

# Public Discussion on Female Resistance

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## Introduction

The Public Discussion organized in Athens on October 22, 2024 by the Contemporary Social History Archives, had as its main aim to present and publicly test the alternative narratives around the Resistance through a focus on women's action, which were formed in the framework of the WIRE project, as well as to discuss, debate, evaluate and propose further ways to promote scientific knowledge about female resistance to the general public through different paths, approaches, practices and fields, such as artistic representations, cultural activities and extracurricular activities, implicating different actors (historians, groups of oral history, cultural institutions, artists, educators and students). The discussion, aimed at maximizing the public impact, was held at Innovathens in collaboration with the Municipality of Athens, and was part of the public events "1974/1944: Athens celebrates freedom", on the occasion of the double anniversary of the 80th anniversary of the liberation of Athens from the Nazi occupation in 1944 and the 50th anniversary of the transition to democracy after the fall of the military dictatorship in 1974.

Based on the specific objectives of the work package that link and enhance broader WIRE activities, namely a) the creation of alternative narratives of Resistance based on the female experience; b) the promotion of open, creative and unconventional dissemination activities at different levels and for different target groups and end-users, based on the identified narrative and memorial needs; c) the development of community outreach activities specifically linked to the cultural spaces involved in the project (museums, memorial centres) designed to reach the maximum possible audience, and c) the creation of sustainable public history products: both real and virtual permanent exhibitions, podcasts and a user-friendly repository of life stories - biographies, contexts, and historical narratives of female resistance, the event was planned and organized in four parts:

Presentation of the WIRE project, and discussion around its activities and results, with emphasis on the Greek case and specific deliverables coordinated by ASKI, such as: Digital Repository on Women's Life Stories and Podcasts on Female Resistance. In this part of the discussion, WIRE contributors who worked on these work packages (researchers, historians, archivists, etc.) participated as keynote speakers, while audiovisual material was presented, and an open discussion was held with the participants.

Presentation by the Greek students who participated in WIRE's Memory Route of the activities they carried out, their experience and their thoughts about their participation. 4 students (2 female, 2 male) participated as main speakers, and then the other students took the floor and all gave a short commentary. This was followed by a discussion with the participants.

Panel discussion "Changing the Lens: Approaches to Female Action in the 1940s" with the participation of representatives of cultural institutions, memory site managers, museologists, educators and designers of educational programmes, as well as and historians/researchers. This panel aimed to open the discussion with a focus on WIRE in different fields of approaching, managing and using the past, in sites of memory and memorials, in museums and exhibitions, in school education and in extracurricular activities. Emphasis was

placed on different media and practices, such as various forms of art, oral history, as well as public and digital humanities.

Open discussion with the participants of the event. In the last part of the event, the discussion was opened to the participants. In the discussion, the main speakers were joined by representatives of institutions, members of oral history groups (specifically the Athens Oral History Group), artists, primary and secondary school teachers, undergraduate students, postgraduate students and PhD candidates, researchers from different fields, as well as people from different disciplines interested in history.

## The WIRE Project Presentation and Discussion

The WIRE project was based on a simple and, at the same time, ambitious idea: To reverse the focus and revisit the Resistance -in fact, to revisit different political and social movements of the 20th century in Europe, codified by the term 'Resistance'- through the experience, the actions, and the participation of women in them. Not as an additional and complementary process, but as an organic element of these movements, without which they could not have existed and would not have acquired the character they did. The ambitious and thus complex aim is to rethink and reframe Resistance as a concept, as a phenomenon, as a spectrum of actions and as a chronotope through the lens of female participation, and to bring it back to the public sphere, through this new perspective, actively contributing to a paradigm shift and reshaping current European memory.

WIRE is not mainly a historical research project. The project exploits productively both existing historical knowledge and the narratives of women themselves (oral and written testimonies, etc.), by organizing different kinds of activities, in international and national level, and producing different kind of results and 'products', through a creative synthesis and use of practices and methodologies of the institutions that designed and implement it, and, more broadly, of the public and digital humanities. It is an activity-based, interdisciplinary and educational project.

The first speaker analyzed and discussed the above mentioned main axes of the project. He then presented the specific activities of WIRE with the Memory Route as the central thread, explaining their objectives and outcomes. What did it seek, what did it achieve and how can we revisit and rethink WIRE and such projects, based on the experience so far at international, transnational and national level?

