Polish Women in Combat and Memory of Violence, 1939-1945

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Introduction

In 1946, a special historical commission set up by the Polish military authorities in Great Britain began to work on a publication that would document the presence of Polish soldiers on the fronts of World War II and the activities of the Polish Home Army, as the largest underground organization in occupied Poland and one of the largest partisan armies in Europe of that time[1]. The members of the commission were soldiers who collected documents throughout the war and then compiled veterans' accounts. In this way, a three-volume monumental work was created, which for decades to come will constitute the primary source of knowledge on the organization, personnel composition and activities of the Polish armed forces in occupied Poland and beyond. The Polish Home Army was the subject of the third volume, which was published in 1950 by the General Sikorski Polish Institute in London.[2]

Information about the publication that had already been in preparation reached Wanda Gertz "Lena", a legendary figure in the Polish Home Army, commander of the women's sabotage unit DYSK[3], who was then in Great Britain as the Inspector of Women Soldiers of the Home Army and later as Inspector of the Polish Resettlement Corps. Unfortunately, no one from the office has approached either her or her female colleagues to give an account. In response to this exclusion, she established a separate women's committee to document female participation. Gertz bitterly recalled in a letter to one of her colleagues in 1957 that the historical bureau declined to assist them due to a lack of funding and the impracticality of publishing a supplement to a book that was

[1] More on the Polish Home Army and Polish Underground State: David WILLIAMSON: *The Polish Underground, 1939–1947*, Barnsley, Pen & Sword, 2012; Joshua D. ZIMMERMAN: *The Polish Underground and the Jews, 1939–1945*, Cambridge University Press, 2015.

[2] *Polskie Siły Zbrojne w drugiej wojny światowej, vol. 3: Home Army*, London, General Sikorski Polish Institute,1950.

[3] DYSK - women's sabotage and diversion unit of the Polish Home Army. The unit specialised in blowing up bridges and railway tracks; its female soldiers also took part in the liquidation of Gestapo agents and female agents.

already available for purchase. «As a result, women's participation in this publication is minimal!»[4]

An event that illustrates the limitations of Polish memory regarding women soldiers serves as the starting point for this article's analysis of the relationship between the remembrance of women's roles and their experiences of violence, as well as the influence of violence in shaping their identity of female soldiers. I contend that the complex interplay between perceptions of femininity and violence, alongside the existing structural gender hierarchy within veteran circles, significantly impacts the challenges of commemorating women's contributions. Specifically, I aim to examine the accounts of violence articulated by women who participated in the Warsaw Uprising of 1944. Following the path established by Anna Krylova, I seek to uncover traces of female soldiers' identities within these narratives. In this article, I pose questions about the dominant themes of individual interviews and the patterns of biographical experiences related to the violence depicted in these testimonies.[5] Thus, my focus is not on violence itself, but rather on its role in narrativizing the active participation of female witnesses during the Warsaw Uprising

Weronika Grzebalska, expert in gender aspects of militarization and researcher of Warsaw Uprising, rightly points out that the persistence of gendered role imaginaries is reflected in the discourse on violence, including violence against women. Following Cynthia Enloe, she reminds that the foundation of the imaginary order is the division between those who need help (women and children) and those who defend (men).[6] An excellent illustration of such a narrative is the excerpt she quotes from a broadcast given by the underground Polish radio when the former enemy, the Germans, after the fall of the Warsaw Uprising, were replaced by the incoming Soviets. The dominant narrative frames women's personal suffering—such as that stemming from rape by enemy soldiers—as a form of *national humiliation* and *disgrace*.[7] In this context, the prevailing image of women as peace-loving, reinforced by their biological ability to bear children

[4] Letter of Wanda Gertz to Janina Stępińska, 9 August 1957 (fragments), in Jadwiga PODRYGAŁŁO: *Ach te dziewczęta. DYSK we wspomnieniach i relacjach*, Warszawa, 1996, p. 9.

[5] Anna KRYLOVA: *Soviet Women in Combat. A History of Violence on the Eastern Front*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010, see also: Jelena BATINIĆ: *Women and Yugoslav Partisans: A History of World War II Resistance*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2015.

[6] Weronika GRZEBALSKA: *Płeć powstania warszawskiego*, Warszawa, Instytut Badań Literackich Polskiej Akademii Nauk, 2013; Cynthia ENLOE: *Does Khaki Become You? The Militarization of Women's Lives*, London, Pandora Press, 1988; Wendy CHAPKIS: *Loaded Questions: Women in Militaries*, Washington, Institute for Policy Studies, 1981.

[7] Weronika GRZEBALSKA: op. cit., pp. 45-46. An illustrative example of such a narrative is the excerpt she quotes from a broadcast following the fall of the Warsaw Uprising, when the previously identified enemy, the Germans, were supplanted by the approaching Soviets: «There are rumors that the women, whom Rokossovski intends to leave for a certain period to clear Warsaw of rubble, are to be turned into street women for the pleasures of Moscow. We appeal to you, fathers and husbands, to act with us sooner rather than allow such a disgrace. Do not surrender a single child or woman alive into the hands of the Asians... Already dozens of girls who preferred death to disgrace have died by suicide».

complicates also the recognition of violent acts committed by women. As Juliette Pattinson points out: «Violence is inextricably bound up with masculinity and is perceived as a key differentiator between men and women. Men are thought to have a natural predisposition toward violence, with male hormones driving aggression, and such beliefs reinforce this notion. Boys are raised to be competitive and bellicose».[8]

Sexual violence, which is today one of the most salient elements in the thinking of historians of women's experience of violence during war, can be discursive in very diverse ways. Andrea Pető distinguishes between four main broad frameworks for talking about sexual violence: first, a framework that they will describe as normalizing sexual violence as part of warfare; second, a framework that identifies rape as a result of the absence or partial failure of institutional mechanisms or legal sanctions. Third, the feminist approach offered an explanatory framework that emphasized the conscious politics of war actors who use violence as a crime against the victim community. Finally, the human rights framework allowed us to treat sexual violence as torture.[9] Also highly relevant to this article is the issue raised by the researcher regarding the exposure of sexual violence within the public sphere.

In the case of the occupation of Polish territory, it is essential to contextualize violence within the broader framework of the brutalization that characterized the Nazis and Soviets policy. Maren Röger and Ruth Leiserowitz, in their introduction to the book "Women and Men at War: A Gender Perspective on World War II and Its Aftermath in Central and Eastern Europe", highlight two main related issues. First, they emphasize the uniqueness of Central and Eastern Europe as a site of mass extermination of Jews and a region where non-Jewish civilians were subjected to mass atrocities and deportations. The policies of the occupiers appear to have completely disregarded the gender of the victims. Both powers perpetrated deportations and mass murders regardless of sex. Second, Röger and Leiserowitz argue that the brutality of the occupation policies directly influenced the mobilization of both women and men into the resistance.

