and leaflets. They also took part in dangerous nighttime missions, painting anti-fascist slogans on walls—a task fraught with the risk of arrest or even death. Initially, they carried out these activities alongside the boys, but they soon chose to work independently to challenge the stereotype that women were suited only for menial tasks. Through their courageous efforts, these young women not only contributed significantly to the resistance but also developed a profound sense of self-worth and embraced responsibilities they had never envisioned before. Their unity and spirit were embodied in a hymn they created, sung to the tune of a march and proudly published in their newspaper:

> Let's redeem ourselves from the triple slavery of conqueror, boss and man.
> Let's conquer freedom and become worthy of it forever.[39]

The struggle against fascism and the fight for their homeland's liberation were deeply intertwined with the personal liberation of these women—not only from oppressive employers but also from patriarchal constraints, including those of the traditional husband-wife dynamic. In February 1943, the Free Young Women organization dissolved and merged into EPON. This transition marked a significant evolution, as the Free Young Women had become a training ground for future female cadres. Many of its members assumed prominent leadership roles in Athens and were also dispatched to rural areas. At the same time, in small towns and villages EPON clubs, were established

[38] *O Dromos tis Palis* [The Road of Struggle], Organ of the KKE of the Prefecture of Trifyllia, 1 (1944), p. 2.
[39] Interviews: Maria KARAGIORGI: 24.10.1988. Kiki VOUDOURI: 10.7.1989. Fofi LAZAROU: 16.6.1987.

fostering a revolutionary sense of community. These clubs became spaces where young women and men interacted as equals for the first time—talking, dancing, and performing theater together—breaking longstanding societal barriers and paving the way for broader social change.

**Women's Role in Demonstrations and Mobilizations**

> And at the top of the demonstration, in front of the Greek flags and signs, the girls of the people, of the school, of the loom and the desk, bodies still immature and women in full bloom, united in the common fight, set the tone for the battle that is beginning.... Here come the tanks![40]

In 1942, small demonstrations broke out in Athens for fair distribution of rations and on national anniversaries. On October 28, the anniversary of Greece's entry into War, schoolgirls played a pivotal role in a powerful display of resistance. Joining a group of 1,500 disabled war veterans, the girls boarded trolleys, took their place at the forefront of the demonstration, and marched through the streets while singing the National Anthem—a defiant act of patriotism and unity in the face of occupation and oppression.[41]

In 1943, Athens witnessed a series of major demonstrations on February 24, March 5, March 25, June 25, and July 22. With a population of about one million, resistance newspapers reported that these demonstrations drew between 50,000 and 200,000 participants. Tragically, each protest resulted in casualties, with many women among the dead and wounded. The demonstration on March 5, 1943, against the political draft stood out for the unprecedented presence of women. Descriptions from the time highlight their overwhelming participation: "Countless, unimaginable numbers of women".[42] The draft posed a direct threat to men, who risked conscription by the occupiers, and women rose to the challenge, taking to the streets in solidarity. From diverse backgrounds and life experiences, these women united to protect their families and communities, demonstrating courage and resolve in the face of brutal repression.

The bloodiest demonstration of the resistance occurred on July 22, 1943, a day forever marked by the tragic deaths of two young women. Eyewitness accounts recount the horrifying moment when a tank ran over Panagiota Stathopoulou, crushing her body. Standing nearby, her friend Koula Lili responded with extraordinary bravery—she climbed onto the tank and struck the driver in an act of defiance. In response, the driver shot her, and she later succumbed to her injuries in the hospital. This profoundly shocking event captured the sheer brutality of the occupation: an unarmed individual

[40] *Nea Ellada* [New Greece], Organ of EAM, 2 (1943), p. 10.
[41] *Lefteria* [Liberty], City Committee of the Athens Party Organization, 5 (1942), p. 1; *Eleftheri Ellada* [Free Greece], Central Committee of EAM, 7 (1942), p. 1.
[42] *Free Greece*, op. cit., 14 (1943), p. 5.

standing fearlessly against an armored machine, and another risking her life in a desperate bid for justice. The fact that these two heroes were young students, only 18 and 19 years old, intensified the emotional impact of their sacrifice, cementing their place in the history of resistance as symbols of courage and the unyielding human spirit in the face of oppression.[43]

The demonstration on July 22, 1943, marked the end of the large-scale protests in Athens. In its aftermath, the conflict escalated as the *andartes* attempted to gain control of city districts. In response, the Germans and the collaborationist Security Battalions intensified their repression in 1944 with blockades and mass executions. The capital was thrown into further turmoil. Also in 1944, the focus of resistance shifted to the countryside, where mobilization gained momentum. Rural communities, through committees, petitions, resolutions, and public rallies, voiced their demands for an end to soaring prices, systemic looting, and widespread terrorism. They called for the cessation of unpaid labor, the release of hostages, the establishment of soup kitchens, and the provision of essential medicines and support for victims of arson.