Then, the historians and archivists who participated in the design and development of the Digital Repository took the floor, analyzing both the overall design involving all four participating countries, and the choices, objectives and methodology used to create the Greek stories of the women of the Resistance included in the Digital Repository. The idea of stories/biographies from each country forming a common digital repository was a challenge. Knowing the particularities of each one and the variations in the cases each presents, the project was challenging enough to understand the place of women in the anti-fascist struggle in Greece, Italy and Spain in the 1940s, as well as the anti-regime opposition in 1970s and 1980s Poland. The Digital Repository

constitutes a very interesting mosaic of women's microhistories in Europe, that includes 50 life-stories of approximately 3.000 words each, accompanied with different kinds of media (archival documents, photographs, testimonies, etc.).

The Greek contribution, beyond the overall design and coordination of the repository, was the research, writing and documentation of biographical texts. The selection of women who would represent the Greek example was a complex undertaking. Many criteria had to be matched, and different cases included in order to form a representative sample of the participation of Greek women in the resistance movement. Famous women-symbols of the resistance struggle, lesser-known cases from different political and social spaces, young girls, communists who were already on standby, feminists of the interwar period, but also farmers, housewives and working women who, on the occasion of the war and the occupation, were mobilized.

Although the writing of women's stories focused on their resistance activities during the war, we nevertheless follow the course of these women throughout their lives. Reconstructing a biography from childhood to their death allows us, first of all, to understand the social environment and the conditions that led to their joining the resistance movement. At the same time, to see how decisive their participation was, acting as a catalyst in shaping their later lives. Particularly, in the cases of women who joined the resistance organizations, imprisonment, exile or political refugee were one-way streets. And while for many of them, their contribution to the resistance was an identifying characteristic that they proudly carried throughout their lives, in the post-war and post-Civil War Greece it became a stigma that deprived them of rights, opportunities and freedoms.

Going through the repository, one realizes that despite the particularities of each country there is a harmonious connection with the stories of other women. Obviously, the social conditions, the political context, the temporalities and the gender perceptions in each country are very different. However, the similarities that emerge from a broader perspective, the common patterns in the way women activate, organize and choose the social rupture in patriarchally structured societies, defending their bold choices, are many. There are analogies and connections, even in small incidents of struggle in the everyday life of illegality, which it is interesting to identify by going through the stories. Moreover, what is important is that the way the stories of these parallel lives are structured and posted in the repository, they are also addressed to a non-specialized audience of researchers. To an audience that comes from other countries, from younger or different generations that are not familiar with Greek, Spanish, Italian or Polish history. In the same direction, particular emphasis was given to illustration, framing the texts with rich archival documents and photographs. The latter always have their own dynamics, their own autonomy and can be seen without the mediation of historical discourse. In general, it is interesting how the paper imprint of an archival source travels to the digital world and through it its visibility multiplies.

An important dimension is also the result of the educational activities undertaken by the participating students in the context of WIRE, based on the Digital Repository of women's stories as their main source. For example, based on the stories, when they visited Greece in the context of the Memory Route,

the students created podcasts, transforming the lives of women into short audio documentaries. They did similar actions elsewhere. This transformation of biographies into another product or another medium gives them a second life. It is the dissemination of knowledge but above all serves one of the primary purposes of the project, which is education. This was the topic analyzed by the last speaker of the panel, who was responsible for coordinating and creating the podcasts in collaboration with the students.

## The Students' Experience

In the second part of the Public Discussion, the students of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens who participated in the project took the floor. The main speeches were made by 4 students (2 female, 2 male) while all the others then spoke (10 persons in total), discussing their experience, activities and thoughts with the event participants. During the project, the Memory Route team, consisting of 40 students, 10 from each country, participated in educational and research activities in Athens, Krakow, Monte Sole, and Barcelona (during the public discussion, the MR in Barcelona hadn't taken place yet). According to the students, WIRE was for them a unique opportunity to delve into unknown aspects of history, understanding the decisive role that women played in the Resistance, in different countries and in various forms. It managed to unite historical research with social awareness, offering them an invaluable tool for their future path both on a personal and professional level.