The article is divided into three parts. The first two sections serve as an introduction and contextualize the key third part of the article, which examines the

[8] Juliette PATTISON: "Turning a Pretty Girl into a Killer: Women, Violence and Clandestine Operations during the Second World War", in Karen THROSBY, Flora ALEXANDER (eds.), *Gender and Interpersonal Violence*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, p. 11.

[9] Andrea PETŐ: "Commentary", in Ayşe Gül ALTINAY, Andrea PETŐ (eds.), *Gendered wars, gendered memories: feminist conversations on war, genocide and political violence*, New York, Routledge, 2016, p. 23-24; see also: Andrea PETŐ: "Silencing and Unsilencing Sexual Violence in Hungary", in Ville KIVIMÄKI, Petri KARONEN (eds), *Continued Violence and Troublesome Pasts. Postwar Europe between the Victors after the Second World War*, Helsinki, Finnish Literature Society 2017, pp. 132-144; Inger SKJELSBÆK: *The Political Psychology of War Rape: Studies from Bosnia and Herzegovina*, New York, Routledge, 2011; Inger SKJELSBÆK: "Sexual violence in times of war: a new challenge for peace operations?.", in Louise OLSSON, L., Torrun TRUGGESTAD (eds), *Women and International Peacekeeping*, New York, Routledge, 2019, pp. 69-84.

relationship between women's identities and narratives of violence. In the first part, I elaborate on the post-war memory of women soldiers in occupied Poland, as outlined in the introduction. In the second part, I present the foundational findings of historiography regarding women's participation in the underground movement in occupied Poland from 1939 to 1945, with a particular focus on their involvement in the structures of the Polish Home Army.

Entangled memory

After the defeat in the September 1939 campaign and the division of the country along the so called Ribbentrop-Molotov line, a resistance movement began to develop in the occupied territories of Poland under the command of Polish military and civilian authorities residing in France and subsequently in Great Britain. The uniqueness of the Polish Home Army lay in the fact that it was the legitimate military force of the Polish Underground State. By 1944, the movement had coalesced around approximately 350,000 soldiers, including 10,000 officers and 35,000 volunteers in forest units. The Polish Home Army was officially formed on 14 February 1942 as a continuator of the Polish Victory Service (IX–XI 1939) and the Union of Armed Struggle (XI.1939-II.1942) and it functioned as an umbrella organization for around 200 distinct political organizations and military associations, largely reflecting the political landscape of interwar Poland (the National Armed Forces remained outside the structures of the Home Army). The army was only one component of the Underground State, which encompassed a political, social, and administrative system. It included political body representing the parties (the Political Consultative Committee), which turn into the underground parlament in 1944 (the Council of National Unity), as well as administrative organs, such as the Government Delegation for Poland and its local branches. The Home Army was engaged in a wide spectrum of activities, encompassing the organization of training programs and sabotage operations, intelligence and counterintelligence efforts, as well as communications management and the production of weaponry. The main strategic objective of the Home Army was to prepare a national uprising, which finally began on 1 August 1944. The Uprising was primarily aimed against the Germans but was also intended to position the Underground State as a host authority in the face of the advancing Red Army from the east. The Warsaw Uprising lasted for 63 days and ended in defeat. As a consequence of intense combat and deliberate massacres carried out by Nazis, approximately 16,000 the Home Army soldiers and between 150,000 and 200,000 civilians lost their lives, while half a million residents were forced to evacuate the city. Due to the destruction inflicted in September 1939, during the uprising, and following its collapse, more than 80% of left-bank Warsaw was reduced to rubble.

The memory of female insurgents is doubly entangled. Apart from the deliberate marginalization by their comrades-in-arms after the war, it is subordinated to the fragmented, non-linear narrative of the Home Army and the Polish Underground State, whose members faced persecution by the authorities of USSR-subordinated communist Poland.[10] The history of the underground army was publicly portrayed by the new authorities during the first post-war decade as that of a non-democratic, even fascist, formation. During the Stalinist period (1948-1955), the social ties that once unified this milieu were largely dismantled. The repression endured by Home Army soldiers fostered a climate of suspicion toward any initiatives aimed at documenting and commemorating the history of the underground.[11] It was not until the political thaw of 1956 that the memory of ZWZ-AK soldiers was revitalized, with a particular emphasis on the 1944 Warsaw Uprising, albeit in a format imposed from above by the authorities. The state socialist regime employed the strategy of the *myth of the unity of the resistance*, inscribing the history of the Home Army through centralized veterans' institutions into a narrative of a purportedly united Polish democratic armed opposition to Nazi Germany and linking it to the tradition of nineteenth-century uprisings and independence struggle.[12]

Independently of the official memory policies established in the People's Republic of Poland, the grassroots efforts to commemorate the soldiers of the underground flourished in exile. However, in both domestic and émigré activities, women were—if not entirely omitted—most often positioned within the traditionally understood gender order and patriarchal perspectives regarding war and national duties. As historian Dobrochna Kałwa noted, the dominant martyrological narratives created a canonical collective portrait of women who fulfilled a triple service—to the nation, to the homeland, and to socialism. Despite their inclusion in the community of the national wartime effort, their contributions were often described as *disparate and secondary*.[13] The narrative propagated by Polish fiction and popular culture, particularly from 1956 onward, reinforced the unequivocal image of the Warsaw Uprising—as a representative symbol of

[10] Beginning with the first arrests in 1944, deportations to labour camps in the Soviet Union, through trials before military courts, up to the last manhunts in the mid-1950s, the great operation of the "Polish" and Soviet secret services continued uninterrupted. The balance sheet of these operations is tragic - at least several thousand dead, tens of thousands of broken lives, broken ideological and political circles. (...) Just as the repressions were intended to physically liquidate the Polish Underground State, the aim of the propaganda was to destroy its myth and legend, see: Łukasz KAMIŃSKI: "Polskie Państwo Podziemne - długi trwanie w PRL, 1956-1989", *Pamięć i Sprawiedliwość*, 2 (2002), pp. 59-60.

[11] Łukasz KAMIŃSKI: op. cit.

[12] See, e.g.:Joanna WAWRZYNIAK: *ZBoWiD i pamięć drugiej wojny światowej 1949–1969*, Warszawa, Wydawnictwo TRIO, 2009; Marcin NAPIÓRKOWSKI: *Miasto umarłych. Historia pamięci 1944-2014*, Warszawa, Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2016; Marcin ZAREMBA: "Kolumbowie. Rewolucja pamięci", *Wielkie Rozczarowanie*, Kraków, Wydawnictwo ZNAK, 2023.

