

## **Women's Journeys in the Italian Resistenza during World War II**

Los caminos de las mujeres en la resistencia  
en Italia durante la Segunda Guerra Mundial

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**Abstract:** Between September 8, 1943, and April 25, 1945, Italian women played a crucial role in the resistance against fascists and German occupiers. From silent expressions of their opposition to the Nazis and their allies by means of symbolic gestures to more properly oppositional activities —sabotage, distribution of leaflets and clandestine newspapers, demonstrations and strikes— through their involvement in the *Resistenza* as armed fighters, couriers, instructors, propagandists, coordinators or nurses, a wide range of acts and behaviors materialized women's both armed and unarmed resistance.

Freed from military duty, the decision of some women to join the *Resistenza* was voluntary —a conscious assumption of responsibility and a political act of putting their own lives at risk in the struggle to end the war, liberate their country and contribute to shaping a new society for their people.

After the end of the conflict, Italian women's activism and participation in the partisan movement was overlooked partially because of the existing military requirements for official recognition as partisans, the moral and social norms of the time and partisan women's own self-representation, seeing their involvement in the *Resistenza* as something that had to be done and was driven by a personal, rather than political decision.

This paper is intended as a synthesis for non-Italian readers. As such, it traces the different ways in which Italian women became involved in the *Resistenza*, considering the events prior to September 1943 but also after the end

of the war and the liberation of the country. The research is based on relevant historiography, on both published and unpublished testimonies by partisan women and on a selection of relevant documentary sources.

**Keywords:** Women, Civil Resistance, Armed Resistance, WW2, Italy 1943-1945.

**Resumen:** Entre el 8 de septiembre de 1943 y el 25 de abril de 1945 en Italia las mujeres desempeñaron un papel importante en la resistencia contra los fascistas y los ocupantes alemanes. Desde la oposición silenciosa que expresa su disidencia hacia los nazis y sus aliados a través de gestos simbólicos, hasta actividades más propiamente contrarias – como el sabotaje, la distribución de folletos y prensa clandestina, manifestaciones y huelgas –, hasta la participación en la Resistencia como combatientes en armas, correos, instructoras, propagandistas, organizadoras, enfermeras, una amplia gama de comportamientos y actos dieron sustancia a la resistencia femenina armada y desarmada.

Al no verse presionadas por obligaciones militares, las mujeres tomaron una decisión completamente voluntaria al ingresar a la Resistencia, una asunción consciente de responsabilidad y un acto político que ponía en riesgo la propia vida en la lucha por alcanzar el fin de la guerra, la liberación y contribuir a configurar un nuevo país y una nueva sociedad.

Tras el final de la guerra, el activismo y la participación de las mujeres italianas en el movimiento partisano quedaron en la sombra y no fueron reconocidos en las dimensiones que adquirieron en los años del conflicto, debido a criterios militares establecidos por obtener las calificaciones oficiales como combatientes de la Resistencia, a las normas morales y sociales de la época, a una particular auto-representación de las mujeres partisanas, interpretando su participación y actividades en la Resistencia como algo que debía hacerse y que fue impulsado por decisiones personales más que políticas.

El presente artículo está concebido como una síntesis para lectores no italianos y recorre las diferentes formas en que las mujeres italianas participaron en la Resistencia, teniendo en cuenta los acontecimientos anteriores a septiembre de 1943 y la evolución después del fin de la guerra y la liberación. El trabajo se basa en la historiografía relevante, en testimonios publicados e inéditos de mujeres partisanas, y en el uso de documentos seleccionados.

**Palabras clave:** mujeres, resistencia civil, resistencia armada, Segunda Guerra Mundial, Italia 1943-1945.

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### Introduction

**T**he Second World War fully involved civilians in the conflict, blurring the distinctions between the front and the home front, between soldiers and civilians. The home front was given the task of supporting the war effort in the context of an economy entirely geared to the war and it was mobilised through careful and pervasive propaganda. It was also the object of explicit attacks such as bombings by the adversaries with the aim of crushing morale and support for the war. With the military occupation of a large part of the European continent, the conflict then entered ordinary people's daily lives.<sup>1</sup>

The levels of violence increased due to the particular nature of the Nazi war and the ideological backlash that tore Europe apart in a clash of civilizations between Fascist regimes and the powers that opposed them, and in a series of civil wars between the Nazis and the collaborationists, on the one hand, and the Resistance, on the other.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See the comprehensive work *The Cambridge History of the Second World War*: vol. I, John FERRIS and Evan MAWDSLEY (eds.): *Fighting the War*; vol. II, Richard J. B. BOSWORTH and Joseph A. MAIOLO (eds.): *Politics and ideology*; vol. III, Michael GEYER and Adam TOOZE (eds.): *Total War: Economy, Society and Culture*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2015. On the concept and characteristics of total war in the 20th century see Pietro CAUSARANO et al. (eds.): *Le XXe siècle des guerres. Modernité et barbaries*, Paris, Les Éditions de l'Atelier/Éditions Ouvrières, 2004; Gabriella GRIBAUDI (ed.): *Le guerre del Novecento*, Napoli-Roma, L'Ankor del Mediterraneo, 2007; Tommaso DETTI (ed.): *Le guerre in un mondo globale*, Roma, Viella, 2017 and especially the essays about WW2.