Most of the students chose to participate in the project, mainly because they did not know much about the women of the Resistance and the key-role they played. Their participation in the resistance actions was for many of the students an unknown part of history, which piqued their interest and inspired them to discover it. The project gave them the opportunity to shed light on a less studied aspect of the resistance struggles.

According to the students, the WIRE project offered them significant benefits and valuable insights. First, it allowed them to understand in depth the contribution of women to resistance struggles, an aspect that often remains marginalized. By studying the actions of women from countries such as Greece, Spain, Italy and Poland, they highlighted their decisive role, while at the same time challenging traditional historical perceptions, bringing to light unknown or neglected aspects of women's participation. In this way, the students felt that they contributed to the creation of a more complete and balanced historical memory. In addition, through interactive activities, such as role-playing, making educational games and creating podcasts, they developed skills in collaboration, critical thinking and creative problem solving. The interaction with students from different countries enhanced the exchange of ideas, offering them rich experiences and knowledge. The opportunity to meet new people, explore new places and learn about the women-symbols of each country, made their experience truly unique. The relationships and friendships they developed with other European students, through their cooperation and travels to their countries, opened new horizons and strengthened their cultural bridges.

At the same time, the project was not only an educational experience but also a means of personal development, by strengthening their understanding of human rights, gender equality and women's rights. Their acquaintance with the



stories of the brave women of the resistance was a source of inspiration and empowerment, encouraging them to become active citizens and fight for the rights of others. Most importantly for them, the material they had access to was rare and invaluable, and they would never have had the opportunity to study and understand it in such depth anywhere else. Through this experience, the students came into direct contact with archival sources, such as diaries, notes, and interviews, which gave them the opportunity to truly get to know these women, not just as historical figures, but as individuals with thoughts, feelings, and experiences. They did not just listen to their stories, but felt that they were essentially connected to them. Overall, the WIRE project offered the students a multidimensional education, enriching their knowledge on both a theoretical and practical level. As all of them said, the experiences and memories they gained will accompany them forever, offering friendships and knowledge that will remain indelible in their memories.

## Changing the Lens: Approaches to Female Action in the 1940s

The panel discussion "Changing the Lens: Approaches to Female Action in the 1940s", starting from the WIRE project, opened and broadened the debate on female action in the 1940s in different fields of approaching, managing and using the past: in sites of memory and memorials, in museums and exhibitions, in formal and non-formal education. Special attention was given to the different media and practices of dealing with the past, such as various forms of art, oral history, as well as public and digital humanities. The moderator of the discussion is professor of Theory of History and History of Historiography at the Department of History and Archaeology of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, the Greek university with which ASKI collaborated in the project and from which the students who participated in WIRE's Memory Route came. Thus, in addition to the introductory remarks, coordination and commentary of the discussion with the speakers and participants at the event, he also provided the university's perspective on the project and its importance for the students' historical education, networking and skill development, which go beyond the formal educational process within the context of their undergraduate studies.

The first speaker was the manager of an important memory site in Greece, the Distomo memorial and the relevant Museum for the Victims of Nazism, as well as a researcher working on the topic of the history and memory of the women of Distomo, through their oral testimonies. The Distomo was one of the major war crimes against civilians that the Nazis committed in Greece, on 10 June 1944. The massacre operated as part of Army Group E and the standing orders of the Wehrmacht in Greece, and it used terror as a way to frighten the Greeks into not supporting the guerillas. After the failure of numerous sweeps designed to hunt down the guerillas throughout 1942-1943, Army Group E started to employ what the historian Mark Mazower called "the indiscriminate slaughter of civilians" as the best way to fight the guerillas. On 10 June 1944, for over two hours, Waffen-SS troops of the 2nd company, I/7 battalion, 4th SS Polizei Panzergrenadier Division went door to door and massacred Greek civilians as a part of savage reprisals for a partisan attack upon the unit's convoy. A total of

228 men, women and children were murdered in Distomo, about 10% of the then Distomo population.

