Redefining Resistance: Women in National Liberation Movements during the Second World War*

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In times when civil advocacy for freedom and individual rights worldwide is more than necessary, it is crucial to remember and illustrate how people resisted and how resistance has been possible even in the darkest chapters of human history. Women played a major role in the resistance in different forms of armed and unarmed resistance. Despite periods of questioning and reassessment after both 1918 and 1945, the "mythical" differentiation between men and women regarding war persisted, in part because scholars employed insufficient categories for the understanding of the realities and complexities of women's participation in the conflicts. For generations, dominant models identified resistance with military operations. This primarily militarized vision of resistance has obstructed a view of the range of resistance actions, doubly challenging to bring women's resistance into standard works, because they are not men but also because they frequently use nonviolent means to resist. Feminist historians, however, have questioned since the 1980s, the assertion that the two wars were entirely male enterprises. Their studies analyze the many different roles women played in the resistance.[1] Resistance is one of those terms that, although seemingly clear-cut, is difficult to define. Women have shown that resistance can be armed, unarmed, organized, unorganized, massive, individual, "apolitical", and strongly political at the same time. Female resistance calls into question, thus, the dominant concept of "resistance".

This Special Issue of the *Revista Universitaria de Historia Militar* (RUHM) builds on and advances previous research to offer new directions for studying women's experiences during the Second World War. One of these directions would be a broader

* The dossier is a Special Issue derived from the project CERV-2022-CITIZENS-REM "Women in Resistance. Reshaping the Narratives on Female Antitotalitarian Resistance in Europe" (WIRE), funded by the EU under GA No. 101091223.

[1] See for example Maurine GREENWALD: *Women, War, and Work: The Impact of World War I on Women Workers in the United States*, Greenwood Press, Westport, Conn., 1980; June A. WILLENZ: *Women Veterans: America's Forgotten Heroines*, Continuum, New York, 1983; Kazimiera J. COTTAM: *Soviet Airwomen in Combat in World War II*, MA/AH Publishing, Manhattan, Kansas, 1983; Francoise THEBAUD: *La femme au temps de la guerre de 14*, Stock, Paris, 1986.

definition of "resistance", which should also include unarmed resistance and acts that in normal times could be seen as part of daily life. The difference is rooted in timing, location, and perspective. In many occupied countries, like France, women were expected to eat last if there was not enough food. This points to the expectation that the challenge of living in crises under extreme stress was dumped on women. So, one possible gender difference identified for further exploration in this Special Issue would be the integration of resistance into women's everyday life activities, a day-to-day stand for what they thought was "right".[2]

Since the 1980s, scholars have used gender as a lens to interrogate wartime experiences to reveal the way femininity is subordinated to masculinity in a binary relationship that implicitly corresponds to the civilian/military divide.[3] Studies of the Second World War show that the civilian-military binary did not hold firm, nor did gender roles exclude women from armed combat.[4] Indeed, in Greece, Yugoslavia, Italy, Poland and the USSR, as well as in other countries, women took up arms and participated in combats.[5] As this Special Issue indicates, the phenomena of women's mass military engagement in Greece, Italy and Poland presented a major and unexpected shift. According to Ingrid Strobl, author of *The Partisanas*, these were women who «broke the mold» of expected female passivity and did so outside of any explicitly feminist context.[6]

For example, Tasoula Vervenioti highlights that over one-third of Greek women participated in political, cultural, and military branches of the resistance, with women comprising 10% of reservists in guerrilla platoons of the National Popular Liberation Army (ELAS). During the Warsaw Uprising, Barbara Klich-Kluczewska notes that

[2] See Nathan STOLTZFUS, Mordecai PALDIEL, and Judy BAUMELl-SCHWART: "Women Defying Hitler. An Introduction", en Nathan STOLTZFUS, Mordecai PALDIEL, and Judy BAUMELl-SCHWART: (eds.): *Women Defying Hitler. Rescue and Resistance under the Nazis*, Bloomsbury Publishing, London, 2021, p. 69.

[3] Joan SCOTT: "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis", *The American Historical Review*, 91: 5 (1986), pp. 1053-1075; Joan SCOTT: "Women and War: A Focus for Rewriting History", *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 12:2, *Teaching about Peace, War, and Women in the Military* (1984), pp. 2-6

[4] Margaret HIGONNET and Patrice HIGONETTE: "The Double Helix", en Margaret HIGONETTE et al. (eds.): *Behind the Line: Gender and the Two World Wars*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1987, pp. 31-50.