<sup>2</sup> Richard BESSEL: *Nazism and War*, London, Phoenix, 2004. On WW2 as a civil war see Claudio PAVONE: "La Seconde Guerre mondiale: Europe et guerre civile européenne", in Pietro CAUSARANO et al. (eds.), op. cit., pp. 472-485; Id.: "La seconda guerra mondiale: una guerra civile europea?", in Gabriele RANZATO (ed.), *Guerre fratricide. Le guerre civili in età contemporanea*, Torino, Bollati Boringhieri, 1994, pp. 86-128 and Enzo TRAVERSO: *Fire and Blood: The European Civil War 1914-1945*, London, Verso, 2016 (or. Italian ed. 2007). On European resistance movements see Philip COOKE and Ben H. SHEPHERD: *European Resistance in the Second World War*, Barnsley, Pen&Sword, 2013; and on Western European countries Olivier WIEVIORKA: *The Resistance in Western Europe 1940-1945*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2019 (or. French ed. 2017).

In this context of total war, women gained visibility as the conflict projected them onto the public stage,<sup>3</sup> and this visibility reached unprecedented levels in some countries, such as in Italy, especially on the heels of the Fascist regime that confined women to the domestic role of wife and mother.<sup>4</sup> Italian women were called upon to take on the jobs of the men under arms, providing essential services and support. Traditional family duties also led them to be active outside the home to ensure their family's survival, to travel between their place of work and home, as they were often displaced outside urban centres, and to provide assistance to relatives and acquaintances.<sup>5</sup>

In becoming more visible, Italian women were also more exposed to the most brutal effects of the war, especially after September 1943 and the Nazi occupation of much of Italy. Requisitions, forced displacements, arrests, and reprisal measures directly affected the population, and in the massacres perpetrated by the Nazis and Fascists, many civilians died, many of whom were women, children and elderly men, accused of supporting the partisans.<sup>6</sup> For women, rape was often an additional aspect of this violence. However, Italian women were not merely passive victims or onlookers of the war, and in 1943-1945 we find them actively present thanks to their decision to become protagonists by taking part in the Resistance.

After the end of the war, the extent of Italian women's activism and participation remained relatively unknown, sometimes concealed by collective and generic definitions such as the "population," and "civilians,"<sup>7</sup> or, worse, it was overlooked and not officially recognized. Women's presence in the Resistance also struggled to gain attention from historiography. Since the Resistance was a foundational experience for the new Italian Republic and its identity,<sup>8</sup> the publication of protagonists' memoirs and writings about the partisan movement, including historical ones, as well as the collection of its documentation began immediately after the war, but, despite the printing of

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<sup>3</sup> See the essays dedicated to WW2 in Margaret R. HIGONNET et al. (eds.): *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1987 and in Anna BRAVO (ed.): *Donne e uomini nelle guerre mondiali*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 1991.

<sup>4</sup> On the condition of Italian women under Fascism and on the policies implemented by the regime to organize women and gain their consent see Victoria DE GRAZIA: *How Fascism Ruled Women. Italy 1922-1945*, Berkeley, California University Press, 1992; Perry WILLSON: *Women in Twentieth-Century Italy*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, chapters 4 and 5.

<sup>5</sup> Anna BRAVO and Anna Maria BRUZZONE: *In guerra senza armi. Storie di donne. 1940-1945*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 1995.

<sup>6</sup> Lutz KLINKHAMMER: *Stragi naziste in Italia 1943-44*, Roma, Donzelli, 2006 (new ed.; 1st ed. 1997); Gianluca FULVETTI and Paolo PEZZINO (eds.): *Zone di guerra, geografie di sangue. L'Atlante delle stragi naziste e fasciste in Italia (1943-1945)*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Dianella GAGLIANI: "Resistenza alla guerra, diritti universali, diritti delle donne", in Ead. (ed.), *Guerra Resistenza Politica. Storie di donne*, Reggio Emilia, Aliberti, 2006, pp. 28-29.

<sup>8</sup> Filippo FOCARDI: *La guerra della memoria. La Resistenza nel dibattito politico italiano dal 1945 a oggi*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2005; Philip COOKE: *The Legacy of the Italian Resistance*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

some important testimonies by female partisans,<sup>9</sup> women's involvement was long neglected as an object of investigation or was included in reconstructions of Resistance history under the labels of help and assistance to partisans by women. Not full involvement, then, but rather support for the action and conflict that remained the preserve of men. Such a view was in line with the traditional image of the role of women and their tasks in society, an image exalted by two decades of Fascist rhetoric and propaganda and still pervasive in post-war Italy; and it also corresponded to the widespread and well-established stereotype that associates men with war, and women with peace.<sup>10</sup>

In the 1960s, some public attention to the Resistance was brought about by the Christian Democrats' failed attempt to form a government with the support of the far-right party Movimento sociale italiano and by the twentieth anniversary of the Liberation.<sup>11</sup> In this context partisan women were the protagonists of Liliana Cavani's 1965 documentary for Italian television RAI, *La donna nella Resistenza* (Women in the Resistance). But only in the 1970s, after the 1968 movement and the development of feminism, studies by feminist historians belonging to the post-Resistance generation and the work of a number of Resistance protagonists broke the silence surrounding partisan women. These studies were published in a season when historiography was fruitfully opening up to interdisciplinarity and the use of new sources such as oral ones. Though late compared to the events and the first reconstructions dedicated to the Resistance, the works of Anna Maria Bruzzone and Rachele Farina, Bianca Guidetti Serra, Franca Pieroni Bortolotti, and Mirella Alloisio and Giuliana Gadola Beltrami, proposed a new key for interpretation and highlighted the role of women in the Resistance.<sup>12</sup>

A new season of studies, which broadened the scope to encompass the civilian experience of war and gender roles, emerged in the 1990s and the 2000s, finding impetus in the fiftieth anniversary of the Resistance and in the international debate on war