The rural mobilization took a transformative turn with the emergence of women-led movements. Women organized and participated exclusively in protests and campaigns, symbolizing both their growing role in the resistance and their determination to fight against the unbearable living conditions imposed by the occupation.

> I was the woman who was always on the sidelines making sure to always serve you and fear for your live. Today I woke up... [...] Give me your hand... I walk beside you on the road that leads to Victory or Death.[44]

On the day of the bazaar, women from free or semi-free villages made their way to the occupied district capital to join forces with the women of the city. Dressed either in traditional local costumes or in black clothing and scarves as a sign of mourning and resistance, their numbers varied from 200 to as many as 5,000. With unwavering determination, these women marched to key locations such as the Prefecture, the Town Hall, the Church, the offices of the International Red Cross, the German Administration, or the local Garrison. Teachers often stood at the helm of these movements, serving as organizers and leaders, channeling the collective strength of the women into a unified demand for justice, relief, and acknowledgment of their suffering under occupation.

Most of the women's mobilization took place in Thessaly; the first in December 1943; participated three hundred women. They arrived in the city of Trikala on carts

[43] Maria KARRA: "The demonstration against the Bulgarian descent into Macedonia" in *Women in Resistance*, Athens, Publication of the Movement "The Woman in Resistance", 1982, pp. 73-79. [in Greek]; Kaiti ZEVGOU: *With Yannis Zevgos in the Revolutionary movement*, Athens, Okeanida Publications, 1980, pp. 261-262. [in Greek]

[44] *EAM*, Organ of EAM Magnesia, 17 (1943), p. 6.

and gathered outside the Prefecture. They asked for the distribution of the Red Cross foodstuffs, to be given the items of the monopoly and to stop the looting. They got assurances and the mobilization ended peacefully. The Germans did not intervene, and the women dispersed into the bazaar.[45] One of the most dramatic and harrowing mobilizations unfolded in Trikala on March 11, 1944, involving 700 women from nearby villages. Entering the city from different points, they converged on the Prefecture as the offices opened for the day. The Director, alarmed by the sight of the women, attempted to slip out through the back door, only to find more waiting there to mock him and bombard him with insults. Flustered, he called in the Germans and the Gendarmerie, who began interrogating the women, demanding to know who had organized the protest. The women boldly replied "Our minds matched".

One elderly woman even taunted the German commander, advising him to return to his "mummy" as the mountains were full of *andartes* and his life was in danger. Enraged, the Germans and their Greek collaborators detained 250 women, herding them into a prison cell where they poured water through a hole in the wall, forcing the women to stand as the water level steadily rose. Despite two sleepless nights in the foul, knee-deep cesspool, enduring immense fear of drowning or execution, the women held firm. When interrogators demanded to know who was responsible, they refused to betray Vaya, the teacher who had led them. Their defiance inspired solidarity across the city. Protests erupted demanding their release, and the authorities, unable to break their spirit or extract confessions, were compelled to free them. Pale from exhaustion, hunger, and confinement, the women marched triumphantly through the city's center.[46]

The final August of the Occupation in 1944 epitomized the adage that the darkest hour comes just before dawn. The terror and atrocities inflicted by the occupiers showed no sign of abating, with relentless violence continuing to plague the population. Yet, amid this despair, women's mobilizations surged across Greece, showcasing their unwavering resolve and courage.

**Women and the Armed Resistance**

> The Greek People's Liberation Army is a relentless punisher of thieves, traitors and enemy agents. Good and brave-hearted. Helper of all Greeks in danger from the enemy. But an unsleeping guardian of people's will, defender of the sovereign rights of the nation.[47]

[45] Christos VRACHNIARIS: op. cit., pp. 185, 203-4.
[46] Vaya PAPAKOGOU: interview 16.3.1990 & 14.6.1995; Christos VRACHNIARIS: op. cit., pp. 204-205.
[47] *Apeleftherotis* [Liberator], Central Committee of the EAM, 40 (1944), p. 5.

