

# **D16.1 – Special Issue: Redefining Resistance: Women in National Liberation Movements during the Second World War**

**UAB**

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Women in Resistance. Reshaping the narratives on Female Antitotalitarian Resistance in Europe – WIRE

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This Special Issue of the *University Journal of Military History* (RUHM) is the outcome of the WP16\_D16.2 Academic Conference. The authors of the four articles included in this Special Issue were also presenters at the WP16 Academic Conference, held in Barcelona. The event sought to link international academic activities and showcase the scientific results of WIRE, aligning with the Final Event of the Memory Route on October 30, 2024.

The Special Issue **Redefining Resistance: Women in National Liberation Movements during the Second World War** is accessible on the *University Journal of Military History* (RUHM) website:

<https://ruhm.es/index.php/RUHM> ;

<https://ruhm.es/index.php/RUHM/issue/view/28/13>

This Special Issue examines the diverse roles of women in resistance movements during the Second World War, focusing on case studies from Spain, Greece, Italy, and Poland. It challenges the traditionally militarized and male-centric definitions of resistance, emphasizing women's critical contributions to both armed and unarmed efforts. The articles highlight how women navigated entrenched societal norms to participate in guerrilla logistics, combat, sabotage, and clandestine organization, often reshaping their roles in wartime society. By uncovering these often-overlooked aspects of resistance, the issue demonstrates how women's actions not only advanced liberation struggles but also fostered significant social and cultural transformations.

The Special Issue includes one Introduction and four articles authored by leading specialists:

### **Magda Fytili (Complutense University of Madrid), Introduction**

The introduction explores women's multifaceted roles in resistance movements during the Second World War, challenging male-dominated narratives of resistance. By addressing both armed and unarmed resistance, it reveals how women bridged military and civilian boundaries. Using case studies from Greece, Spain, Italy, and Poland, the introduction highlights how women's everyday actions and societal roles shaped their resistance, despite facing challenges such as misogyny, societal expectations, and postwar erasure.

### **Mercedes Yusta (Université Paris 8), "They Won't Kill Me Like a Dog": Voices and Experiences of Anti-Francoist Guerrilla Women in Postwar Spain**

This article reports on the historiographical renewal in the study of women's involvement in the armed anti-Francoist resistance in postwar Spain. For years, that resistance has been scarcely known and studied, deemed a minor and marginal phenomenon despite the fact that it had a considerable influence on the sociopolitical evolution of a large number of rural areas in post-war Spain. Women's role in this resistance movement has been even further neglected, partly because of the small number who actively took up arms. Starting from the paradox of their low participation after a civil war that had initially mobilized numerous women on both sides –including their effective albeit markedly minority involvement in the Republican militias—, the present work describes the crossed effects of postwar repression and the misogyny of certain anti-Francoist militants and suggests a re-reading of women's presence in the antifascist resistance based on the testimonies of the protagonists themselves. The paper is divided into four parts. The first part analyzes the anti-Francoist guerrilla phenomenon as an irregular war and the reasons for the marginal presence of women in its ranks. A second part delves into the role of women in

the resistance, particularly as part of the guerrilla support networks. The third part explores women's experiences and testimonies, while the fourth and final part tackles the most radical and complex form of commitment —that of the women who took to the hills and joined rural guerrilla groups. The overarching aim is to offer a more complex reading of the multiple modalities and experiences of female participation in the postwar anti-Francoist resistance, primarily through the voices of the women themselves.

**Tasoula Vervenioti (Historian), Empowered Yet Constrained: Women's Role and Agency in the Greek Resistance Movement (1941-1944)**

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

**Barbara Klich-Kluczevska (Jagiellonian University), Polish Women in Combat and the Memory of Violence, 1939-1945**

In the course of World War II, Poland experienced exceptional brutality under both German and Soviet occupation. In response to this violence, the population became mobilized and actively participated in the struggle against the occupying forces. Of the approximately 380,000 members of the Polish underground army, between 50,000 and 60,000 were women. During the largest uprising against German occupation in Poland—the Warsaw Uprising of 1944—, these women accounted for more than one-fifth of all combatants. This article offers a gendered analysis of the relationship between violence as an everyday experience in occupied Poland and the formation of female soldiers' identities within the broader context of the history of Polish paramilitary auxiliary and female troops under enemy occupation. Following the works by Weronika Grzebalska and Cynthia Enloe, according to which the foundation of an imaginary order derives from the division between those who need help (women and children) and those who defend them (men) and the persistence of gender role imaginaries is clearly reflected in the discourse on violence, the presence of violence in these women's testimonies will be traced. Through a biographical analysis of oral interviews, two radically different trends in the shaping of individual narratives by female insurgents regarding their experiences of violence and participation in the armed struggle will be identified. In both cases, access to weapons or lack thereof plays a symbolic and crucial role. This study is based on interviews with female participants in the Warsaw Uprising collected in the Oral History Archive of the Warsaw Uprising Museum, which houses more than 3,500 accounts by insurgents, including women and civilians. The autobiographical accounts of two women are particularly significant for the present analysis: Wanda Traczyk-Stawska's (pseudonym: Pączek; born in 1927) and Halina Żelaski's (pseudonyms: 'Zośka', 'Halinchen'; born in 1923).

**Roberta Mira (University of Bologna), Women's Paths in Resistance in Italy during the Second World War**

Between 8 September 1943 and 25 April 1945 in Italy, women played an important role in the Resistance against Fascists and the occupying German forces. From silent opposition through symbolic gestures expressing dissent toward the Nazis and their allies to more direct counter activities – such as sabotage, leafleting and clandestine press distribution, demonstrations and strikes – to participation in the Resistance as fighters in arms, couriers, instructors, propagandists, organizers, and nurses, there was a wide range of behaviours and actions which encompassed female armed and unarmed resistance. Unconstrained by military obligations, women made a completely voluntary choice to join the Resistance movement, consciously taking on responsibility for a political act that put their own lives at risk in the fight to end the war, gain liberation and contribute to the shaping of a new country and a new society. After the end of the war, Italian women's activism and participation in the partisan movement remained overlooked, and their actions in the years of the conflict were not recognized to their full extent; this was because of the military criteria set to obtain official recognition as Resistance fighters, because of the moral and social norms of the time, and because of a particular self-representation of women partisans, who tended to interpret their own involvement in the Resistance as something that had to be done and that was driven by personal rather than political choices. This essay has been conceived as a synthesis for non-Italian readers and retraces the different ways in which Italian women participated in the Resistance, keeping in mind the events before September 1943 and the developments after the end of the war and the Liberation. The work is based on the reading of the relevant historiography, on published and unpublished testimonies of women partisans, and on the use of selected documents.



This Special Issue seeks to broaden the understanding of resistance by acknowledging women as active participants, redefining traditional concepts of gender, resistance, and power. By documenting their experiences, these articles underscore the enduring legacy of women’s contributions to wartime resistance and their role in shaping postwar societies.