[5] Jane HART: *New Voices in the Nation: Women in Greek Resistance, 1941-1964*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1996; Tasoula VERVENIOTI: *I gynaika tis Antistasis. I eisodos ton gynaikon stin Politiki* [The Woman of the Resistance: Women's Entrance into Politics], Odysseas, Atenas, 1994; Ada GOBETTI: *Partisan Diary: A Woman's Life in the Italian Resistance*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2014; Rachel MARGOLIS: *A Partisan from Vilna*, Academic Studies, Boston, 2010; Jelena BATINIĆ: *Women and Yugoslav Partisans: A History of World War II Resistance*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2015; Alexis PERI: "Womanhood Under Fire: Gender Practice and Identity in Soviet Accounts of the Front Lines", en Mark CROWLEY and Sandra TRUDGEN DAWSON (eds.): *Women's Experiences of War: Exile, Occupation and Everyday Life, 1939-45*, The Boydell Pres, London, 2020; Anna KRYSLOVA: *Soviet Women in Combat: A History of Violence on the Eastern Front*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2010, pp. 168-169; Roger D. MARKWICK and Euridice Charon CARDONA: *Soviet Women on the Frontline in the Second World War*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2012.

[6] Ingrid STROBL: *Partisanas. Women in the Armed Resistance to Fascism and German Occupation (1936-1945)*, AK Press, Edinburgh, Oakland, West Virginia, 2008 (pimera edición en 1987).

women constituted approximately 22% of the fighting force. Roberta Mira points to Italy, where women actively took up arms in significant numbers, complementing the larger cohort involved in unarmed and support roles. In Spain, the numbers were comparatively lower, influenced by multiple factors; approximately 6,000 to 8,000 guerrilla fighters included only around 150 women.

The articles of Tasoula Vervenioti and Mercedes Yusta reveal that in the case of Greece and Spain, the resistance movements were deeply rooted in the countryside, and connected with long-standing traditions of peasant resistance. Resistance had a notable influence on the social and political evolution of a large part of rural Spain and Greece, which irreversibly affected the daily lives of thousands of peasants, mostly women. Although a woman had a subordinate role in this rural world, several factors significantly affected her entry into the revolutionary partisan army. Additionally, Vervenioti sustains that the mass participation of rural women in the resistance movement overturned one of the basic axioms of village society: «the superiority of men over women and the elderly over the young».

Yet, female entry into armed resistance was fraught with challenges. As Vervenioti, Yusta and Mira show, women had to affront the openly sexist attitudes and misogyny of many political and guerrilla leaders. In Spain, for example, Santiago Carrillo, the general secretary of the Spanish Communist Party, disparagingly referred to women as «elements of corruption in the guerrillas, along with drinking and waste of money», indicating the hostility female fighters faced. Women were excluded "formally" from the guerrilla in Spain except the Guerrilla Federation of Leon-Galicia. In Greece, women could be admitted as long as they "guarded their honour". Vervenioti introduces an interesting factor to further interpret women's, and men's, attitudes in the resistance movements: the "codes" that permeated and united rural societies, among them the "honour". Guerrillas' acceptance of this code led to the prohibition of sexual relations in the Greek guerrilla. The honour of the family, which depended mainly on the "morality" of women, was in danger of being damaged by their participation in the resistance movement. The perception that women would be "disgraced" and "corrupted" if they organized themselves was one of the biggest obstacles, so the resistance movement undertook the role of the family, the guardian of women's morality. «First you look at the cemetery, then at your female comrades», said the Greek *andartes*. As Mira sustains, in Italy, the difficulty of joining the fighting brigades was related to the female stereotype of the «angel of the hearth: weak, not very courageous and not very rational because she was at the mercy of her emotions». Thus, women were to be entrusted at most with tasks of care and assistance. This view was widespread even among anti-Fascists, for whom, «the figure of the woman active in the resistance was not that of the fighter, but that of the courier, unarmed and on a bicycle».

Women were also unable to progress to higher command or political positions in the military, or to be promoted in the top ranks of the communist parties' leaderships. Our four experts show that there were hardly any cases of women holding positions of responsibility within the guerrilla forces; their place was on the side of the men, "alongside" the men. Klich-Kluczewska shows that, in Poland, the male defender was expected to engage in combat with a weapon in hand. However, the female defender, despite being granted the status of a soldier, was primarily relegated to a supportive role, «soldierhood remained closely associated with masculinity».

The circumstances that allowed women to organize and enter the public sphere were not enough to overturn centuries of tradition. Societies in the first half of the 20th century were regulated by rigidly structured gender roles and functions that kept women in subordinate positions. War's emergency conditions could either alter or reinforce existing notions of gender, the nation, and the family. Total war, indeed, acted as a clarifying moment because it revealed systems of gender in a state of flux, and highlighted their workings and arbitrariness. And while, during war and resistance, women's objective situation did change, relationships of domination and subordination were retained through discourses that systematically designated unequal gender relations. Finally, at least in these four national cases, total war reproduced and even accentuated previous gender roles. Within this system of gender, female resistance was presented as "natural", as in the state of peace.