In wartime, those who wield the weapons take the forefront, but it was everyone's responsibility to support them, and the slogan resonated clearly: "Anything and everything for the *andartes*". For the fighters to sustain their struggle, they relied heavily on the traditional labor of women, whose contributions were indispensable. Women took on the arduous task of washing clothes—a necessity due to the lice that plagued the fighters. This work required hauling water and wood, building fires, scalding the garments to kill lice, and thoroughly washing them. Beyond this, the *andartes* depended on women to produce essential woolen items like socks, flannels, sweaters, and underwear. Women crafted these necessities by hand or on looms, combining skill with relentless effort. Food preparation also fell to the women. They baked bread, made pasta, and carried supplies—on their backs—to ensure the resistance fighters had what they needed. They transported ammunition and food across treacherous terrain, braving both snow and sun. One caption powerfully sums up their sacrifice: Endless rows of women, in the snow or in the sun, carrying the necessities for the reinforcement and maintenance of our *andartes*.[48]

The women provided more than just the bare necessities. At the special celebrations, they would offer whole loads of pies, wine, raki, cheese, nuts, etc.[49] They also sent parcels and put letters in them as a morale booster.[50] Moreover, they organized visits to hospitals, which were located in isolated, mountainous villages to avoid being endangered by the clearing operations, and had to walk for many hours on rough paths with mud or snow to bring gifts and comfort to the wounded and sick *andartes*.[51] In the mountain communities, where doctors were scarce, women took on the critical role of caring for the sick, injured, and helpless. Their traditional knowledge of medicine became an invaluable asset to the resistance movement. In Free Greece, women contributed to the establishment of hospitals, infirmaries, medical centers, and first aid stations, creating a makeshift healthcare network in the face of overwhelming challenges. ELAS nurses worked tirelessly under harsh and often dangerous conditions, lacking adequate medical supplies. Their medical assistance extended beyond clinics and hospitals, often reaching the frontlines of battle.

As the resistance movement in Free Greece grew, women increasingly undertook roles traditionally considered "unfeminine". Captain Avgerinos recalled arriving in a village square where he was immediately surrounded by women. The woman in charge promptly organized the accommodations for the *andartes*. She even established a guard, appointing an elderly woman and a young EPON girl to keep watch—a testament to

[48] Spyros MELETZIS: *With the Partisans in the Mountains*, Athens, n.p., 1984, pp. 24, 62, 105, 164-167. [in Greek]
[49] *Female Comrade*: op. cit., 2 (1944), p. 3.
[50] Petros ANTAIOS: *Contribution to the History of the EPON*, vol. B, Athens, Kastaniotis Publications, 1977, p. 405.
[51] *Smolikas*, IX ELAS Division, 7 (1943), p. 6.

the diverse ways women contributed to the resistance.[52] Girls were often employed as telephone operators or liaisons, carrying crucial messages. In moments of heightened danger, women also appeared on the battlefield, not as armed fighters but as essential supporters "on the side" of the *andartes*. On June 27, 1943, during a battle between ELAS and an Italian force, local women provided invaluable support. When the *andartes* warned an elderly woman, who was bringing them water to be careful, she retorted that they should take care of themselves, being younger and more useful—a powerful reflection of the belief these women had in the struggle.[53]

Despite their indispensable contributions, women in ELAS were not formally recognized as soldiers, largely due to the societal norms of the time. Their involvement was often framed as secondary or supportive rather than integral to the resistance's foundation. This perspective, however, significantly undervalued their true impact. Women played a critical role, particularly in auxiliary services, which were vital to the operation of any military effort. In conventional armies, it is estimated that for every combat soldier, seven individuals are required in support roles. In guerrilla warfare, this ratio increases dramatically, with one fighter supported by as many as 13 to 14 people.[54] Their efforts in organizing logistics, maintaining communication networks, providing medical care, and ensuring supplies reached the front lines formed the backbone of the resistance.

> The time has come for the woman to throw herself into the battle
> to fight manfully and think of nothing.
> No mother, no home, no husband and children
> One shall be our purpose: Death or Freedom.[55]

Women had been part of ELAS since its inception, whether armed or unarmed. Many of them fled the cities under threat and sought refuge in Free Greece, where they became integral to the resistance. ELAS employed them in various capacities, often referring to them as "nurses", though their responsibilities extended far beyond medical care and were rarely clearly defined. They operated printing presses to produce propaganda materials, transported weapons through blockaded areas, delivered water and food to fighters during battles, and even supported machine gunners by holding the tape for their weapons. Despite the harsh conditions and dangers, many managed to acquire weapons through different means, driven by a strong desire to contribute fully as *andartes*.