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<sup>9</sup> For instance Joyce LUSSU's *Fronti e frontiere* (Roma, Edizioni U) was published in 1944, Bianca CEVA's account on her experience in the Resistance (*Tempo dei vivi*, Milano, Ceschina) appeared in 1954, Ada GOBETTI's *Diario partigiano* (Torino, Einaudi) was published in 1956 (hereafter we refer to the 1996 ed.). Gobetti's book provides us with a detailed account of her partisan activities and, because of her role as an organizer of the Women's Defence Groups, also of women's forms of resistance and opposition; it furthermore offers profound insights into war and violence, and the meaning of participation in the Resistance. Gobetti's diary is translated in English by Jomarie Alano as *Partisan Diary: A Woman's Life in the Italian Resistance*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014. See also Jomarie ALANO: *A Life of Resistance: Ada Prospero Marchesini Gobetti (1902-1968)*, Rochester, University of Rochester Press, 2016.

<sup>10</sup> Anna BRAVO and Anna Maria BRUZZONE: op. cit., pp. 14-25. For an analysis and deconstruction of stereotypes and gender roles in war times see Jean B. ELSHTAIN: *Women and War*, New York, Basic Books, 1987.

<sup>11</sup> Filippo FOCARDI: op. cit., pp. 41-46.

<sup>12</sup> Anna Maria BRUZZONE and Rachele FARINA: *La Resistenza taciuta. Dodici vite di partigiane piemontesi*, Milano, La Pietra, 1976 (hereafter we refer to the new ed.: Torino, Bollati Boringhieri 2003); Bianca GUIDETTI SERRA: *Compagne. Testimonianze di partecipazione politica femminile*, 2 vols., Torino, Einaudi, 1977; Franca PIERONI BORTOLOTTI: *Le donne della Resistenza antifascista e la questione femminile in Emilia Romagna (1943-1945)*, Milano, Vangelista, 1978; Mirella ALLOISIO and Giuliana GADOLA BELTRAMI: *Volontarie della libertà. 8 settembre 1943-25 aprile 1945*, Milano, Mazzotta, 1981.

violence that developed after the outbreak of civil wars in the former Yugoslavia. The works of Anna Bravo and Anna Maria Bruzzone, along with some important research carried out in different regions that led to the publication of volumes date back to this period.<sup>13</sup> Since then, interest in women's participation in the Resistance has remained, as shown by some recent projects and books which are suitable also for a non-specialist audience.<sup>14</sup>

In the present contribution – conceived as a synthesis for non-Italian readers and to sit alongside other essays dedicated to women's resistance in Europe in this issue of RUHM – we will try to retrace the different ways in which Italian women participated in the Resistance between 1943 and 1945, keeping in mind the events before September 1943 and developments after the end of the war and the Liberation. It is based on the reading of the relevant Italian historiography, on published and unpublished testimonies of women partisans, drawn mainly from the contexts of Piedmont and Emilia-Romagna, and on the use of selected documents.<sup>15</sup>

### Women and anti-Fascism

Between 1922 and 1943 militants of the anti-Fascist parties, especially the Communist Party, the Action Party and the Socialist Party, attempted to maintain an organization

<sup>13</sup> Rolando ANNI et al.: *I gesti e i sentimenti: le donne nella Resistenza bresciana*, Brescia, Comune di Brescia, 1990; Anna BRAVO and Anna Maria BRUZZONE: op. cit.; Marina ADDIS SABA: *Tutte le donne della Resistenza*, Milano, Mursia, 1998; Anna BRAVO: "Resistenza civile", in Enzo COLLOTTI, Renato SANDRI and Frediano SESSI (eds.), *Dizionario della Resistenza*, vol. I, Torino, Einaudi, 2000, pp. 268-282; Dianella GAGLIANI et al. (eds.): *Donne guerra politica. Esperienze e memorie della Resistenza*, Bologna, Clueb, 2000; Dianella GAGLIANI (ed.): *Guerra Resistenza Politica....* In the same period Jane SLAUGHTER published in English the book *Women and the Italian Resistance 1943-1945*, Denver, Arden Press, 1997. On historiography on Italian female Resistance see Perry WILLSON: "Saints and heroines: re-writing the history of Italian women in the Resistance", in Tim KIRK and Anthony MCELLIGOTT (eds.), *Opposing Fascism. Community, Authority and Resistance in Europe*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 180-198.

<sup>14</sup> "Noi compagne di combattimento..." *I Gruppi di Difesa della Donna, 1943-1945. Il convegno e la ricerca*, Roma, Anpi, 2016 and the on line database "Gruppi di difesa della donna": <https://gdd.anpi.it/> [accessed 19 August 2024]; Benedetta TOBAGI: *La Resistenza delle donne*, Torino, Einaudi, 2022; Id.: *La Resistenza delle donne. Voci partigiane*: <https://group.intesasanpaolo.com/it/sezione-editoriale/intesa-sanpaolo-on-air/cultura/2023/benedetta-tobagi-la-resistenza-delle-donne-partigiane-podcast#> [accessed 19 August 2024]. There is no space here to recall the now numerous studies on Italian women's participation in the Resistance in different regional and local contexts.