The articles in this Special Issue demonstrate that, while women played vital roles in guerrilla logistics and support networks, their contributions often went unrecognized. Women who took up arms performed seemingly auxiliary and secondary activities in the context of the guerrilla. However, as all four articles reveal, women's participation in guerrilla support networks was of utmost importance. We should consider the resistance movements beyond the armed groups, as Mercedes Yusta very convincingly explains. These movements were embedded in the fabric of the local population, which included many women who supported them, and without whom they could never have survived. But how should we "categorize" the organization of logistics and supplies for the partisan formations, the courier order-delivery service, communication, information gathering and all the activities that revolved around armed resistance? Are they "armed" or "unarmed" resistance? As Roberta Mira points out, some acts of civil resistance were independent and their objectives did not refer directly to armed partisan activity, but alongside them, we should include the above-mentioned activities. These were not mere support activities but «fundamental and indispensable elements for the development and operation of the fighting partisan formations and political bodies of the resistance». The majority of the auxiliary services of all four guerrillas were supported by women, not counted as soldiers.

But even the women who participated in the armed struggle neither were considered soldiers. Studies of women in uniform from the early modern period to the present, as DeGroot, Peniston-Bird, Melissa Herbert, Nancy Goldman and others suggest, reveal the way notions of femininity continue to obstruct and resist the idea that women can be soldiers, even as they are employed as warriors in conflict.[7] Women's participation in the guerilla "with or without arms" was seen as a contribution and not as a necessary condition for its existence. So, again, resistance appears as "something men do" because what counted was the armed resistance. Women seemed to have played a secondary and subsidiary role, an almost "natural" role since they were involved in civil resistance, in unarmed resistance.

Even though women were confined to the domestic role of wife and mother and were not considered political subjects, as all four articles show, women displayed an inspirational range of resistance activities: they carried out sabotage, leaflet and clandestine press printing and distribution, demonstrations and strikes; they were especially present in protests against the burden of war, the high living costs and food rationing; they gathered information, transported messages, and anything else that might be needed by fighters and those wanted by the authorities; they were instructors, propagandists, organizers, and nurses; women became key figures in rescue operations of vast proportions; they hid partisans and allied soldiers, concealed weapons, or held meetings in safety; they cared for the dead and maintained community ties.

Furthermore, women were given the tasks that male partisans could not carry out since «they were less suspect in the eyes of the Fascists and the Nazis». Juliette Pattison argues that gender stereotypes were employed by the Special Operations Executive (SOE), which trained and used female spies because they were thought more able to avoid detection and "pass" as civilians than men.[8] A woman in a masculine culture might have advantages.[9] During sudden document checks, women with small children were more likely to be allowed to pass by.

In the same logic, unstructured groups and individuals have been rarely defined as resistance in historical research. Women who took part in militant mobilizations were not all members of specific organizations. The boundaries between organized and unorganized were not clear. Thus, the acts of resistance by women, which were neither

[7] Gerard J. DEGROOT and C. PENISTON-BIRD: *A Soldier and a Woman: Sexual Integration in the Military*, Routledge, London, 2000; Melissa HERBERT: *Camouflage Isn't Only for Combat: Gender, Sexuality and Women in the Military*, NYU Press, New York, 1998; Nancy GOLDMAN: *Female Soldiers - Combatants or Non-Combatants: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives,* London, Greenwood Press,1982; Cynthia ENLOE: *Maneuvers: The International Politics of Militarizing Women's Lives*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2000; Jean BETHKE ELSHTAIN: *Women and War*, Basic, New York, 1987.

[8] Juliette PATTINSON: *Behind Enemy Lines: Gender, Passing and the Special Operations Executive in the Second World War*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2007.

[9] Nathan STOLTZFUS, Mordecai PALDIEL, and Judy BAUMELl-SCHWART: "Women Defying Hitler. An Introduction…, p. 7; Margaret LAFOY ROSSITER: *Women in the Resistance*, Praeger Publishers Inc, Westport CT, 1985, p. 13.

recognized nor corresponded to prevailing moral perceptions, have simply been ignored up to the present. This is the case of the curses as Vervenioti sustains. The curses were mainly addressed to the Greek collaborators of the occupiers, «who feared the women's curses more than the ELAS weapons because they had no way of dealing with them and believed in their power».

For their resistance actions, women suffered brutal repression, both for being women, and political enemies. Since the rural communities were the ones that allowed the armed resistance to survive, counterinsurgency focused on repressing them, targeting the families of the guerrillas, particularly the women. Additionally, their actions were depoliticized. They were accused of deviant sexual morality; they were seen as the guerrillas' concubines and prostitutes. The conquerors treated them as "objects" and "property" of the combatants, which they wanted to destroy. Ultimately, women were starved, displaced, deported, arrested, interrogated, tortured, raped, and executed.