[52] *Laokratia*, EAM Florina, 7 (1944), p. 4.
[53] *Epimeliteia* [Chamber], Central Committee of the Chamber of the Partisan, 3 (1943), p. 5.
[54] Maria BRUZZONE: "Women in the Italian Resistance", in Paul THOMPSON (ed.), *Our Common History: The Transformation of Europe*, London, Pluto Press, 1982, pp. 273-310.
[55] Chrysoula TAMIA – TZEFRONI: interview 19.2.1987.

In the ELAS reserve, women engaged in sabotage missions, guarded their villages, carried out political work, and even participated directly in combat. To enhance their capabilities, ELAS established a training school where women received instruction and, after completing rigorous training and passing exams, were assigned to various critical positions. Dressed in boots and *khaki skirts* (zip culottes), these women became a striking symbol of resistance and empowerment. They traveled between villages, delivering speeches, organizing events, and galvanizing support for the resistance. Beyond their leadership in mobilizing communities, they also trained other young women in the use of weapons, spreading their skills and fostering a sense of collective strength.[56]

In the autumn of 1943, following the acquisition of weapons from the Italians, ELAS began forming ELAS-EPON women's groups and platoons, marking a significant shift in women's roles within the resistance. The Yugoslav resistance movement, which had already incorporated women as armed fighters, served as an influential example. This connection was further strengthened in the summer of 1943 when a Yugoslav partisan delegation, including women, participated in the EPON Congress, inspiring Greek women. In one notable instance, 20 young women from a village in Grevena approached the nearest ELAS station to request arms. Their determination was exemplified by the extraordinary bravery of two unarmed girls who had captured an armed German soldier, who brought to the station.[57]

In 1944 eight women's platoons were created at the headquarters of all the ELAS Divisions; the Groups were usually formed in the Regiments. Their command was "dual": military and political. The political one was exercised by the Captain and the military one by the Commander, a graduate of the ELAS Officers' School. Thirteen women had graduated from the school with the rank of Lieutenant. The total number of *antartisses* did not exceed 10%. All of them wore trousers, knew how to handle weapons and took part in battles. Lt. Lisa, of the IX Division's Platoon, wrote:

> The automatic firearms in our hands spread death to the fascist occupier and the traitors. Our will quickly learned the art of war. In battle we harden and steel our hearts and our faith. In the fire of war, we won by passing hard tests.[58]
>
> With a steady step we advance towards our perfect emancipation, for we prove that not only in other peaceful pursuits we are equal to man, but in everything in this war.[59]

[56] Nitsa KOLIOU: *Unknown aspects of Occupation and Resistance 1941-44: Historical research for the Prefecture of Magnesia*, vol. II, Volos, 1985, pp. 785-786. [in Greek]
[57] *Smolikas*, IX ELAS Division, 6 (1943), p. 5.
[58] *Exormisi* [Dash], Organ of the Macedonia Division Group, 2 (1944), p. 1.
[59] *Smolikas*, IX ELAS Division, 16 (1944), p. 3.

The involvement of women in the ELAS represented the pinnacle of their participation in the resistance struggle. For many young women, mastering "the art of war" symbolized a transformative journey toward what they saw as their "perfect emancipation". Armed and active on the frontlines, they felt they had achieved equality with men, challenging deeply entrenched societal norms. Yet, history has shown that the progress of humanity rarely follows a straight, uninterrupted path. While these women broke barriers and redefined their roles in society during the resistance, their newfound status was often tied to the extraordinary circumstances of war.

**The Brutality of Occupation**

Wars are not merely times of crisis; they are also marked by pervasive and extreme violence. In the context of war, the political economy of patriarchy and entrenched gender inequality exacerbates women's vulnerability, intensifying the violence directed toward them and perpetuating cycles of oppression and harm. The violence endured by the Greek people during the war and the triple occupation was devastating, leaving deep scars on the nation. The suffering stemmed from a cascade of consequences: widespread hunger, brutal reprisals, mass executions, blockades, the burning of villages, and the forced displacement of populations. Out of Greece's approximately 9,000 villages and towns, an estimated 3,000 were destroyed, damaged, or devastated by bombings, arson, and looting.[60] For women, however, the burden of this violence was even greater. Starving children looked to their mothers for food, their cries of hunger and pain adding to the anguish. Women struggled to mend clothes that had long outlived their use and juggled the care of their families with survival. During clearing operations, when the dreaded cry, "The Germans are coming!" echoed through the village, the challenges for women were immense. While men might flee to the mountains to join the *andartes*, women faced the impossible task of finding safety while caring for children, the elderly, and even domestic animals.[61]