[13] Dobrochna KAŁWA: "Przemoc i zapomnienie. Druga wojna światowa z perspektywy płci kulturowej", in Katarzyna BAŁŻEWSKA, Dobrosława KORCZYŃSKA-PARTYKA, Alicja WÓDKOWSKA (eds.), *Kobiety i historia. Od niewidzialności do sprawczości*, Gdańsk, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Gdańskiego, 2015, pp. 28-29.

the entire Polish Underground State—as a male-dominated space, which further marginalized female soldiers. Film scholar Karolina Kosińska observes that while Polish productions about the Warsaw Uprising do feature female nurses, liaison officers, and civilians, these women are rarely depicted as main protagonists.[14] Instead, they are presented as companions to the men for whom they live, care, and sacrifice themselves. If they are portrayed as heroines, it is within the context of someone else's drama.[15]

Thus, while women were present in the underground, the remembrance of their contributions remained subordinate to the dominant narrative centered on male soldiers for many post-war years. The reversal of this trend can be credited to the female soldiers themselves. Ultimately, it was women who fought for their own remembrance, with the culmination of this process of *memory building* occurring between 1990 and 2010. Two women played a pivotal role in commemorating the participation of women in the struggle of the Polish Underground during the 1990s: General Elżbieta Zawacka[16] and General Maria Wittek.[17] Through their initiatives, the Pomeranian Archives and Museum of the Home Army and Women's Military Service in Toruń, along with the Commission for the History of Women in the Fight for Independence at the Central Archives of Modern Records (Archiwum Akt Nowych) in Warsaw, were established. In

[14] These are three most popular films and series about the 1944 Warsaw Uprising: "Kanal" by Andrzej Wajda (1956), "Kolumbowie" by Janusz Morgenstern (1970) and "Godzina W" by J. Morgenstern (1979).

[15] Karolina KOSIŃSKA: "To, czego nie ma. Relacje i wspomnienia kobiet z Powstania Warszawskiego jako gotowe, a niezrealizowane scenariusze filmowe", *Kwartalnik Filmowy*, 69 (2013), p. 95.

[16] Gen. Elżbieta Zawacka (1909-2009) - a mathematician by education, before World War II an instructor of Women's Military Organisation (Przysposobień Wojskowy Kobiet), in clandestine resistance movement since 1939, as a courier of the ZWZ-AK (Union of Armed Struggle) Headquarters she transported reports to the West, in 1943 she covered the route Warsaw – Nazi Germany - France - Spain - Gibraltar - London, After the war, she was recognised as the only woman "cichociemna"["silent unseen" commandos], wanted by the Nazi Germany, participated in the Warsaw Uprising in 1944, Lieutenant-Captain of the Home Army, after the war she was sentenced to 10 years in prison, from which she was released in 1955. Associated with the Solidarity movement. In 1990, she led the establishment of the Pomeranian Home Army Archive Foundation in Toruń, which housed the archives and accounts she had collected since the 1960s; in 2006, she was promoted to the rank of brigadier general, see, among others, Katarzyna MINCZYKOWSKA: *Cichociemna. General Elżbieta Zawacka "Zo"*, Warszawa, Oficyna Wydawnicza Rytm, 2014.

[17] Gen. Maria Wittek (1899- 1997) - a soldier of the Women's Voluntary Legion in 1920, from 1928 commander-in-chief of the Women's Military Organisation in the Second Republic of Poland, commander of an ZWZ-AK unit - Women's Military Service (code-named "Cooperative", then "Reading Room") her flat in Warsaw was one of the main centres of the Polish underground, after World War II she was arrested and imprisoned. After her release she worked in one of Warsaw's kiosks. In 1991 she was appointed Brigadier General, see Dorota KROMP, Katarzyna MINCZYKOWSKA: "Generał Maria Wittek 1899-1997. Naczelna komendantka Organizacji PRZYSPOSOBIENIA Wojskowego Kobiet i Szef Wojskowej Służby Kobiet Komenda Główna Służby Zwycięstwa Polski - Związku Walki Zbrojnej - Armii Krajowej", in Waldemar REZNER (ed.), *Służba Polek na frontach II wojny światowej*, *vol. 5 Wojenna służba Polek w II wojny światowej*, Toruń, Fundacja Generał Elżbiety Zawackiej, 2003.

doing so, they continued the efforts to institutionalize memory that Maria Wittek had initiated in 1970s.[18]

Female members of the Polish Home Army were thus central to most initiatives aimed at documenting and preserving their experiences. For nearly a decade, from 1997 to 2006, the Gen. Zawacka Foundation published successive collections of studies dedicated to the presence of women not only in the underground but also on various fronts during the First and Second World Wars. This historiography emerged from the needs of the female combatants themselves and was closely tied to the integrative activities of the community. Scientific conferences were typically combined with reunions of female veterans and ongoing efforts to collect documentation and memoirs.[19] From the 1990s onwards, oral history archives that gathered interviews with Warsaw insurgents and members of various underground organizations began to play an increasingly significant role.[20] Thanks to these initiatives, researchers have managed to answer questions regarding the extent of women's participation in the Polish Home Army and their areas of involvement in the movement. Concurrently, discussions employing gender analysis have led, at least to some extent, to paradigm shifts and the emergence of new questions concerning their personal experiences and subjective evaluations of the resistance organizations.

In 2013, sociologist and doctoral student at the Social School of the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences (PAN) in Warsaw, Weronika Grzebalska, published a book entitled *Płeć powstania warszawskiego* (The

[18] Maria Wittek was behind the idea of opening a Commission for the History of Women in the Fight for Independence at the Society of History Lovers [Stowarzyszenie Miłośników Historii], where the archives collected by her and her subordinates from the "Cooperative" were secured. At the end of the 1980s, she published *Słownik uczestniczek walki o niepodległość polski 1939-1945. Poległe i zmarłe w okresie okupacji niemieckiej*, Warsaw, Państ. Instytut Wydawniczy, 1988, which contained almost 4,500 biographical entries of women freedom fighters.

[19] Elżbieta ZAWACKA (ed.): *Służba Polek na frontach II wojny* światowej, *vol. 1, Przebieg sesji i zjazdu kombatantek*, Toruń, Fundacja Archiwum Pomorskie Armii Krajowej, 1997; Elżbieta ZAWACKA (ed.): *Służba Polek na frontach II wojny światowej, vol. 2, Referaty i komunikaty*, Toruń, Fundacja Archiwum Pomorskie Armii Krajowej, 1998; Elżbieta ZAWACKA (ed.): *Służba Polek na frontach II wojny światowej, vol. 3, Komunikaty i głosy*, Toruń, Fundacja Archiwum Pomorskie Armii Krajowej, 1999; Elżbieta ZAWACKA (ed.): *Służba Polek na Frontach II wojny Światowej, vol. 4, Wojenna służba Polek w II wojnie Światowej*, Toruń, Fundacja Archiwum Pomorskie Armii Krajowej, 1999; Irena SAWICKA, Maria HARZ, Władysław HENZEL (eds.): *Bibliografia wojennej służby kobiet*, Warszawa, Centralna Biblioteka Wojskowa and Fundacja Archiwum Pomorskie Armii Krajowej, 1999; Elżbieta ZAWACKA (ed.): *Z dziejów Przysposobienia Wojskowego Kobiet i Wojskowej Służby Kobiet : materiały*, Toruń, Fundacja Archiwum Pomorskie Armii Krajowej, 1999; Krystyna KABZIŃSKA (ed.): *Sylwetki kobiet-żołnierzy, vol. 1-2*, Toruń, Fundacja Archiwum i Muzeum Pomorskie Armii Krajowej oraz Wojskowej Służby Polek, 2003-2006; Karolina MINCZYKOWSKA, Jan SZILING (eds): *Kobiety w konspiracji pierwszej i drugiej wojny światowej*, Toruń, Fundacja Archiwum i Muzeum Pomorskie Armii Krajowej oraz Wojskowej Służby Polek, 2006.