<sup>15</sup> For Emilia-Romagna and Piedmont we have extensive collections of testimonies (among others Bianca GUIDETTI SERRA: op. cit; Anna Maria BRUZZONE and Rachele FARINA: op. cit; testimonies collected for the book Anna BRAVO and Anna Maria BRUZZONE: op. cit; testimonies collected on the occasion of the thirtieth anniversary of the Liberation, partly in Franca PIERONI BORTOLOTTI: op. cit; testimonies collected in University of Bologna, Department of History and Cultures, Archivio della memoria delle donne; testimonies collected in Centro Documentazione Donna Modena, partly in Caterina LIOTTI and Angela REMAGGI: *A guardare le nuvole. Partigiane modenesi tra memoria e narrazione*, Roma, Carocci, 2004). Women were active in the Resistance also in other Italian regions. See for example the testimonies collected for Tuscany and Veneto: Laura ANTONELLI: *Voci dalla storia. Le donne della Resistenza in Toscana tra storie di vita e percorsi di emancipazione*, Prato, Pentalinea, 2006; Maria Teresa SEGA: *Voci di partigiane venete*, Verona, Cierre Edizioni, 2016.

and to oppose the Fascist regime in Italy and the “forced emigration” abroad. Women took an active part in the clandestine life of the opposition parties, producing and distributing press and propaganda, organizing collections of money and materials to help those arrested and their families, opening their homes for meetings or allowing them to be used as safe houses, training in politics and fighting and even participating in formulating political ideas. Many paid a high price, suffering under Fascist repression in prisons or confinement colonies, being forced to flee and emigrate, leaving Italy and their loved ones, and being subjected to constant surveillance by the police that plagued them and their families in their daily lives.<sup>16</sup>

The life stories of Teresa Noce and Lea Giaccaglia are just two of the possible examples. A member of the Communist Party with important positions and tasks in the organization since 1921, Teresa Noce carried out an intense anti-Fascist activity in Turin, Rome and Milan. In 1926, together with her husband Luigi Longo, she moved to Moscow and then to Paris, where she was active in anti-Fascist networks. In the 1930s she travelled to Italy to maintain contact with the Communist Party and help with organizing work and then, in 1936, she took part in the Spanish Civil War in the International Brigades against Francoists. In 1939 she returned to France and the following year, when Italy declared war on France, she was sent to an internment camp in Rieucros. Transferred to Marseille, she managed to escape and joined the French resistance movement. In 1943 she was arrested and the Nazis sent her to Ravensbrück concentration camp. She returned to Italy after the end of the war.<sup>17</sup> Lea Giaccaglia was also active in the Communist Party in Bologna, Milan, Turin and Paris together with her husband Paolo Betti. After Betti's arrest, she continued to fight against the regime, until her arrest in 1927. The Special Court for the Defence of the State sentenced her to four years in prison, served under harsh conditions. In 1931, at the end of her imprisonment, Lea Giaccaglia was sentenced to five years of confinement in Lipari and Ponza. She returned to Bologna in 1934 and was placed under police surveillance. Fascism lifted the surveillance in June 1936, but Lea died the following month.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Laura MARIANI: *Quelle dell'idea. Storie di detenute politiche, 1927-1948*, Bari, De Donato, 1982; Giovanni DE LUNA: *Donne in oggetto. L'antifascismo nella società italiana. 1922-1939*, Torino, Bollati Boringhieri, 1995; Patrizia GABRIELLI: *Fenicotteri in volo. Donne comuniste nel ventennio fascista*, Roma, Carocci, 1999; Gianluca FULVETTI and Andrea VENTURA (eds.): *Antifasciste e antifascisti. Storie, culture politiche e memorie dal fascismo alla Repubblica*, Roma, Viella, 2024.

<sup>17</sup> Teresa NOCE: *Rivoluzionaria professionale. Autobiografia di una partigiana comunista*, Roma, Red Star Press, 2016; Anna TONELLI: *Nome di battaglia Estella. Teresa Noce una donna del Novecento*, Firenze, Le Monnier, 2020. “Teresa Noce”, in “WIRE Repository of Life Stories”: <https://wirerepository.latempesta.eu/exhibition/noce/> [accessed 12 November 2024].

<sup>18</sup> Patrizia GABRIELLI: *Mondi di carta. Lettere, autobiografie, memorie*, Siena, Protagon, 2000; *Annali Istituto Gramsci Emilia-Romagna*, 1 (1997); Fondazione Gramsci Emilia-Romagna, Archivio Paolo Betti e Lea Giaccaglia. The testimonies collected in Bianca GUIDETTI SERRA: op. cit. give many insights in anti-Fascist activities carried out by women before September 1943.



In the 1940s, alongside organized anti-Fascism, what has been referred to as a “wartime” or “existential” anti-Fascism<sup>19</sup> gradually emerged, linked to widespread discontent with the progress of the conflict, the deprivations, the effect of the bombing on Italian cities and the grief and mourning brought on families by the war.<sup>20</sup> The gradual decline in support for the Fascist regime was witnessed in the popular protests and workplace unrest that swept across Italy from north to south from 1940 and increasingly from 1942, culminating in the workers’ strikes of March 1943. While anti-Fascist militants were responsible for the organization of these protests, men and women not linked to the clandestine opposition parties also participated. Women were especially present in protests against high living costs and food rationing, an issue that directly affected them, forcing them to bear the brunt of supporting their families.