Furthermore, rape has been a grim reality of wars throughout history, and the Second World War was no exception. All occupying armies committed acts of sexual violence during the conflict. Contemporary perspectives on war and gender recognize that rape is not merely a by-product of war but often a deliberate and targeted policy. As Susan Brownmiller compellingly argued, rape serves as both an assault on women as women and as a weapon of war aimed at the enemy. It becomes a brutal tool of domination and humiliation, symbolizing conquest and defeat. Brownmiller described rape as "a message passed between men—vivid proof of victory for one and loss and defeat

[60] UNRRA report to the Bank of Greece: p. 212.
[61] Silvia FEDERICI: *Caliban and the Witch*, New York, Autonomedia, 2004, p. 73.

for the other".[62] This dual nature of sexual violence in wartime underscores its role in both personal violation and broader strategies of terror and subjugation.

In Free Greece rapes confirmed the conquest and hurt the "honor" of the *andartes,* who had been unable to defend "their" women. Most of the rapes took place alongside the burning of villages. The Thessaly Committee of the National Solidarity, which recorded the rapes up to the summer of 1944, states that in the village of Deskati all women from 15 to 80 years old were raped. It also reports that "the occupiers lined up the older women and forced them to bow down and kiss their genitals with their senile lips".[63] Many older women stayed in the village because they could not move; others believed they were in no danger, because they were old. This strategy of using rape as a weapon of war underscored the occupiers' intent to fracture the social fabric of the resistance.

During the clearing operations the rapes were so numerous that the resistance newspapers reported them only if something special had happened, as in Katranitsa (23.4.1944) where women were raped in the church.[64] Individual rapes were not mentioned. "Shame" prevented young women in particular from reporting rape; in village society they couldn't marry because they would be considered a disgrace. Even in Athens, virginity was a powerful taboo. The resistance newspapers promoted the example of Aristea, who chose to die rather than be raped. She said: "I am a Greek and I will die a Greek".[65]

The most brutal violence experienced by women in the resistance often came at the hands of Greek collaborators aligned with the occupiers, such as the Security Battalions. These collaborators inflicted horrific abuse on women, whom they viewed as transgressors for daring to step outside traditional family roles and participate in the resistance. In Athens, Elektra Apostolou, a leading figure who inspired the women's organization Free Young Woman, endured relentless torture at the hands of the Special Security. Her death was marked by a final act of dehumanization—her naked body was left in plain view on a nearby street, a grim warning to others who might follow in her footsteps.[66] In Volos, the collaborators' cruelty was so extreme that even the German Gestapo, notorious for their own brutality, were reportedly appalled. The screams of tortured women prisoners echoed far and wide, underscoring the severity of the violence inflicted.[67] These acts of terror were not just attacks on individuals but a deliberate

[62] Susan BROWNMILLER: *Against our Will: Men, Women and Rape*, New York, A Bantam Book, 1975, pp. 13, 43-78.
[63] See the document of the Pan-Thessalian Committee of National Solidarity, 20.6.1944 in Vassilis ROTAS: *The Struggle in the Greek Mountains: V. Rotas in the 1940s-1950s*, Athens, n.p., 1982, pp. 223-234.
[64] "The Holocaust of Katranitsa" in *Women in Resistance*, op. cit., pp. 51-68.
[65] *I Foni tis Karditsas* [The Voice of Karditsa], EAM Karditsa, 56 (1943), p. 1.
[66] ASKI: https://wirerepository.latempesta.eu/exhibition/apostolou/ [latest access 10/10/2024]
[67] Nitsa COLIOU, op. cit. vol. II, p. 1123.

attempt to suppress women's growing political agency and to reinforce the patriarchal order.

## The Boundaries of Women's Agency

> Gendered inequalities, that fuel violence against women, are rooted in structures and processes of political economy that are increasingly globalized.[68]

Violence against women, deeply intertwined with gender hierarchies, was pervasive during the Occupation and Resistance. It mirrored and intensified pre-war abuses—physical, sexual, verbal, and psychological—while symbolic violence, rooted in traditional patriarchal norms, reinforced constraints on women's roles. Pre-war inequalities, such as the denial of political rights and unequal pay, shaped women's integration into the resistance, defining the limits of their participation. While women were active, their roles were framed as "alongside" men rather than as equals.