[20] See e.g.: Archiwum Ośrodka Fundacji Karta; Dom Spotkań z Historią w Warszawie https://relacjebiograficzne.pl ; Archiwum Historii Mówionej Muzeum Powstania Warszawskiego https://www.1944.pl/archiwum-historii-mowionej.html, projekt Instytutu Pamięci Narodowej https://opowiedziane.ipn.gov.pl/ahm/swiadkowie

Gender of the Warsaw Uprising), thereby reinterpreting for the first time the participation of female citizens of the Second Republic of Poland in clandestine activities during the Second World War. She operates under the premise that the stereotypical image of women as natural opponents of militarization—dominant in contemporary Polish culture—does not align with reality, as evidenced by the significant participation of women in voluntary military organizations prior to World War II and their involvement in underground resistance efforts. Grzebalska's focus on the most symbolic event in the history of the Polish resistance movement, the Warsaw Uprising, underscores this point. Furthermore, she emphasizes that wartime conditions not only failed to undermine fundamental gender divisions but, in fact, reinforced them. The male defender was expected to engage in combat with a weapon in hand, while the female defender, despite being granted the status of a soldier, was primarily relegated to a supportive role. As Grzebalska notes, soldierhood remained closely associated with masculinity.[21] The persistence of this association proved so robust that the book ignited extensive public debate. The discourse surrounding the role of women in the Uprising elevated the issue of women's participation in clandestine activities to prominence for the first time, symbolized by the controversy over Grzebalska's use of the feminative *powstanka* (women-insurgent) instead of *powstaniec* (insurgent).

The strength of the thesis regarding rigid identity canons during the Second World War would be illustrated by a poignant quotation from the memoirs of one of the female soldiers, Jadwiga Podrygałło. She ironically described one of the training courses she attended near Warsaw:

> We had a lot of weapons, and after whole days we would assemble and disassemble them, clean them and learn about the various types of automatic weapons and pistols. (...) And to make our lives more interesting, on the first or second day, *Giewont* [the commander's alias - BKK] ordered night exercises. *Giewont* offered to us to observe the boys' exercises, but we protested. We are soldiers here, after all, and we want to be treated like men. Hearing our protest *Giewont* only smiled and said: - If so, please fall in line. (...)
>
> Before leaving [to Warsaw], *Giewont* passed the command on to *Karol* (Tadeusz Zürn), who was very young and deeply concerned about his role. And the very next day there was a short argument, completely unexpected and funny. *Karolek* saw that *Anda* and *Halina* were wearing make-up. He gave an order: - Wash yourselves, because after all soldiers do not paint themselves. *Anda* only laughed, but *Halina*, who was always an elegant woman, became deeply indignant: - by what right does a greaser interfere in her personal affairs? She refused

[21] Weronika GRZEBALSKA: op. cit.

> to obey the order and that's when *Karolek* got angry for good. He ordered a punitive exercise and chased her well around the garden.[22]

In adopting their soldierly roles, *Anda* and *Halina* were expected to relinquish the external markers of female identity. Makeup was deemed incompatible with the soldiering identity, which was closely associated with masculinity.

Women and the Polish Underground State

The presence of women in the underground Polish army was directly linked to women's activism, which led to the establishment of an organization promoting women's military auxiliary service. This initiative was primarily advocated by female soldiers who had participated in the First World War and the Polish-Bolshevik War of 1919-1920. They argued that women should be prepared to engage in potential conflicts through training and the formation of specialized military structures.[23] However, the policy of the Polish government and military authorities until 1926 was unequivocally opposed to defense preparations, a stance that applied not only to women but also to men.

Since the mid-1920s women organized themselves from the grassroots level into paramilitary structures. In defiance of military policies, they organized camps and training sessions for girls. In 1928, they established the Women's Organization for the Defense of the Country, which by the end of the 1930s had approximately 47,000 women. This organization conducted courses, facilitated unit work, and fought tirelessly to extend women's rights to full participation in the defense of the country. Even fifteen-year-olds could join, provided they had the consent of their parents and school principals.[24]

As fears of war mounted in 1937, a subject entitled *Preparation for National Defence* was introduced in secondary schools, which included girls in their final years and was taught by members of the Women's Military Organization. A similar situation prevailed in universities, where academic legions were formed. Political efforts yielded concrete results; in the spring of 1938, a law concerning general military duty was enacted, granting women the right to auxiliary military service in areas such as anti-aircraft defense, sentry, communications, technical support, firefighting, healthcare, and

[22]Jadwiga PODRYGAŁŁO: op. cit, pp. 63-64.
[23] Anna MARCINKIEWICZ-KACZMARCZYK: *Kobiety w obronie Warszawy. Ochotnicza Legia Kobiet (1918-1922) i Wojskowa Służba Kobiet ZWZ-AK,1939-1945*, Warszawa, Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, 2016, p.73. See also: Anna MARCINKIEWICZ-KACZMARCZYK: "From Buzuluk to London: The Combat Trail and Everyday Service of Women Auxiliaries in the Polish Army (1941–1945)", *International Journal of Military History and Historiography*, 39:2 (2019), pp. 263-287.
[24] Anna MARCINKIEWICZ-KACZMARCZYK, *Kobiety w obronie Warszawy...*, p.77.

transport services. Consequently, the position of the Organization, which had evolved into an association of greater utility a few months before the war, was strengthened.[25]

At the time of the German invasion of Poland, it became evident that the women's auxiliary service was of little interest to the Polish authorities. By summer, military officials had rejected the mobilization plan submitted by women's organizations. Regulations that could have enabled the integration of women into military service were issued too late—only during the evacuation of the government and just before the Soviet attack on September 17. This situation clearly indicated that women's auxiliary service was not regarded as a viable form of support. Nonetheless, the female members of the Organization participated in relief efforts in healthcare and communications, particularly during the defense of Warsaw.[26]

As Maciej Żuczkowski notes, despite initial resistance to the inclusion of women in military structures at the onset of the war, attitudes towards women's participation gradually evolved. This change was primarily driven by the increasingly dire social conditions under German and Soviet occupation, the division of the country, and the internment of a significant number of soldiers who were engaged on two fronts in September 1939. From the inception of military structures—closely intertwined with political frameworks—leadership roles in communications, secretariat functions, and financial management were assumed by women. Notably, in the context of clandestine operations in Poland, women's residences became critical nodes in the organizational network, particularly in urban areas.