Nelia Benissone Costa, a Communist Party militant in Turin, recalls how she tried in 1943 to involve other women in opposition in this way:

Women then didn’t really know what was what. They were unhappy about the war, the cold, the hardships. The propaganda work could best be done in the queues outside stores. It’s here that we were talking, discussing, trying to make it clear that it was Fascism that had wanted the war and that now we had to end it. It was time for women to get organized, because perhaps the greatest burden was on us. The men [...] were at the front, but while being bombed, we had to think about getting by, about food, about family.<sup>21</sup>

The burden of war was used as a springboard to ignite discontent and lead to opposition activity. Dianella Gagliani noted that taking part in an anti-war demonstration did not always, or necessarily, mean embracing political anti-Fascism, and yet, if one takes into account that Fascism was «first and foremost a movement, a party, a regime that set anti-pacifism and warmongering as the foundation of its doctrine and practice», protesting against the war was tantamount to setting oneself against the Fascist system.<sup>22</sup> Thus in the protests of 1940-1943 a rejection of the war emerged, a key element in defining the attitude of many of the Italian women who were to take part in the Resistance a few months later.<sup>23</sup>

On 8 September 1943 and in the days immediately afterwards, this movement of revulsion toward the war became evident. Faced with the chaos into which the Italian

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<sup>19</sup> Guido QUAZZA: *Resistenza e storia d’Italia. Problemi e ipotesi di ricerca*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 1976, pp. 105-106.

<sup>20</sup> Pietro CAVALLO: *Italiani in guerra. Sentimenti e immagini dal 1940 al 1943*, Bologna, il Mulino, 1997.

<sup>21</sup> Testimony of Nelia Benissone Costa, in Anna Maria BRUZZONE and Rachele FARINA: op. cit., p. 34 [This direct quote and all those that follow have been translated by the author of this paper.].

<sup>22</sup> Dianella GAGLIANI: “Donne, guerra, Resistenza”, in *Fascismo, Resistenza e Costituzione*, Roma, Anpi, 2012, pp. 60-61.

<sup>23</sup> Dianella GAGLIANI: “Resistenza...”, p. 23.

army and the entire country were thrown by the announcement of the armistice between Italy and the Anglo-American forces, the king and government's abandonment of the capital, and the prompt Nazi reaction, women became key figures in a rescue operation of vast proportions, defined by Bravo and Bruzzone as a "mass mothering", which involved first and foremost Italian soldiers to be rescued from capture by the Germans and also Anglo-American prisoners of war who had escaped from Fascist detention camps.<sup>24</sup>

We have several testimonies about that moment from women who recalled the rescue of servicemen as their first act of resistance. Albina Caviglione Lusso of Turin, for example, said: «In the days right after the armistice we didn't go to the factory, and we helped the disbanded soldiers. We women took care of getting hold of civilian clothing for the soldiers who asked for help, or we dyed their uniforms, removing buttons and insignia».<sup>25</sup>

Poljana Grazia from Bologna recalled the events in a similar way: «On that day and in the following days dozens of soldiers passed through my house, who we dressed in plain clothes, and who left us weapons and ammunition in return».<sup>26</sup>

In a slightly different context, in Rome, where Italian army units attempted to resist the Germans by fighting, Carla Capponi – a future member of the GAP (Gruppi di azione patriottica, Action Groups) – recalled the clashes during which she first helped the soldiers set up to defend and then rescued a wounded soldier.

One of the Italian tanks was hit [...]. A young man was thrown out of the cockpit [and] gave signs of wanting to free himself from the imprisoning vehicle. Without thinking [...], I ran across the road [...]. The shots passed over me; I kept running [...]. It was not easy to pull the soldier out of the hatch. I managed to drag him down; the weight of the body above me made me lose my balance and we both ended up on the pavement [...]. I feared what I had seen [...] might happen: the Germans shooting at wounded men left on the pavement. I absolutely had to carry him away.

Carla carried the soldier to her home, where her mother medicated him and gave him shelter.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Anna BRAVO and Anna Maria BRUZZONE: op. cit., pp. 66-76; Roger ABSALOM: *A strange alliance. Aspects of escape and survival in Italy. 1943-1945*, Firenze, Olschki, 1991.

<sup>25</sup> Testimony of Albina Caviglione Lusso, in Anna Maria BRUZZONE and Rachele FARINA: op. cit., p. 70.

<sup>26</sup> Testimony of Poljana Grazia, in Luciano BERGONZINI: *La Resistenza a Bologna. Testimonianze e documenti*, vol. V, Bologna, Istituto per la storia di Bologna, 1980, p. 927.

<sup>27</sup> Carla CAPPONI: *Con cuore di donna*, Milano, il Saggiatore, 2000, pp. 93-103, quotation from pp. 100-101.

## Women's Resistance

From episodes such as those mentioned above, women's resistance developed; its specific forms can be examined by referring to the concept of civil resistance, that is, that set of unarmed actions and behaviours that hindered the war machine of the Nazis and their allies. In defining civil resistance in German-occupied Europe between 1939 and 1943, Jacques Sémelin identified the organized actions of institutions, political and social groups, churches, professional associations and ordinary citizens as forms of unarmed opposition against the Germans and local collaborationist governments that preceded armed resistance and took place in some cases independently of it. Civil resistance pursued goals directed primarily at maintaining the essential societal structures, community ties, identity and humanity; it delegitimized the Nazis and their allies, it showed that civilians in occupied countries did not bend to the will of the Germans, and in some cases it was more effective than armed resistance.<sup>28</sup>

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, protests and strikes – there was a wide range of behaviours and actions which made up civil resistance in Italy after 8 September 1943.<sup>29</sup> Italy's situation, however, is slightly different from that studied by Sémelin in other European countries,<sup>30</sup> since in the Italian peninsula civil resistance and armed resistance were closely linked: they emerged simultaneously and existed in a complex context, in which German military occupation coincided with the arrival of German and Allied military operations on Italian soil and was intertwined with the civil war unleashed by the reappearance of Fascism, which had been overthrown on 25 July 1943, in the guise of the Italian Social Republic (RSI).<sup>31</sup>

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 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. These were not mere support activities, but fundamental and indispensable elements for the development and operation of the fighting partisan

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<sup>28</sup> Jacques SÉMELIN: *Unarmed against Hitler: Civilian Resistance in Europe 1939-1943*, Westport, Praeger, 1993 (or. French ed. 1989).