This subtle yet powerful distinction reinforced traditional gender norms, even within the transformative context of the resistance struggle. With the exception of the Free Young Woman organization, women's participation in the resistance was largely channeled through committees within larger organizations like EAM, EPON, and National Solidarity. These committees reflected the gendered division of labor prevalent in Greek society, assigning women tasks considered "feminine", such as caregiving, food preparation or carrying loads on their backs. Despite their political awakening and identity transformation through the resistance, women were still constrained by the very social structures they sought to challenge, highlighting the persistent tension between modernity and the limits imposed by traditional patriarchal systems.

The disparity between women's roles in ELAS and National Solidarity underscored this bias. ELAS, perceived as a "male" organization, celebrated armed struggle and battlefield heroics, while National Solidarity's contributions were undervalued despite their importance. Women's logistical, emotional, and organizational support for the resistance was indispensable but largely invisible within this framework. The idea of whether ELAS could have operated without women's contributions was rarely acknowledged, reflecting the undervaluation of their roles.

Women's involvement in the resistance marked a step forward, but it was insufficient to dismantle entrenched patriarchal norms. The resistance framed their contributions as extensions of familial and national duties rather than independent political

[68] Jacqui TRUE: *The Political Economy of Violence against Women*. New York, Oxford University Press, 2012, p. 5.

actions. To incorporate women into its ranks, EAM reassured conservative communities that women's participation would not threaten their morality or family honor.[69] This required strict control over relationships between men and women in the movement, with romantic ties forbidden. Such policies, encapsulated in slogans like "First you look at the cemetery, then at your female comrades" reassured local populations and helped secure their support. Resistance texts of the time emphasized that such relationships could be exploited by the "black reaction" (right-wing, national-minded factions) to discredit EAM; they accused the resistance of fostering a "corrupted society", warning that this perception could erode public trust and hospitality, particularly among conservative households concerned about their reputation.[70]

Thus, in ELAS, issues of honor and morality were addressed with strictness and severity; violations of these moral codes often resulted in severe penalties. For women fighters these measures placed disproportionate scrutiny. In one instance from the women's platoon of the XIIIth Division, a young woman's exceptional beauty became a matter of concern for the Command. Fearing that her appearance might "provoke" the National Army officers who had joined ELAS, her beauty itself was deemed problematic. The issue was brought to a platoon meeting, where it was decided that she should be disarmed and dismissed. The young woman left the platoon, deeply hurt and embittered by the decision.[71] Another tragic case occurred in the IX Division, where an *andartissa* was accused of speaking privately with a fellow fighter. In the presence of the Division officer, the assembly imposed the punishment of disarmament. However, before her weapon could be taken away, the young woman chose to end her life.[72]

Despite such constraints, women's participation challenged traditional roles and fostered a sense of self-confidence. Women demonstrated resilience, competence, and determination, gaining leadership opportunities and achieving equality within the resistance that was unimaginable in pre-war Greece. Their testimonies consistently reflect that they never felt inferior to men in EAM's organizations. However, this progress was short-lived. The post-war period saw a resurgence of patriarchal norms and gender-based violence, erasing many of the gains achieved during the resistance as society grappled with the war's aftermath and ideological divisions.

**After the War Was Over**

[69] On the "honor – shame" practice (honor for men and shame for women) see: John Kennedy CAMPBELL: "Traditional Values and Continuities in Greek Society", in Richard CLOGG (ed.), *Greece in the 1980s*, University of London, 1983, pp. 189-191; John Kennedy CAMPBELL & Philip SHERRARD: *Modern Greece*, New York, Praeger, 1968, p. 340; Juliet DU BOULAY: "Lies, Mockery and Family Integrity", in I. G. PERISTRIANY (ed.), *Mediterranean Family Structures*, Cambridge University Press, 1976, pp. 389-406.
[70] *Smolikas*, IX ELAS Division, 8 (1943), p. 1.
[71] Maria FERLA-BEIKOU: interviews 13.3.1990 & 26.10.1995.
[72] Interviews: Lisa THEODORIDOU, 2-3.5.1990; Katina POLYZOU, 6.4.1992; Theodora ZIKOU, 8.4.1992.

The war profoundly impacted daily life, especially for women, and its effects lingered long after the fighting ceased. In October 1944, Greece was liberated, and the government of National Unity was established in Athens. However, just two months later, in December, the Battle of Athens erupted: ELAS clashed with the British-backed government forces. These 'December events' marked a turning point for those involved in the EAM resistance. Toula Mara, who carried the wounded and dead on a tricycle during the battle, later remarked, "Since December, I have never been able to cry".[73] ELAS was defeated and surrendering on February 12, 1945.

