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# UNSILENCED RESISTANCES

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**RESHAPING** the  
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RESISTANCE in **EUROPE**

## UNSILENCED RESISTANCES

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## UNSILENCED RESISTANCES

«Resistere è per prima cosa trovare la forza di dire “no” senza avere necessariamente un’idea molto chiara di ciò a cui si aspira»

["To resist is first to find the strength to say 'no' without necessarily having a very clear idea of what you are aiming for"].

Jacques Sémelin, *Senz’armi di fronte a Hitler.*

*La Resistenza civile in Europa 1939-1943,*

Sonda, Torino 1993, p. 42.

In order to collaborate with teachers and educators in developing educational paths about female resistance, in order to implement activities and workshops for students and for adults, the decision was to start from this sentence, a very dense summary of important themes that have to be taken in mind.

This deliverable represents a kind of tool case the Peace School elaborated in order to define the framework in which the educational process can be set and developed. It is not an historical essay nor a methodological paper but a constellation of key concepts and fundamental knots to keep in mind and to be prepared to face.

The Peace School elaborated it starting from some conversations with the University of Bologna historians that are cooperating since the beginning with the WIRE project:

- Luca Baldissara, Associate Professor, Department of Philosophy and Communication Studies, Contemporary History
- Maria Pia Casalena, Associate Professor, Department of History and Cultures, Contemporary History, Director of First Cycle Degree in History
- Toni Rovatti, Senior assistant professor (fixed-term), Department of History and Cultures, Contemporary History

These meetings served the purpose of listing and discussing some general historical themes that are considered fundamental in the Italian context and that are connectable to the European dimension.

Once systematised those concepts, Peace School experts worked on them, inserting the expertise of non formal education methodologies and of decades in researching how to use history and memory for the building of a just present society.

Finally, together with historians, a list of possible biographies to use as an example, a list of silenced voices to be resounded, was drafted.

What follows is the distillation of this work, that is shared with educators, translated into English.

## Educational premises

Each workshop should be designed considering the needs of the group attending.

Participants should be the starting point of the educational path, and consequently, following the flow of what emerges from the group itself during the workshop, the path also adapts to the needs and interesting themes expressed.

If the work is directed to students, the suggestion is to start from 11 / 12 years old ones, even if when focused on themes and not necessarily to historical events, the heritage of the female resistance can be dealt with from primary school age.

Every workshop should start with the collection of the personal points of view. The background idea is the idea of brainstorming, but the field to explore can differ and can also determine the need for a different setting and amount of time.

One possible line is the one related to the personal experience:

- Have you ever heard stories of persons involved in a war?
- Do you have a personal remembrance of some of them?
- Are they connected to your family, to your circle of friends, to the territory where you live?

Another possible line is related to the exploration of ideas present in the group:

- What would you connect to the word *dictatorship*?
- What would you connect to the word *resistance*?
- What would you connect to the word *female identity*?

Of course, these two entry points can produce a lot of overlapping points of reference but it is important to keep in mind that choosing one or the other can determine the atmosphere of the workshop, the level of commitment of each participant. For this reason, it is important to understand who is taking part in the workshop and which group is called to work together. There's no preferred way to start, while the preferred way is the one adapting for the best at the type of the group.

What emerges from this initial part has to be kept present as the frame in which the exploration will take place, not as a cage but as possible bricks to build on.

## Historiographical dimensions

### To say "no". To what?

Resistance opposes the Fascist dictatorship and this requires to keep in mind that resistance is not only a matter of armed opposition to the regime during the period 1943-1945.

Resistance is a long term phenomenon that starts to be active as soon as Fascism spreads.