<sup>29</sup> Anna BRAVO and Anna Maria BRUZZONE: op. cit., pp. 15-17 and Anna BRAVO: "Resistenza...".

<sup>30</sup> Anna BRAVO: "Armed and unarmed: struggles without weapons in Europe and in Italy", in *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 10:4 (2005), pp. 468-484.

<sup>31</sup> On the Italian context and Resistance movement see Santo PELI: *La Resistenza in Italia. Storia e critica*, Torino, Einaudi, 2004. For an analysis of the Resistance from within and a re-reading of the entire 1943-1945 period in Italy in its complexity, through the lens of the "three wars" (civil, patriotic and class war) and themes such as choice, betrayal and use of violence see Claudio PAVONE: *Una guerra civile. Saggio storico sulla moralità nella Resistenza*, Torino, Bollati Boringhieri, 1991.

formations and political bodies of the Resistance. What falls under the umbrella of unarmed resistance should therefore be considered as a proper part of Resistance movement activity.

The protagonists in this form of resistance were both men and women, of varying ages and social, political and cultural backgrounds, but women were very much present and took a leading role in it. And yet civil resistance is by no means the only form of opposition Italian women took part in between 1943 and 1945. In fact, there were women who took up arms and joined the fighting formations, although fewer in number than those who were unarmed partisans,<sup>32</sup> or who had “frontier” roles between the armed and unarmed resistance. Often, they were given the task of connecting the armed formations, political parties, and mass organizations with the rest of society, in order to persuade the Italian people of the good reasons for the conflict so as to achieve the end of the war and liberation.

Just as was true for the men, the reasons for women choosing resistance could be varied and ranged from a pre-existing political awareness to an opposition that had matured during the war in the face of the suffering and grief it had caused; from the desire to redeem Italy from Fascism and defend it from the Germans to the will to avenge murdered loved ones and to have justice; from the search for greater social equality to instinctive or “existential” forms of rebellion.<sup>33</sup> Among partisan women in Bologna, for example, we find those who were from an anti-Fascist family background and entered «the partisan struggle [... ] with political convictions already formed» in childhood, such as Isabella Agati,<sup>34</sup> those who, older in age, had already carried out anti-Fascist activities in the 1930s and the early war years, such as Giovanna Zaccherini, for whom «joining the Resistance was merely the consequence and continuation of that conspiratorial work I had already been doing for years and years»;<sup>35</sup> and those, such as Eugenia Pasi, who declared: «I don't know why I became a partisan. I hated the war and Fascism because Fascism had wanted it and continued it».<sup>36</sup>

Besides the variety of reasons, it is worth noting that a woman's decision to join the Resistance was a completely voluntary one.<sup>37</sup> As there was no female conscription,

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<sup>32</sup> The decision to take up arms was often a painful one for women, who were not educated in the use of weapons and were considered according to the traditional view and Catholic morality as strangers to war and violence, and in the Fascist view as servants of the fatherland, especially in the roles of mothers and wives of soldiers, nurses and godmothers of war. For a reflection on this issue see Claudio PAVONE: *Una guerra civile...*, pp. 440-445 and Anna BRAVO and Anna Maria BRUZZONE: *op. cit.*, pp. 141-146.

<sup>33</sup> See Guido QUAZZA: *op. cit.*, pp. 105 and following; and Claudio PAVONE: *Una guerra civile...*, chapter 3.

<sup>34</sup> Testimony of Isabella Agati, in Luciano BERGONZINI: *op. cit.*, vol. V, p. 915.

<sup>35</sup> Testimony of Giovanna Zaccherini Alvisi, in Luciano BERGONZINI: *La Resistenza a Bologna. Testimonianze e documenti*, vol. I, Bologna, Istituto per la storia di Bologna, 1967, p. 392; Roberta MIRA: “Antifasciste e sovversive. Profili di donne bolognesi nei casellari di polizia del regime”, in Gianluca FULVETTI and Andrea VENTURA (eds.), *op. cit.*, pp. 217-220.

<sup>36</sup> Testimony of Eugenia Pasi, in Luciano BERGONZINI: *op. cit.*, vol. V, p. 1002.

<sup>37</sup> Anna BRAVO and Anna Maria BRUZZONE: *op. cit.*, p. 189.

women were not faced with an obligatory choice, unlike male partisans who fell into the age group that was called to arms by the Fascist Italian Social Republic. For young men, who represented the largest component of the partisan movement, joining a partisan formation, initially was often the only way to try to avoid responding to the RSI's official conscription decrees, which threatened imprisonment or execution for draft evaders and deserters, and retaliation against their families. Their choice was thus partly voluntary and partly compulsory, and for some of them the convinced adherence to the Resistance, which began as draft renunciation, developed only later.