The period following the disarmament of ELAS, known as the White Terror, was one of the most harrowing eras of the 1940s, particularly for women. Armed groups targeted those who had participated in the resistance on the side of EAM/ELAS. The pre-war regime's slogan Homeland - Religion – Family regained prominence, reflecting not only a defense of the nation but also a return to traditional Greek values.[74] Nationalist ideologies emphasized rigid boundaries between men and women, relegating women to the private sphere and defining their primary role as biological reproduction.[75]

Despite women's significant participation in the resistance, they were denied political rights—unlike in France (1944) and Italy (1945). The Greek state refused to grant women the right to vote, equal pay for equal work, or access to all professions, ignoring demands made by women's organizations during the interwar period. Moreover, the vision of *Laocracy* was under severe threat, as were the women who had fought for it. Efforts to force them back into 'traditional roles' were carried out through propaganda and brutal violence, executed by state and para-state mechanisms. This violence was not an isolated symptom of state power but a deliberate strategy of nationalist and patriarchal oppression.[76]

Women of the resistance were stigmatized and treated as dishonorable, often accused of being prostitutes simply for acting in the public domain or associating with men outside their families. Terrorist groups and the Gendarmerie persecuted, tortured, and raped them under the pretext that they were already "dishonored". Torturers, typically men, projected their sexual fantasies onto these powerless bodies, inflicting both physical and psychological trauma.[77]

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[73] Toula MARA, Interview 27.6.1995.

[74] Magda Fytili: "Enemigas de la familia y la nación: resistencia femenina y represión en Grecia (1941-1974)", *Temps i Espais de Memòria*, 8 (2023), pp. 18-24.

[75] Nira YUVAL-DAVIS: *Gender and nation*, SAGE publications, 1997, pp. 21-25.

[76] Katherine STEFATOS: *Engendering the nation: Women, state oppression and political violence in post-war Greece (1946-1974)*, PhD Thesis, Goldsmiths, University of London, 2012, p. 53.

[77] *Tasoula VERVENIOTI: "The Leftwing Women between Politics and Family" in Mark MAZOWER (ed.)*, After the War was Over. Reconstructing the Family, Nation and State in Greece, 1943-1960, *Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2000, pp. 105-121.*

One of the most common punishments was to cut off women's hair—a symbolic act of humiliation. During the Occupation, ELAS had similarly punished women who fraternized with occupiers (though this did not apply to professional prostitutes). In France, similar measures were taken after its liberation.[78] In post-liberation Greece, the threat of a haircut turned into a taunting song aimed at women of the resistance: "Comrade, comrade, who knows so much, tonight I'm cutting your hair".[79] Terrorist gangs used razors in the cities and scissors or knives in the countryside. Sometimes, hair was ripped out with whips while the women were beaten. Those who had borne arms as *andartisses* endured even harsher tortures. One of them described her ordeal:

> I was beaten. They cut my hair. They cut my hair. It was the National Guard when we returned. Why? Because we were andartisses. As punishment. To force us to confess whatever they wanted. There were three of us from the village: two andartisses and one EPON member. When they cut our hair, they used two pairs of scissors, and one of us was cut with a knife. Her head was full of wounds. She was in terrible shape and lost four teeth from the beating.[80]

On March 31, 1946, elections were held, which EAM/KKE boycotted. This date is conventionally considered the start of the Greek Civil War. Following their victory, the nationalist state institutionalized violence through a series of "emergency measures". These measures targeted not just people's actions but also their thoughts and beliefs. The Security Service issued certificates of social morality, and individuals were forced to sign declarations of repentance. Surveillance became a pervasive tool of repression, supported by an extensive network of informers.[81] In April, Security Committees were established to exile those who refused to denounce their resistance activities with the EAM/KKE. Remote islands became sites of exile. The first executions occurred in July 1946, including the death of a teacher among the twelve executed.