The swearing-in of members of the Headquarters of the Underground forces in Warsaw occurred specifically in the apartment of one of the female soldiers, Halina Nieniewska.[27] Women played pivotal roles in commanding offices and established a network of contacts between high command and field organizations, often combining these responsibilities with other underground tasks, such as clandestine education.[28]

Ultimately, the principal responsibility for the involvement and activities of women in the underground was assumed by PWK Commander Maria Wittek. She was tasked with organizing the service of women as soldiers in auxiliary military roles, in accordance with the law enacted in April 1938. Wittek was responsible for recruiting

[25] Maciej ŻUCZKOWSKI: "Służba Kobiet w strukturach wojskowych Polskiego Państwa Podziemnego na przykładzie Dowództwa Głównego Służby Zwycięstwu Polski i Komendy Głównej Związku Walki Zbrojnej - Armii Krajowej", *Pamięć i Sprawiedliwość*, 26.2 (2015), p. 83-84.
[26] Maciej ŻUCZKOWSKI: op. cit, p. 84.

[28] Halina Nieniewska, as head of one of the departments of the Polish Home Army Headquarters, was also a teacher in an underground secondary school and a member of the underground party, the Democratic Stronnictwo Demokratyczne, and also wrote for the underground newspaper associated with it: "New Roads", see: Marek NEY-KRWAWICZ: "Karność, odwaga i ostrożność, koleżeństwo i ofiarność – to naczelne zasady", *Życie codzienne a służba żołnierzy- pracowników Komendy Głównej Armii Krajowej 1939-1944*, Warszawa, Instytut Historii im. Tadeusza Manteuffla Polskiej Akademii Nauk, 2023, p. 704.

female members of the organization and facilitating their training for auxiliary service in frontline conditions. This initiative led to the establishment of a cell codenamed *The Cooperative* (later referred to as 'Reading Room'). Wittek endeavored to reach all pre-war districts where women's paramilitary organizations had emerged prior to the conflict. To achieve this, she fostered collaborations with local activists, including scout troops and rural housewives' organizations.[29]

Women were bound, as were men, by the principle that service was voluntary; however, upon taking the oath, «a woman would be a soldier, both as to the obligation of military service and as to the consequences of breach of that obligation». Furthermore, women were to be integrated into the units to which they were assigned, remaining subordinate to their commanders, with *The Cooperative* designated as the unit responsible for all women's affairs within the army. This decision was predicated on the fact that, in practice, many women were affiliated with existing organizations, and the establishment of a separate entity was ultimately deemed inexpedient.[30] Maciej Żukowski emphasizes that the principles outlined above did not undergo substantial alteration throughout the occupation. *The Cooperative* retained its status as a deeply clandestine unit, with its existence known only to a select few in accordance with general clandestine movement protocols. In 1940, the next Commander of the organization asserted that: «It was inappropriate to label women's service as 'auxiliary,' given that the conditions under which they operated and the tasks they performed were identical to those of their male counterparts. He proposed this perspective to the Commander-in-Chief».[31]

Consequently, a new designation for the unit was adopted: the Women's Military Service [Wojskowa Służba Kobiet - WSK]. It was mandated that military ranks be conferred upon all women who did not already hold the. Ultimately, women active in the structures of the underground state were recognized as full-fledged soldiers of the Polish Army by a decree from the Commander-in-Chief in London on 27 October 1943. This recognition was particularly significant as preparations for the uprising commenced the following year, necessitating the expansion of military structures. Women were henceforth to be recruited and trained on a larger scale by the WSK. Training recommendations also included armed operations encompassing diversionary tactics, combat, and intelligence training. Simultaneously, the WSK was tasked with responsibilities related to healthcare, soldier support, communications, transport, guard duty, and administrative tasks for commanders. Nevertheless, subsequent directives emphasized that women were to replace men in roles where male service was not feasible. Researchers indicate, however, that the overarching aim was to enlist as few women as possible for security reasons. Consequently, it is challenging to accurately estimate their

[29] Anna MARCINKIEWICZ-KACZMARCZYK, *Kobiety w obronie Warszawy*…, p. 124.
[30] Maciej ŻUCZKOWSKI: op. cit, p. 87.
[31] Ibídem, p. 87.

actual numbers within the ranks of the Polish Home Army. Even if these women collaborated with underground structures, they may not have been formally sworn in; thus, they will not appear on the lists of soldiers.

In a substantial number of memoirs and accounts, there are recollections of training courses for women organized by the Headquarters:

> We had theoretical exercises at home, but during holidays we were given referrals - Barbara Żarska recalled - My friend and I, we were sent to the surgical outpatient clinic at 17 Dworska Street, which is now 17 Kasprzaka Street (...) We learnt how to perform procedures, dressings, bandaging and so on. Apart from that, we also had stretcher exercises. (...) Apart from that, we had military training. You would come to us and show us what a rifle looked like, what it was made of, how to cock it, how to aim. We had to learn all this. I think there was a cadet's handbook, and you had to learn it: how much it weighed, how many parts [it was made up of]. Today I wouldn't even be able to say that. He showed us personal weapons, so at that time he showed us the Vis (it was a Polish pistol produced in Radom) and the Parabellum, how to retract, how to put the magazine on, because it was different in the Parabellum and in the Vis. The Vis was of a different design. We didn't have drills. The boys had shooting exercises in the sticks. We didn't have shooting, in any case our group didn't have shooting, just to get familiar [with the weapons]. There was a military drill, to know how to report, how to salute, how to line up. Then there was an exam. After the exam there was a reception.... By then we had already finished the sanitary course and finished the military drill, and there was an exam. After the exam there was an oath. A major came, who had the pseudonym *Zygmunt* (I don't know his surname), took the oath and then we were all members of the Polish Home Army.[32]

Although leading positions in the Home Army were predominantly held by prewar professional officers, there were units, including central units, where women played a significant role. However, responsibilities related to aid, economic activities, and office work were typically reserved for women, reflecting a civilian rather than a military profile. Nonetheless, women also served in counterintelligence roles, for instance, as guards and medical personnel in the notorious Gestapo prison at Pawiak. They provided information regarding the fates of those arrested and delivered secret messages. Much of the intelligence gathered by female counterintelligence agents was subsequently transmitted to London. As researchers emphasize today, due to the stringent protocols

[32] AHM MPW [Archiwum Historii Mówionej Muzeum Powstania Warszawskiego], Barbara Żarska, alias "Basia", born 1926, corporal, nurse.

surrounding intelligence operations, most of these women remain anonymous, and their names cannot be established.

Before and during the uprising, women in the branches of the Ordnance Service were involved in the production of incendiary devices, pistols, explosives, and grenades. Undoubtedly, the most critical area of women's involvement in military clandestine activities was in distribution and healthcare services. Most students at the Warsaw School of Nursing, the only legal nursing institution in the General Government (GG), were affiliated with the clandestinity and participated in the Warsaw Uprising. During this time, female doctors, previously unconnected with the Polish Home Army or the Scouts, enlisted *en masse*. The couriers distributed materials throughout the General Government, employing methods of distribution that primarily depended on their initiative. Initially, they carried smaller quantities of newspapers on their persons or concealed beneath their clothing. As the volume of materials increased, they resorted to using double-bottomed suitcases. They distributed not only printed materials but also medications, money, orders, and even small arms.[33] It was believed that women were less likely to attract scrutiny, thereby enhancing their chances of successfully transporting materials compared to their male counterparts.