The absence of military conscription made women less suspect in the eyes of the Fascists and the Nazis, and this allowed them to move more freely and pass checkpoints more easily. Therefore, women were given the tasks that male partisans, especially young men, could not carry out. These were activities such as searching for places to hide partisans, conceal weapons, print clandestine newspapers and leaflets, or hold a meeting in safety; or those that involved long journeys or for which one would have contact with Fascist and Nazi commands and soldiers; or even site inspections and gathering information, or transporting messages, weapons, clandestine newspapers and leaflets, medicines and anything else that might be needed by fighters and those wanted by the authorities. These were delicate tasks, not simple ones, which required a high sense of responsibility and had to be carried out by trusted people; tasks that were indispensable for the development and success of the armed resistance; tasks that in a regular army we would call intendency, logistics, and communications and which therefore cannot be reduced to the status of mere support or help, but are an integral part of the Resistance.<sup>38</sup>

In narrating how they joined the partisan movement, however, many women have downplayed the value of their voluntary choice, almost hiding it behind the mediation of a man – whether that be a brother, father, uncle, husband, boyfriend, friend, or co-worker – who brought them into the partisan movement, or by fitting it into collective processes<sup>39</sup>; instead, for all of them it was a conscious assumption of responsibility, a taking sides, a political act that involved considerable risks, up to and including that of losing their lives. Just as men, if discovered, women risked arrest, interrogation, torture, deportation or shooting. The fact that they were unarmed and that, to defend themselves or avoid searches and checkpoints, they used their “personal weapons” – readiness of spirit, playful behaviour and smiles – does not mean that they did not know what they were doing and what was at stake.

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<sup>38</sup> Luciano CASALI: “Aspetti sociali della Resistenza in Emilia Romagna. Alcune considerazioni”, in Luciano CASALI and Alberto PRETI (eds.), *Identikit della Resistenza. I partigiani dell'Emilia-Romagna*, Bologna, Clueb, 2011, p. 20.

<sup>39</sup> Anna BRAVO and Anna Maria BRUZZONE: op. cit., pp. 185-190.

The memoirs of the partisan women, collected through interviews and writings, offer a wide range of episodes of resistance and show how women were present in every sector and every activity of the partisan movement, including the fighting formations.

The Piedmontese Elsa Oliva worked in Bolzano and on 8 September 1943, when the Germans attacked the barracks of the Italian army corps, she found herself «with a rifle [...], ready to resist together with the Italian soldiers» and realized that she wanted to «fight with weapons in her hand». After some action in a partisan group in Bolzano and after escaping deportation to Germany, Elsa returned home to Domodossola and decided to join partisan formations in the mountains. Her testimony highlights the difficulty of joining the fighting brigades, a sign that 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, to be entrusted at most with tasks of care and assistance – was widespread even among anti-Fascists and partisans. Elsa recalls:

I had [...] problems getting accepted as a partisan. I thought I would present myself as a Red Cross nurse [...]. I wanted to shoot, to do the fighting, but of course those people would have immediately said, “But no!...” [...].

After a couple of days of being in the group, [...] I said [...], «I didn't come here to look for a lover. I'm here to fight and I'm only staying here if you give me a weapon and put me in the group of those who have to be on watch and take part in the action. In addition, I will be a nurse. If you agree, I'll stay, if not I'll leave». [...] I was included with the guard [...]. I had a weapon, I was no longer just the nurse. At the first fight I proved that I could fight like them and that I wasn't just holding a weapon for appearances, but to aim and hit.

Later Elsa took on a role in command and was assigned a flying squad with duties of internal surveillance and intelligence gathering on spies and prisoners.<sup>40</sup>

Fascinated by the figure of Norma Barbolini of Modena, whose action in the field during a clash with the Germans earned her the role of commander<sup>41</sup>, Laura Polizzi from Parma also asked for and was granted a transfer to a fighting formation in the Apennines, from Reggio Emilia where she had been heading up the Women's Defence Groups. Armed with a small revolver, she was given the important role of deputy political commissar in the brigade, with the tasks of visiting the various detachments, maintaining radio contact with the Anglo-Americans for weapons and materials launches,

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<sup>40</sup> Testimony of Elsa Oliva, in Anna Maria BRUZZONE and Rachele FARINA: op. cit., pp. 134-142; quotes: pp. 134, 139-140.

<sup>41</sup> Norma BARBOLINI: *Donne montanare. Racconti di antifascismo e Resistenza*, Modena, Edizioni Cooptip, 1985.

looking after the discipline and morale of the partisans, overseeing the interrogation and punishment of prisoners, and writing for the partisan newspaper.<sup>42</sup>

Women also fought with weapons in the Patriotic Action Groups (GAP) that operated in city centres, carrying out attacks against Nazis and Fascists and their headquarters. Irene Castagneris, a GAP member in Turin, declared «I took part in practically everything that was done», carrying weapons and explosives, staying at the scene of the attacks «as protection» and even taking part directly in the action.<sup>43</sup>

However, the figure that embodies the woman active in the Resistance in the popular imagination is not that of the fighter, but that of the courier, unarmed and on a bicycle, which we recall here through the words of the Novara-born Catholic, Lidia Menapace:

I gradually found myself, almost without realising it, involved in the clandestine affairs: now it might be bringing medicine to the wounded, or a message to the mountains, or it's accompanying a Jewish boy to the Swiss border [...], or hiding a wounded boy in a town house, then it's having to listen secretly to Radio London for the weapons launch [...].

I learn the language of the underground, I learn to go unnoticed, not to argue in public, to change my route when there are crowds, not to ask personal questions of those I come into contact with, to forget names and addresses every time I've finished a mission; I distribute underground press, sew on insignia and cockades, in the house cellar are bombs, blue and green handkerchiefs [...] and copies of our newspaper *Il Ribelle* (The Rebel). [...]