In this respect, it can be useful to mention some characteristics:

- *hierarchy*. The Fascist society is a society based on the idea of inequality. Individuals are not on the same level, and for that they do not have the same rights. There's the supreme leader to be venerated and from him down everyone is classified as worthy or not in terms of belonging.
  - The introduction of the racial laws in 1938 is a turning point for a lot of resisters.
- *order*. Strictly connected to the idea of hierarchy, there's the one of order, meaning that once the structure is set it has to be perpetuated, protected and maintained. This introduces a high level of violence

because every deviation from the scheme has to be punished and restored. Violence is not something to sanction while it is considered as an effective tool to regulate the social dynamics.

- *must do*. If this is the desired society, everyone is called to play his/her own role. The Nation and its components are to be preserved and valued, and its wellbeing has to be the priority over personal interests.
- *must be*. If this is the desired society, everyone is called to be compliant with his/her role and given characteristics.

If this is the general frame, if these are the concept that are taught and reproduced in society (from family to school, from recreational club to work place), when resistance comes to the female side it requires an additional effort due to the fact that Fascist regime was simply amplifying the existing representation of who is a woman and what she is supposed to do. In the general culture, actually, a woman is not an individual but she is always defined within a very small circle - the family - and in relation to others, mainly men: she starts as a daughter of a father, to become a wife of a husband and then a mother, preferably of a son. She has to be the angel of the heart, for which it is not needed any ambition, competence, or any quality except for loyalty, fidelity and dedication.

### **To find the strength. Where?**

It can seem that in this context resistance in an heroic act and under some respect it was. Nevertheless, in many cases it was precisely the family the place where the feeling of opposition was fed and nourished. From catholic to anarchist backgrounds, from liberal to socialist and communist ideology, many women started to breathe the air for action. It was of course not simple, above all in lower classes contexts, but antifascist fathers and above all **progressive mothers** were able to turn the fascist values linked to the female roles into something useful to the collective fight. The first fundamental transformation in women's perception was from the idea of *servicing* to the idea of *taking care*. Once more, it was a step turning a hierarchical idea of relationship into a horizontal one. It was not easy to spread the idea, but even if women were often asked to do the same things they were asked at home - cooking, sewing, providing for basic needs, nursing - women themselves



cared for changing the general frame and explicitly stated their actions as core to the fight.

Considering how difficult it could be to step out from millennial traditions, women soon realised that a key part of resistance was to organise support situations in order to help those women that were not able to find the strength in their inner circle. Female resistance was a clear and beautiful example of the power of *co-education*. women discover the importance of talking to each other, of presenting each other an alternative reading of reality, of offering a shoulder in case of need or uncertainties. "Political schools" were set while queuing for bread, while washing clothes at the river, while going to work into the industries left empty by an entire generation of men called to serve in the army.

Women knew that the obstacles were even higher than the ones presented in the male resistance and for that they knew that the effort couldn't be only personal but should be *collective*.

### ***Without necessarily having a very clear idea. It depends...***

The resistance fight was fought by women for their own *emancipation*. Actually, women's first act of 'resistance' (in an extended connotation of 'civil resistance') occurs in the aftermath of the outbreak of war, when they are left alone to fight against the cost of living, against the bombings, against the 'total war' that is spreading on the home front, to defeat hunger and ensure the survival of children, the elderly and other family members, entrusted entirely to them since the men are either soldiers or prisoners. They are therefore forced to *come out of the private sphere*, to make their voices heard with strikes, demonstrations and, in these common actions, even women hitherto excluded from the public sphere begin to become aware, to mature a first auroral political consciousness. War was the first great subverter of traditional social hierarchies and the 'midwife' of change.

Characteristic of the Resistance in general was the personal *assumption of responsibility*, which was much more problematic for women, since "each one found herself in the condition of having to identify and 'invent' her own presence and her own position, even outside the traditional paths: in arms or

without arms? At home or in a brigade? and so on" (cfr. Gagliani, Guerra, Mariani, Tarozzi, p. 478).

Moreover, the choice of all the women who decided not to stand by and watch has something surprising, scandalous even; more so than any male adherence to the Resistance. It can be said that they are the **only true 'volunteers'** (cfr. Anna Bravo researches).