The Distomo massacre is an example that allowed the participants to discuss the various and differentiated experiences of violence: How differently can the same event be experienced based on gender? How does this affect the experience of violence and trauma? How does sexual violence function as a weapon of war and an act of retaliation? The perpetrators also killed many pregnant women, indicative of the use of violence against women as mothers. Beyond that, an important issue is how gender roles change after the massacre: The aftermath of such violence often imposes changes in traditional gender roles. Widows and orphaned children often take on new responsibilities, changing the social fabric of the village. What were the long-term gendered effects of violence, and which is the role of gender in the reconstruction of a community? At the same time, the speaker explored the place of women in memory. How are women depicted in the monument-mausoleum? Where and how were they presented? There is a famous photograph of the 'Woman of Distomo' emerged as an international symbol against Nazi atrocities. Dressed in black, tearful, mourning. The 'Woman of Distomo' is the symbol of the grieving mother, daughter, and widow. The photograph transcends national boundaries and the woman, through a historical event, can be translated as a symbol of resistance and struggle against Nazism and violence. At the same time, a national identity is constructed that carries the element of historical continuity. Last, what was highlighted was the importance of individual agency (women's and men's) through the personal testimonies of the survivors for the prevention of war crimes, as a way of building critical consciousness in the present and in relation to the narratives inherited from the past.

The second speaker is a museologist, director of Museums at the Technopolis, a cultural organization of the Municipality of Athens, who has created and overseen various historical exhibitions, and had coordinated multiple public and educational activities around them. In conversation with the WIRE project, she presented examples and methodologies for the inclusion and promotion of women's history in museums and historical exhibitions in Greece and abroad, as well as projects exclusively dedicated to female historical figures and the promotion of women's action in general. Particular emphasis was given to the historicity of this process, and its contemporary dimension as a product of its time.

The main example on which the second speaker's presentation focused was the historical exhibition organized by the Technopolis of the Municipality of Athens with the cooperation of the Contemporary Social History Archives, the General State Archives, and the Historical Archive of the City of Athens, on the occasion of the double anniversary of the 80 years of the Liberation of Athens from the Nazi Occupation in 1944 and the 50 years of the transition to democracy after the fall of the military dictatorship in 1974. In fact, the WIRE project played an important role in this major exhibition, significantly changing the perspective on the presentation of the Occupation, the Resistance and the Liberation of 1944. To a much greater extent than in related exhibitions in the past, it highlighted the role of women organically throughout the exhibition, while a special installation was also included with the stories of three important women of the Greek Resistance, who are also included in WIRE's Digital Repository.

Three heroines who fought but didn't manage to experience the Liberation, after being tortured and murdered by the Nazis and their Greek collaborators for their actions in the resistance struggle. These women were Electra Apostolou, Lela Karagianni, and Ioulia Bimba.

The last speaker is a professor at the Department of Early Childhood Education of the School of Education of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, specializing in Teaching Methodology and Educational Material Development. She has a long experience in research and in fieldwork, particularly in teaching practices and teacher training, in minority education, and in the design and development of digital and conventional educational materials for adults and children. The speaker offered a comprehensive and in-depth perspective on the history and importance of such educational tools and projects, which can form the basis for various experiential education programs intended for different age and social categories and cognitive levels of children and adults. She also analyzed the importance of games, action and experience in learning, elements that are often missing from formal educational programs and which can be offered by activity-based projects such as WIRE. Finally, she opened the perspective, theoretically and methodologically, by presenting different types of educational projects, compatible with WIRE, that target different population groups and concern various aspects of women's history in the past and present, suggesting ways of coordinating and combining them in the educational process, but also in other fruitful and indirectly educational endeavors such as artistic creation.

## Open Discussion with Participants

In the last part of the event, several of the participants took the floor and an open discussion took place regarding WIRE, the history of women in the Resistance and beyond, the importance, impact and possible weaknesses of such projects. The discussion was attended by members of the Athens Oral History Group, representatives of cultural institutions, artists, educators, activists, students and researchers of different levels, as well as people active in various fields, interested in history and the ways of managing the past.

The discussion, as well as the event as a whole, was very successful in terms of promoting WIRE and making it known to a wider audience in Greece, receiving feedback on its methodology, activities and results, but also creating an open and safe space for discussion on the role of women in history, politics and society. Furthermore, the participation and interest shown by the participants reflect the dynamics and the need for such projects that promote historical knowledge and awareness, the exchange of views in a respectful and fruitful way, the highlighting of important and often silenced historical events, subjects and phenomena, the reshaping of their memory and the promotion of the values associated with it.