So, why did women participate in the resistance activities? All four articles show that there was an overlap between political and emotional motivations. The resistance movements involved broad layers of the population in a dynamic that was at once one of survival and resistance against the Nazi's brutality, and that involved varying degrees of politicization and engagement. Women participated "for love", for the family, for sentimental or affective ties, and solidarity. They extended their traditional role as mothers and wives. They rebelled against the repressive regimes due to a strong sense of justice. They were politically engaged; they were anti-fascists. In many cases, communism provided these women with an organization that suited their desires for equality.[10] For many female communists, the goal went beyond just repelling the Nazis. They wanted to create a new social order within their communities. They believed that liberation would bring the possibility of shaping a new society based on rights, freedom, peace, equality and social justice. In the context of war, the personal became political, both for women and men. As Mira and Vervenioti sustain, the "defence of life and its dignity" was linked to the defence of rights, freedom and justice, to a better society in which women would have an equal place. «Let's redeem ourselves from the triple slavery of conqueror, boss and man» was the slogan of the young Greek female partisans. Participating in resistance movements offered many women «the only possibility to escape the limited and sordid rhythm of a predetermined feminine destiny».[11]

For women, it was the dignity of their struggle, the freedom they lived, and their struggle for liberation and emancipation that marked their lives; resistance was a transformative experience for them. Together, these four articles reveal that women were conscious actors who made decisions to fight for survival, civil rights and participation in the war. Many of those decisions had long-term impacts. The legacy left behind by

[10] Jane SLAUGHTER: *Women and the Italian Resistance*, Arden Press, Portland, 1997, p. 18.
[11] Ingrid SROBL: *Partisanas*..., p. viii.

the female resistance fighters is that their «wartime activities [were] personally liberating despite pervasive fears and almost paralyzing anxieties».[12] So, why do we hardly know anything about them, even though women capitalized on wartime disruptions of gender norms, and transformed their position within society? Women, in many countries, acquired the vote or took up new employment after the war was over. However, even if they improved their position within society, they did not increase always their social or political power and everywhere suffered the effects of postwar gender backlash. Men continued to dominate the labour market and monopolize political power.

As four articles explain, many of them never shared their experiences or sought postwar recognition due to the nature of societal expectations of the roles a woman should play.[13] Sometimes, women downplayed the value of their resistance activities by hiding them behind the mediation of a man –whether that be a brother, father, uncle, husband, boyfriend, or friend– who brought them into the partisan movement. Many, had internalized, to some degree, the still-binding hierarchization of resistance into an "active" military category and a "passive" category that included everything else. Or they believed their activities and actions failed to compare with the men since society expected its men to resist. Women tended to interpret their involvement in the resistance as unimportant or "natural", as something "women do", because the male resistance was "real", while women's resistance to Nazism and Fascism was relegated to the traditional roles of support and self-sacrifice. Women, like men, had drawn upon existing cultural resources to make sense of their experiences.

In many cases, they were also conditioned by repressive systems, by deeply patriarchal gender regimes, to the extent that their experiences were difficult to transmit outside the dominant language. Female partisans, who had worn men's clothes, spent many months in the company of groups of men and handled weapons, were outside the norm and the stereotypical view of what it meant to be female and, as a result, were not judged favourably. They were neither encouraged by their male *compañeros* to vindicate their resistance actions due to the communist Left's patriarchal character and despite its progressive and revolutionary commitments. In the post-war era, men relegated women's wartime activities to the realm of the extraordinary and lauded a return to the status quo ante bellum. Women filling men's prewar roles were characterized as something «interesting» but in the end «a temporary anomaly».[14]

Women's involvement has been long neglected as an object of investigation or has been included in reconstructions of resistance history under the labels of help and assistance to partisans by women. Different genders employing diverse activities can

[12] Jean BETHKE ELSHTAIN: *Women and War*…, p. 177.
[13] See also Margaret COLLINS WEITZ: *Sisters in the Resistance: How Women Fought to Free France, 1940-1945*, John Wiley & Sons Inc, New York, 1995, p. 7.
[14] Angus CALDER: *The People's War: Britain 1939-1945*, Pantheon, New York, 1969, pp. 388-390, 400-404.

generate divergent responses, disparate tactics, and distinct models of behaviour. But even when different genders utilize the same resistance tactics, the social expectations from each gender cause them to be interpreted differently, particularly in a world that has been for centuries divided into "men's society" and "women's society".

In sum, this Special Issue seeks to illuminate the complex and often underappreciated dimensions of women's resistance during the Second World War. It examines how women, navigating entrenched societal expectations, engaged in a range of resistance activities, contributing not only to the fight for liberation but also to broader social transformation. These articles argue that women in resistance were not merely passive supporters but active participants who redefined their roles within wartime society, challenging traditional conceptions of gender, resistance, and power.