For women there was no the threat of compulsory conscription; they did not have to go into hiding to escape the impossible choice between joining the Nazi-Fascists or ending up in prison camps. There is nothing to force them into hiding, from which the shortest step is the one towards the Resistance. There is nothing to force their choice. They could remain at the window, waiting for the storm to end. Indeed, they should do so, it is **what is expected of them**: the dominant culture and social pressure conspire to keep them locked up at home, to do otherwise is a disgrace and a provocation, before being a danger.

### ***What you are aiming for. Clearly***

In January 1945, the underground sheet 'Noi Donne' [Us, women] provided an effective self-representation of the female presence in the liberation movement:

We want everyone to know who we are and how we are, we want everyone to know that partisans are not only the young people who rise up against Nazi-fascist arbitrariness, to escape impositions of violence and bloodshed. But all of them are fighters for an idea that has not been extinguished, but clarified more enlightened in more than twenty years of oppression, political imprisonment and emigration. And we want people to know about partisan women. We are sisters, brides, mothers, women like all women of the world. We are not the sutlers of a merry army of marauders and adventurers, but we share all the hardships with them. When in the evening we wrap ourselves in our blanket on the straw of our hut, next to our brothers, before our eyes close in the heavy sleep of fatigue, our speeches are the speeches of all free, freedom-loving people, speeches that prepare our hard work of tomorrow, and our dreams are those of all women who want a useful

and healthy life, dreams of a warm and cosy home, and of a dignified job together with a happy family and a society of free men.

Women knew what they were fighting for and they knew the dangers and the risks.

### ***Going to action.***

Female resistance is a particularly rich form of resistance because it goes from the passive unarmed refusal to give the golden wedding ring to the Nation cause, to the decision of embracing weapons and killing people in guerrilla style actions.

This characteristic allows to explore first of all the always **problematic choice of violence** but also the need for effective actions conducted by other means.

Is the opposition to a regime something that is doable only with violent means? In which context boundaries and values is it possible to build an aware choice? And a coherent one?

As a second line of reflection, the complexity of female resistance forms allows to explore **risks, fears and consequences for each choice**.

Partisans, courier girls and anti-fascist women in general, if arrested, often found themselves victims of violence, in order to wrest from them by torture information useful to uncover the clandestine networks. There was a kind of surplus of violence - physical and psychological - inflicted on the female prisoners compared to the male prisoners, often determined by that hierarchical state of mind that considered women not as valuable as human beings but inferior and at men's disposal.

Another obstacle to overcome when choosing to resist, that was not a men concern.

## **Educational dimensions**

### **After the end of the war. Women condition**

The day of the insurrection and the following days that were the days in which the war was slowly handing were days of great excitement. Freedom seemed to be a reality and not only a thing to fight for. Months spent imagining the future were coming to an end, meaning that future was there to be built.

The official figures for women's participation in the Resistance - according to the qualifications decided on a provincial basis by the brigade commanders in 1946-1947 - indicate 35.000 female fighters, 20.000 'patriots' (i.e. supporters of the armed formations), 70.000 members of the Women's Defence Groups. The number of women victims of Nazi-Fascist violence amounted to 2.750, those deported to approximately 3000, and those arrested and tortured to 4.500.

Apparently there are all the premises for a definitive spark towards social change. Nevertheless, what really happened was that the lingering grip of traditional values had the upper hand over the innovative factors of women's participation in the national liberation movement. With the transition from war to peace, the vast majority of female partisans and Resistance collaborators returned to their **usual roles**, within their families, in recognition of the dominant **patriarchal canons**. The months of clandestine involvement in political-military life constituted a parenthesis, a closed cycle that was not spoken of favourably (with a mixture of resignation and repression, in the face of male-imposed censorship), except by that minority that embraced political militancy, especially in areas with a strong left-wing settlement. In many cases, in fact, prigs criticised women who left their families to live in groups of young partisans. The slander is often conveyed by parish priests, especially as it mainly concerns girls outside the Church and politically aligned (in 1948, Pius XII excommunicated those who voted communist or socialist).