By 1947, with the Truman Doctrine and Marshall Plan, the U.S. provided financial and military support to the Athens government against the Democratic Army of Greece, led by the KKE. In December 1947, the EAM/KKE was outlawed. The civil war concluded in 1949 with the defeat of the Democratic Army, whose fighters fled to Soviet Bloc countries. The Greek civil war unfolded within the broader context of the Cold War. It caused immense social upheaval, especially in rural areas. Entire

[78] Claire DUCHEN: "Crime and Punishment in Liberated France: The Case of les femmes tondues" in Claire DUCHEN & Irene BANDHAUER-SCHOFFMANN (eds), *When the War was Over. Women, War and Peace in Europe, 1940-1956*, London and New York, Leicester University Press, 2000, 233-250.
[79] Allegra SKIFTI: Interview 21.6.1995.
[80] Maria VENETSANOPOULOU, Interview 16.2.1993.
[81] Nickos ALIVIZATOS: "Regime of 'emergency' and political freedoms, 1946-1949" in Jhon O. IATRIDES (ed.), *Greece in the 1940s. A Nation in Crisis*, Hanover and London, University Press of New England, 1981. [Greek Edition: Athens, Themelio, 1984, pp. 383-398].

populations of mountain and semi-mountain villages that had supported ELAS during the resistance were displaced, forced to live in tents in provincial cities for almost three years. This displacement disrupted traditional gender roles and led to new dynamics in gender relations.[82]

Little is known about the ultimate fate of the women who participated in the resistance. In 1949, approximately 5,000 women were exiled, but the exact number remains unclear. Nor do we know the full extent of women who were tortured, imprisoned, or executed. Records were deliberately destroyed, and to this day, not all archives are accessible to historians.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, the multifaceted role of Greek women during the Resistance movement (1941–1944) illuminates both their empowerment and the constraints they faced within a patriarchal society. Their active participation—from logistical support to direct engagement in armed resistance—marked a pivotal transformation in gender roles during this tumultuous period. Yet, despite their significant contributions, societal structures largely confined their agency within the boundaries of traditional expectations, framing their involvement as extensions of familial or national duties. While the resistance catalyzed moments of remarkable progress for gender equality, the post-war period saw a reassertion of patriarchal norms, eroding many of the gains achieved. Greek women's enduring resilience, however, left an indelible mark on the fight for national liberation and social reform, challenging historical narratives to recognize their invaluable contributions to shaping both the resistance movement and the broader struggle for equality.

It was not until the era of the Third Republic that women who had been active in the resistance or the Democratic Army began publishing their memoirs. The timing of these publications has been pivotal in shaping how social memory and history have been constructed. Women exiled during the civil car were the first to share their stories in the 1970s. Their accounts typically avoided direct engagement with the civil war, focusing instead on their broader experiences of exile and resistance. In the 1980s, after the socialist government officially recognized EAM's resistance as part of the national resistance, women prisoners began publishing their memoirs. Like the exiles, they concentrated primarily on their resistance activities, steering clear of the divisive civil war.

The 1990s marked a turning point. With the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War, Greece began reckoning with its past. Parliament collectively decided to destroy police files, symbolically erasing the memories of the civil war.[83] Around this

[82] Aylin AKRINAR: 2003. "The Honour/Shame Complex Revisited: Violence Against Women in the Migration Context", *Women's Studies International Forum*, 26 (2003), pp. 425-442.
[83] Vaggelis KARAMANOLAKIS: *The Unwanted Past: The Social Morality Files of the 20th Century and their Destruction*, Athens, Themelio 2019. [in Greek]

time, women who had fought in the Democratic Army began sharing their testimonies. In 1994, the first book specifically about the women of the resistance was published, and in 1999—50 years after the civil war ended—the first historical conference on the conflict was held in Greece.[84]

These milestones underscored the direct link between political contexts and the evolving memory and historiography of these tumultuous years. Despite this progress, the number of women who published their memoirs remained small, totaling fewer than one hundred. Most of these women were educated and living in Athens, while rural and poor women, who had played pivotal roles during the wars of the 1940s, had little access to the means of writing and publishing. This absence has left significant gaps in historical narratives. This paper seeks to amplify the voices of these rural and working-class women, who have largely been left out of the historical record despite their crucial contributions. By highlighting their participation, the paper aims to place women's experiences at the center of contemporary narratives about anti-totalitarian resistance in Europe, reshaping how we understand their role in this critical chapter of history.

[84] Tasoula VERVENIOTI: "Memories and Amnesia of Greek Civil War Archives and Memoirs. Athens and the Provinces, the Leadership and the Rank and File", in R. Van Boeschoten, T. Vervenioti, E. Voutyra, V. Dalkavoukis and K. Bada (eds) in *The Memory and the Forgetting of the Greek Civil War*, Thessaloniki, Epikentro, 2008, pp. 81–102. [in Greek]