Finally, within the Union of Retaliation, a unit dedicated to day-to-day combat, two combat units composed of women were established: the Women's Miner Patrols, commanded by Zofia Franio, and the Women's Diversion and Sabotage Unit, led by Wanda Gertz. [34] These units engaged in diversionary and reconnaissance operations. Approximately 180 women served in both units throughout the war. In addition to the women soldiers actively participating in the underground army, numerous women supported the Polish Underground State in less formal capacities, primarily by providing their apartments for underground activities, meetings, or for housing and storing weapons and documents.

The Polish Home Army, a highly complex and clandestine structure, supported women, despite their limited presence on the front lines. Current estimates of the number of women involved in the underground, based on research from the mid-1980s, suggest a figure of around 56,000, a statistic that remains difficult to contest today. During the Warsaw Uprising, women reportedly constituted approximately 22% of the fighting force, numbering around 11,000 individuals.

It is important to note that girls and women played a crucial role in underground Jewish organizations, although due to extremely difficult conditionstheir numbers were of inevitably smaller. Many of these women had been active prior to the war in Jewish youth organizations. One prominent leader of the Jewish underground in Poland was

[33] Maciej ŻUCZKOWSKI: op. cit, p. 87.
[34] See more: *Łączność, Sabotaż, Dywersja. Kobiety w Armii Krajowej*, Londyn, Zarząd Główny Armii Krajowej, 1985.

Frumka Płotnicka (1914-1943), who served as a spiritual liaison for the dispersed Zionist youth groups in occupied Poland. Concurrently, she gathered and disseminated information regarding the extermination of Jews by the Nazis. Notably, as early as September 1939, when men were mobilized into the army, a new Central Committee composed exclusively of women emerged within the Zionist organization.[35] The situation was analogous in other organizations. Female activists in the movement were tasked with forming resistance groups under the extremely challenging conditions faced by the Jewish population. Together with Mordechai Anielewicz, the commander of the Jewish Combat Organization [Żydowska Organizacja Bojowa - ŻOB], Frumka co-founded resistance cells in areas annexed by the Nazi Germany as of May 1942, particularly in the Dąbrowa Basin. Eventually, Frumka led a branch of the ŻOB there, which at that time had a membership of approximately 200 individuals. Under her leadership, the organization collected weapons and coordinated key roles in smuggling operations. Additionally, bombs, grenades, Molotov cocktails, as well as counterfeit caps and armbands of Jewish police officers were manufactured in private residences. Maria Misztal cites an account by Aron Brandys, who wrote «We sent comrade Idzia Pesachson to Warsaw to present our situation there. After a few days, Idzia and another comrade, Astryd, carried revolvers and bombs [...] Astryd started to bring weapons from Warsaw constantly. She travelled twice a week, she had to transport the weapons across the border, but she was always able to wriggle out of control».[36]

In addition, women distributed leaflets and made their apartments available for underground activities. As the Jews of Zagłębie began to be incarcerated in the ghettos, organizations transitioned to bunkers established within the cities, which served as outposts for armed resistance and hiding places. The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in April 1943, which culminated in the Germans burning down the district, was a profound shock for most of resistance fighter. Some young individuals chose to resist and retreated into the bunkers during the liquidation of the Będzin ghetto in the summer of 1943. Frumka Płotnicka was killed during the ghetto's liquidation on 3 August 1943.

Violence, Women and the memory of the Warsaw Uprising

In this article, I refer primarily (although not exclusively) to oral history archive created at the Warsaw Rising Museum in Warsaw. At the moment, the collection of recordings consists of more than 3,500 testimonies of witnesses - participants of the clandestine resistance movement and civilian witnesses of the uprising, which were recorded

[35] Maria Stanisława MISZTAL: "Udział i rola kobiet w ruchu oporu Żydów w Będzinie i Sosnowcu podczas II wojny światowej", in Anna LANDAU-CZAJKA (ed), *Na marginesie dziejów. Studia z polsko-żydowskiej historii społecznej: kobiety, młodzież, dzieci*, Warszawa, Instytut Historii im. Tadeusza Manteuffla Polskiej Akademii Nauk, 2023, p. 335.
[36] Maria Stanisława MISZTAL: op. cit., pp. 337-338.

in Poland and abroad. The interviews conducted are transcribed and available on the Museum's website. The advantage of this collection, which began to be built in 2014, is its comprehensiveness and methodological consistency. The analyses of this collection undertaken so far point to some of their characteristics, which can be identified at the same time as disadvantages, and which are largely dueto the specificity of the Warsaw Rising Museum as an institution that creates and sustains its myth.[37] The creators of the collection refer to the assumptions of the oral history and the principle of giving voice to witnesses of history, but unlike the methodology primarily used in Poland by Fritz Schütze. they are constrained by a questionnaire of repetitive questions, e.g. about everyday life, the course of actions of a particular unit or religiousness.[38] Due to the huge number of interviews, their quality varies greatly and depends on the volunteers or staff conducting the interviews. The interviews are biographically structured in the sense that the central story of the uprising is usually preceded by information about the family and experiences of the occupation period. In addition, quite a few of the interviews were conducted with people born in their late twenties or even in 1931, which means that we are dealing in this case with girls aged 13-17, sometimes Girl Scouts, who during the uprising distributed the mail or became nurses

A characteristic frame of the analysed interviews is the character of the construction of memories, which mostly refer positively to the very idea of triggering the uprising in Warsaw in the summer of 1944 (which for some witnesses and historians is no longer so obvious[39]). Linguists studying the collection in terms of the linguistic mechanisms of emotivisation point to the high intensity of the emotions that are repressed during the interviews. What is particularly surprising in the interviews as a whole is the dominance of positive emotions, which disappear almost only in accounts that are openly critical of the outbreak of the uprising. Positive feelings such as euphoria, delight, joy or hope are very intense, and the witnesses are not always able to express them fully.[40] The following example, except for the last sentence on masculinity, is quite typical:

> I wouldn't give up one hour of my work in the underground. It was the most wonderful period of my life. What no one can understand who has not been

[37] Beata DUDA, Ewa FICEK: "Musiało tak być, bo bez tego by nie było nic. Językowe środki perswazji w relacjach wspomnieniowych z Archiwum Historii Mówionej Muzeum Powstania Warszawskiego (na wybranych przykładach)", *Res Rhetorica*, 11/1 (2024), p. 69. https://doi.org/10.29107/rr2024.1.4

[38] Jakub GAŁĘZIOWSKI: "Czas na analizę! O potrzebie seminariów historii mówionej", *Wrocławski Rocznik Historii Mówionej*, 12 (2022), p. 230.

[39] On the debate surrounding the Warsaw Uprising, see e.g., Eugeniusz DURACZYNSKI: "Powstanie warszawskie-badań i sporów ciąg dalszy", *Dzieje Najnowsze*, 27:1 (1995), pp. 71-88; Dariusz GAWIN (ed.): *Spór o Powstanie: Powstanie Warszawskie w powojennej publicystyce polskiej 1945-1981*, Warszawa, Muzeum Powstania Warszawskiego, 2004; Andrzej Leon SOWA: *Kto wydał wyrok na miasto? Plany operacyjne ZWZ-AK (1940−1944) i sposoby ich realizacji*, Kraków, Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2016.