### **After the end of the war. Representing the female resistance**

New historiographical perspectives overturn canonical interpretations (starting with the dissertations on women's 'contribution' to the Resistance, as if women were extraneous or at most alongside the partisans, but not part of the movement) and impose a fundamental question: how much did the Resistance actually contribute to women's freedom, projecting them beyond the traditional private dimension of the family into a political dimension? A new situation, certainly, but one that still retained structures characteristic of traditional society. And which lasted a handful of months, under the banner of exceptionality.

Teresa Noce, a leading figure in the anti-fascist opposition, urged the women comrades of the generation following hers, who saw in the Resistance an opportunity for redemption for themselves and for Italy, not to be sucked into the subalternity of patriarchal society, maintaining the protagonism savoured in the liberation struggle:

Let us say that Cinderella no longer wants to wait in the narrowness, in the darkness, in the cold of the unlit hearth for Prince Charming who will set her free. Our Cinderellas who want to come out, our Cinderellas who fought with the partisans in the war of liberation, our Cinderellas who today fight alongside adult women, who fight alongside men in strikes, our Cinderellas who occupy factories when they want to close down... they have found the path of struggle and they will follow it today, just as they followed it from 1943 to 1945, fighting to free Italy from the mud and from the men who betrayed them.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the myth of the 'betrayed Resistance' was popular, with a critical interpretation of post-war politics. In reality, on closer inspection, if betrayal there was, it concerned women, 'betrayed twice: by traditional political forces and by their own comrades in struggle who, once the war was over, devalued their contribution, reducing it to the margins of a generic "contribution"'(Cfr. Catania, p.119).

### **And today?**

The experience of the female resistance and above all its neglecting leave us many open issues to work on. The idea is to go back and analyse the state of art in relation to some demands that were launched with the resistance experience and to highlight the strategies that are still working against women empowerment.

During the educational experiences that the Peace School conducts on the Monte Sole Massacre places, many hints are shared by participants who connect the past to the present condition. Two of them are particularly interesting:

- While describing the way of living within the community of Monte Sole, it is often shared that women were fully and alone covering all the domestic work and they were then called to work with men in farms, all without being paid. Women were not economically independent and cut out from a lot of human rights. This sharing allows the group to think to the condition in their own context and it is often discovered that also in today families women are not sitting at the table to have meal with the rest of the family; or that the entire family organisation is designed and lead by women who have to take care of everyone; or that money are something managed by men and even if working outside the home, women are asked to give their salary to the family to receive back those money to be used for family needs.
- Nazi soldiers, when asked to account for slaughtering civilians, often claim that the point was that it was impossible to distinguish between civilians and combatants within the guerrilla. It was then "their fault". Victim blaming is immediately recognisable and it is often easily related to the current condition of girls and women who are considered accountable for the violence against them in terms of behaviours, ways of dressing, attitudes.

The Peace School often deals with conflict management and what emerges is the stereotypical idea that women are more suitable for non-violent approaches than men. This is not usually explicitly linked to "genetics" but it is often described as a consequence of the "training" women are doing in all the care work - professional and/or domestic - they are doing. Unfortunately, it seems that "genetics" comes back into the picture when analysing the premise of this reasoning: care work is mainly a female work because women are "naturally" more suitable and capable for them.

It is easily understandable as this line of reasoning can expand till the level in which jobs, ways of life, hobbies, sports are gender divided, gender assigned and - unfortunately - gender paid.

Fully occupied with professional work and domestic work, women are generally discouraged not to commit in public life due to the lack of time and, often, energy. Moreover, women can be less available for social commitment

due to shortage of money, earning systematically less than men. Time and resources are not running at the same speed for men and women.

Stereotyped roles and responsibilities, characteristics and attitudes are continuously reproduced and often reinforced by standardised behaviours and above all through a poor, unfocused and discriminating use of the language. Language is actually a very productive line of work when it comes to education for democracy, peace and nonviolent-society. The starting point can be exactly the word "contribution" that was used to define the female resistance, the female work during the Constitutional Assembly soon after the war and that is constantly associated to the commitment, effort, work women are putting in society.

An important chapter not to forget is the discussion around the women's body. The experience of being a brigade member and activist, resident with male companions, is often recalled to memory with a lot of references to harsh discussions about the way to dress, where to sleep, which actions to take. The body for women is something to be ashamed of, to be covered and hidden. Above all, the woman's body does not belong entirely to them. The man's sight is a sight that claims right on that body, in relation to sex, reproduction, domination. In this horizon, as back then as today, the educational perspective cannot elude the issue of violence and rape as something to discuss and to deepen.

Last but not least, it is fundamental to take care of the international dimension. As resistance during WWII was a transnational phenomenon that benefited from transversal solidarities and competences, women empowerment and emancipation path is something that is not meant to be within national boundaries. To keep an open heart and mind towards women's conditions and struggles all over the world can only enrich the common effort and improve the collective and the individual women condition.

Because to resist women always have to find strength.



## Appendix

### Available biographies researched in WIRE perspective

	Protagonist	Themes
1	Chairini	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Communist well before joining the resistance - strike of '21</li> <li>● torture and personal sacrifice (abortion)</li> </ul>
2	Chirici	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● teacher for the lower classes</li> <li>● presence of her brother</li> <li>● honorary degree</li> </ul>
3	D'Este	
4	Ferro	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● theatre company</li> <li>● role of the antifascist mother</li> <li>● guilt in the liberation of the only brother</li> <li>● massacre of Benedicta</li> <li>● hunger (grapes covered in dust that suffocates her)</li> <li>● subalternity to the male</li> <li>● theatre even after the end of the war</li> </ul>
5	Mattei	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● political conscience linked to her father (preventive arrest when Mussolini came to town)</li> <li>● supporter of the Rosselli brothers</li> <li>● resistant even before the war</li> <li>● resistance of small things</li> <li>● hatred of weapons</li> <li>● education as a profession/vocation after the war</li> </ul>
6	Menapace	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● parable of life: from Catholic Action to Democrazia Proletaria and Rifondazione, passing through the autonomy of Alto Adige</li> <li>● absolute non-violence</li> <li>● Article 11 of the Italian Constitution</li> </ul>
7	Monaco	
8	Morelli	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● strongly anti-fascist origins (outside Parma) since the 1920s</li> <li>● clandestine press</li> <li>● preservation of culture (censored books)</li> </ul>
9	Noce	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● opposed the 1st G.M.</li> <li>● 1st secretary of the PCI at Porta Palazzo (Turin)</li> <li>● agitator and internationalist</li> <li>● victim of the PCI's double moral standards</li> </ul>



10	Rola	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● did not want to wear a uniform</li> <li>● "do not abandon the city" anti-fascist and anti-Nazi strike/manifestation</li> </ul>
11	Trivella	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● maternal anti-fascism</li> <li>● internationalism</li> <li>● organisation of the French underground</li> <li>● commitment even after the end of the war</li> <li>● non-conformism difficult to carry out, with high personal costs</li> </ul>
12	Vassalle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● enlistment with the allies</li> <li>● Radio Rosa</li> </ul>
13	Wittgens	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● upper middle class / aristocracy</li> <li>● art and rescue of the Brera works</li> <li>● support for the Jews</li> <li>● moral vs. material law</li> </ul>
14	De Giovanni	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● family environment</li> <li>● unconventional partner</li> <li>● armed choice</li> </ul>

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