[40] Beata DUDA, Ewa FICEK: op. cit., p. 70.

> in the underground. What a miracle it was! What a friendship it was! It is difficult to describe at all. They were people as close as parents, as brothers, as sisters. We really loved each other, I mean not erotically, God forbid, but we were attached to each other. (...) I wouldn't give up one hour of my life, of the underground. It was the most beautiful period of my life, even though it was the most dangerous...And the men were really men.[41]

At the same time, there is a peculiar internal tension in the interviews as a result of the coexistence of these unambiguously positive emotions with fear, anger and hatred, which can be expressed not only through the explicit verbalisation of these feelings, but also by appealing to the listener's imagination by evoking such concepts as executions, murders, hell, hecatomb, annihilation or cruelty.[42] This coexistence of emotional expression with the expression of fear correlated with the memory of violence appears in messages regardless of gender. To this must be added the pathetic colouring of many of the messages, which, according to the researchers, must be put down primarily to the temporal distance from the events of 1944. At the same time, the authors of the study, who devoted considerable attention to tracing the functioning of discursive communities in the interviews, did not see any manifestation of a gender community in them. The predominant identification of the interviewees with the group of insurgents as a whole or the community of young people ("we insurgents", "we youth").

Correlations of positive emotions and violence are found, for example, in the extensive account of Wanda Traczyk-Stawska, who was only 13 when the war broke out, and only 17 when it broke out. "It was both terrible and so beautiful that I don't think anyone who has not lived through it can imagine it" - she reported.[43]

a) "I dreamt of gun"

In Traczyk-Stawska's account of her own fate as a girl and then as a teenager, we are presented with a narrative built from the layered experiences of violence that frame the war and explain her personal choice to participate in the scout clandestine movement and finally the uprising. In these, she is a direct witness to individual violence. What is characteristic of this narrative is the avoidance of their hierarchy but a layering and shuffling that probably quite intuitively captures the experience of a 12–13-year-old.

Starting on 17 September 1939, when the Germans brutally shot an infant before her eyes and wounded her mother. Through the expulsion of her Jewish neighbours

[41] AHM MPW, Hanna Barbara Szczepkowska-Mickiewicz "Anna", b. 1915, interview by Małgorzata Brama, Milanówek 2006.
[42] Beata DUDA, Ewa FICEK: op. cit., pp. 70-71.
[43] AHM MPW, Wanda Traczyk-Stawska, born 1927, alias Pączek, platoon sergeant, interview by Mariusz Kudła, Warsaw, 2009.

from their home. Then the home invasion of the Germans: «He pushed me, this officer, because I wasn't very polite, and then my dog, this beloved dog, jumped on his shoe and he hit him against the wall so that his spine probably broke. And that was also one of my horrible experiences».[44]

While in the events at the beginning of the war she was a direct witness to the violence, which, incidentally, directly affected her, in the course of her entry into the clandestinity through scouting she began, of her own free will and against her scout mentors, to engage in activities which, due to the danger but also the context of *carrying death*, were originally rather (although not exclusively) the domain of male militants:

> I had the most difficult service you can imagine (...) For the reason that, for almost a year, we had action "N" as a task, distributing, among other things, warnings to Germans who mistreated Poles and Jews in a particular way. It was such a form that (...) I had to enter the house where the person lived to whom I was to deliver a warning that a death sentence would be committed on him. I had to serve it to the one who had this sentence. It was a total vulnerability and the knowledge that this was an adult of some kind, and I would not be able to defend myself in any way. It was a hard service for me.[45]

Grzebalska recalls that it was the belief of the men of the time, including the Home Army soldiers themselves, that the physical liquidation of a person convicted of denunciation or treason should not be commissioned to women as more sensitive than men.[46]

It seems that Traczyk-Stawska, after four years filled with training and service primarily in small-scale sabotage, was convinced that she was fully ready for soldier duty during the uprising, that is, service with a weapon in her hand. She recalled: «I, through the window, saw boys running out of Boduen 2 who were very well armed, I saw that they had lightning bolts all over them, and I had always, since I had to go unarmed to those [to whom I carried warnings of death sentences], dreamed of guns».[47]

At the same time, she was acutely aware that, as a woman and a minor at that, she was last in line for a gun. Such an internalised belief in the need for equal treatment of men and women in the army was not at all common. Traczyk, perhaps due to her young age and relatively radical combat experience (indirect participation in liquidations, participation in sabotage actions, e.g. the destruction of the Nur fur Deutsch café) became accustomed to the idea of inflicting death and having the right to do so. If there

[44] Ibidem.
[45] Ibidem.
[46] Consequently, the women's units committed only two successful liquidations of denouncer, see Weronika GRZEBALSKA: op. cit., p. 84.
[47] AHM MPW, op.cit.

was a ban on shooting, she makes this clear in her account: «We weren't allowed to kill, they didn't give us weapons directly, we just had smoke grenades and stinky, kind of caustic agents in glass containers».[48]

Eventually a colleague gave her an old smith-wesson, and moving to a new well-stocked unit she had access to pistols as a gunner - liaison officer. That guns remain at the centre of her insurgent story symbolically illustrates the situation of extreme scarcity and the belief that in the hands of women this rationed good would go to waste. Among other things, she devotes considerable space to shooting techniques and ammunition shortages, as well as to the illegal ways in which weapons were produced in the underground. She also extensively describes a brawl with one of the insurgents who wanted to take away her weapons: «Then I, because I had been with the boys for so long and they weren't parliamentary in their vocabulary, well first I cocked the gun and said what I was going to do in very unparliamentary words, well we nearly had a fight with this boy».[49]

The lack of weapons in the case of female combatants, especially nurses, often had tragic consequences:

> I have to say that the best, the bravest were the nurses, then the liaison officers, and only then the boys. The nurses went without weapons, and they still had to carry, they couldn't run, they had to collect the wounded, put them on stretchers. (...) The boys were calling out, moaning, you could see how they were suffering there, it was already daytime. And they ran to save their boys, to dress them, to crawl to them. They had to run through such a small section where the CCM was fired. They were dressed in white aprons, in armbands, they ran one by one and died.[50]

Traczyk-Stawska thus makes very clear in the interview the different statuses of the women in her unit. In addition to the nurses, or 'insurgents without weapons', there were those who were experts in the field. This was a group that clearly impressed her personally, as they crossed the boundaries set by tardy gender roles with vigour: «We had a mine-sapper section of girls who, when we were in action and needed to get somewhere, blew holes and, when they were free, picked TNT out of unexploded ordnance with a spoon and made grenades - 'sidolki'. They also armed bottles. In a word, they were the truest sappers, although they had no moustaches and were very pretty».[51]

[48] Ibidem.
[49] Ibidem.
[50] Ibidem.
[51] Ibidem.

When asked by the interviewer about her worst memory of the uprising, Traczyk answered without hesitation: «Capitulation was the most horrible [memory]. For me capitulation was the worst thing that could happen to a soldier».[52]

To this coherent account of the violence experienced by a female insurgent soldier that we find in Tkaczyk-Stawska's narrative, one more piece of the puzzle should be added: the suffering of the insurgent due to the wounds she received.[53]

b) "Have you witnessed or been a victim of war crimes?"

One of the most extensive testimonies to be found in the collection of the Warsaw Rising Museum is that of a nurse, Halina Żelaska, pseudonym *Zośka* (born 1923), who fought in the Old Town. Unlike in the case of Traczyk, it also does not fit into the dominant framework of emotional intensity. The account is detailed, rationalised and structured. Żelaska basically needs no questions. She weaves a compact story, which allows us to look closely at the selection of events and examples of experiences. We find in her what often disappears in enthusiastic accounts of the uprising, namely the position of the observer of mass violence, which is psychologically unbearable, but the author is aware that she is a witness obliged to testify to the crime. In this sense, her account is in some places closer to that of civilians than of insurgents and insurgents. Żelaska is not much older than Traczyk, but the four-year age difference may be crucial in this case: «No. I have never had a gun. - she declares - Anyway, there were no weapons, and it is inconceivable that anyone, even my sister, I don't remember having even a short weapon. (...) Petrol bottles, filipinkas, grenades a little. But when it came to weapons, not every soldier had a gun either».[54]

From her account one can read, at least at first glance, agreement with the prevailing gender order. As a nurse, she seems to belong to a different group than the "soldiers". At the same time, her testimony as a witness/observer is powerful because of its sincerity and, it seems, her resistance to the prevailing conventions governing the story of the uprising.

Halina Żelaska observes certain events from a "safe place" as a person working for a German office:

> I just stood at the window and saw that huge vans had arrived. They opened the flaps. (...) The flaps weren't such that you could get down lightly, they just hung a bit diagonally. But generally, it was very difficult to get down, and at

[52] Ibidem.
[53] See, for example, AHM MPW Janina Barbara Greenfield-Żbikowska "Hanka", born 1924, paramedic, interview by Maria Zima, Warsaw, 2012.
[54] AHM MPW, Halina Żelaska pseud. *Zośka*, born 1923, nurse, interview by Urszula Adamowicz, Warsaw, 2014.

> the top of every car there were soldiers standing with rifles and with these butts they were pushing them all, as if beating them, and they fell down, some of them. (...) They lined them all up against the wall on Brzozowa Street. And when I saw them [being thrown] out of the cars, I couldn't [look] anymore, I couldn't go on... Not only did I hear the shots, but I couldn't go on watching.[55]

In the same rhythm, almost as if from the position of an outside observer (even though she is directly threatened), she reports on the rapes carried out by the soldiers of RONA units (units consisting of foreigners in German service, mainly from the USSR) in and near Warsaw.

> During the night we were woken up by some shouting, a crash. They broke down the door, the scream was Zosia's. They raped Zosia first, because she was sleeping in the kitchen, and the entrance was from the staircase directly into the kitchen, there was no hallway. That's how it was built before. But we didn't know that, that they raped her, they just rushed in, two of them rushed into our room. One of them immediately started to get at this Mrs Perełka and says to the other one, pointing at me, *It's rebionok'* And the other one came up to me, deflected that one, and says: *Kak rebionok?* And I, at that moment, as he discovered it, I jumped over the other one, who was picking at it, and the lady was defending herself, and I opened the window next to it and started screaming terribly. I didn't even know it was possible to get so much voice out of yourself (...). When I started screaming, the two of them and the one, they all ran away.[56]

Halina Żelaska thus firstly overcomes one of the strongest taboos of the Warsaw Uprising, that is the taboo of sexual violence against women: both female soldiers and civilians. Secondly, she consciously places these crimes in a row alongside the mass murders committed in the capital or the deliberate destruction of the city's fabric with fire, which she describes in detail in the next part of her account.

Two more important contexts of the experience of violence play a special role in the accounts of the women insurgents. Firstly, it is a message that carries at the same time a commitment to help thus referring to the traditional division of gender roles, e.g. as in Krystyna Zwolińska's account: «(...) there was a big bombardment at Dąbrowskiego Square in Victoria during the day and a lot of the basement collapsed. We had to

[55] Ibidem.
[56] Ibidem.

pull people out of that cellar. That was the first time I saw such a pile of swollen corpses, because you don't know why the body swells enormously after such an explosion».[57]

Finally, the symbolic violence with which the witnesses were particularly unable to cope even years later was the aggression from the civilian inhabitants of Warsaw. As the interviews indicate, this aggression was more difficult for the insurgents to accept, as they usually experienced it suddenly and it aroused in them a sense of isolation. Women, such as nurse Krystyna Zwolińska, rightly perceived it as an element of class divisions:

> It was my first confrontation with the so-called *people of the city*, Krystyna recounted years later. It was, however, a different type of gathering than such intellectual basements on Marszałkowska Street (...). Here we were almost attacked (...). It was a big internal experience for me. Encountering people who did not take part in the Uprising, for whom it was an indifferent matter, who did not understand the reasons why it broke out and who were revolted.[58]

It was the insurgents who were to blame for the suffering of the civilians.

Conclusions

Experiencing violence was one of the phenomena of the occupation period, particularly during the Warsaw Uprising, that did not so much differentiate citizens as unify them. However, this unity is only superficial. The recollection of violence was influenced by one's affiliation with the resistance movement and by gender. The remembrance of violence among women soldiers encompasses many shades of complexity, yet two distinct narratives emerge within the collective memory of the Uprising. These narratives exemplify the construction or rejection—often unconsciously—of a female soldier identity, a topic that Krylova has explored.

In the analyzed source material, there is a notable prevalence of full acceptance of the soldier's role, in which violence was inherently embedded. Consequently, some female insurgents dismantled the rigid gender order during the tumult of the occupation, while one of the central artifacts of female soldiers' narratives became weapons: the aspiration to possess them, as well as stories of acquiring or losing them. This desire was not solely dictated by their limited access to weaponry but also reflected their subjective feelings of being excluded from the circle of privileged possessors (i.e., men).

[57] AHM MPW, Krystyna Zwolińska-Malicka "Długa Krystyna", b. 1920, interview by Bartek Giedrys, Warsaw 2005; see also e.g. AHM MPW, Wanda Grzeszkowiak-Tycner "Radziejowska", "Pepanc" b. 1926, interview by Grzegorz Komosiński, Warsaw 2010.
[58] AHM MPW, Krystyna Zwolińska-Malicka.

Conversely, there exists a narrative of violence predominantly viewed through the lens of the witness and the helper, which aligns more closely with traditional social role divisions. Nevertheless, in the case of female paramedics, who occupy a somewhat liminal position (typically unarmed and responsible for the welfare of others), we often encounter a unique transgression of social taboos and testimonies of sexual violence against women.