On winter mornings, when it's still dark, I go out for mass or to queue up at the butcher's [...]. With my shopping basket on the handlebars of my trusty bicycle [...] and a packet of *Il Ribelle* casually wrapped up, I go out when it's still night [...]; I lay a copy of the newspaper at certain gates or doors I know, then I run to get in line at the shop that's still closed and finally with the extra packet of meat and minus one packet of newspapers I go to church [...].<sup>44</sup>

From this testimony we can see how the couriers were not only entrusted with the task of carrying messages and how their role was delicate and important for the Resistance: Annita Malavasi in the Reggio Emilia Apennines directed a real information gathering and transmission centre, Ena Frazzoni played a central organizing role in the Resistance Military Command of Emilia-Romagna and Teresa Cirio ensured the contacts between

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<sup>42</sup> Interview with Laura Polizzi, in “Teste parlanti”: <https://www.testeparlantimemorie900.it/video/laura-polizzi-parte-prima/> [accessed 8 August 2024].

<sup>43</sup> Testimony of Irene Castagneris, in Bianca GUIDETTI SERRA: op. cit., vol. I, p. 288.

<sup>44</sup> Lidia MENAPACE: *Io, partigiana. La mia Resistenza*, San Cesario di Lecce, Manni, 2014, pp. 62-63.

the members of the Communist Party in Turin and the central organization in Milan, by constantly travelling from one town to another.<sup>45</sup> Partisan women were also assigned other important tasks including, obviously, the organization of the Women's Defence Groups (*Gruppi di difesa della donna*, GDD), to which we will return; but they were also involved in activities that might seem more unusual. For example, Nelia Benissone Costa had the task of recruiting and politically preparing the partisans before they joined the formations in the city or in the mountains in the Turin area<sup>46</sup>; and the Reggio Emilia schoolteacher Teresa Vergalli was tasked with giving speeches to the partisans, explaining Italian history and the meaning of the Resistance struggle to build a different Italy from the Fascist one, building «confidence and hope for the aftermath». Teresa remembers that for «boys, poorly educated, poorly clothed, poorly armed and poorly fed» who were fighting «against enemies, against the hostile climate, but also against anxiety, fear, and impatience» it was «a relief and a novelty» to listen to someone talking «about the future [...]. And better [...] if it was a girl speaking! Compared to men, we women were able to use a different, less bombastic, more down-to-earth tone. And we were better able to lighten the atmosphere and the anguish».<sup>47</sup>

Aurelia Zama and other socialist women wrote articles for the women's newspaper *Compagna* (Companion) in a flat in the centre of Bologna and typed flyers and other propaganda materials, as did Virginia Manaresi in Imola, locked in her room with a blanket over her head and her typewriter to prevent neighbours from hearing her.<sup>48</sup> Anna Bonivardi from Turin, in one of her testimonies, recalled the organization of healthcare in the city, carried out with the complicity of other partisans and doctors, while the Bolognese Candia Onofri was active in the production of false documents for opponents, partisans and persecuted people, with stamps and papers stolen from municipal offices.<sup>49</sup> The house where Antizarina Cavallo and her daughter Isotta lived in Lu Monferrato, near Alessandria, served as base for their activity as couriers as well as depot for weapons and other materials.<sup>50</sup> Teresa Cerutti recalled the clandestine

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<sup>45</sup> Interview with Annita Malavasi, in "European Resistance Archive": <https://www.resistance-archival.org/it/testimonies/anita-malavasi/#/clips/GYlx3vSEZXk?k=d4ii8d> [accessed 8 August 2024]; Ena FRAZZONI: *Note di vita partigiana a Bologna*, Bologna, Tamari, 1972; Testimony of Teresa Cirio, in Anna Maria BRUZZONE and Rachele FARINA: op. cit., pp. 84-89.

<sup>46</sup> Testimony of Nelia Benissone Costa, in Anna Maria BRUZZONE and Rachele FARINA: op. cit., pp. 37-38.

<sup>47</sup> Teresa VERGALLI: *Una vita partigiana. Perché la battaglia per i nostri diritti continua ancora oggi*, Milano, Mondadori, 2023, pp. 76-77.

<sup>48</sup> Testimony of Aurelia Zama, in Luciano BERGONZINI and Luigi ARBIZZANI: *La Resistenza a Bologna. Testimonianze e documenti*, vol. II, Bologna, Istituto per la storia di Bologna, 1969, pp. 73-74; Interview with Virginia Manaresi by Roberta Mira and Toni Rovatti, July 2019, now in <https://memoriavittimenazismofascismo.it> [accessed 8 August 2024].

<sup>49</sup> Testimony of Anna Bonivardi, in Bianca GUIDETTI SERRA: op. cit., vol. I, pp. 207-208; Testimony of Candia Onofri, in Luciano BERGONZINI: op. cit., vol. V, p. 887.

<sup>50</sup> Testimony of Antizarina Cavallo, in Bianca GUIDETTI SERRA: op. cit., vol. I, pp. 255-256.



meetings held in her apartment in Turin, how she distributed the anti-Fascist press and when she brought letters from partisans to their families.<sup>51</sup>

Forms of care for the dead were of great importance for the maintenance of community ties and a symbol of the will to preserve humanity in the brutal context of war, such as those that Angiolina Fenoglio, Nelia Benissone Costa's mother, carried out in Turin, going to the cemetery to get news of the partisans killed and bringing information and comfort to their families. Also in Turin, the funeral of the sisters Vera and Libera Arduino, militants of the Women's Defence Groups killed by the Fascists in March 1945, was a recognition and homage to the two girls and became the occasion for a large demonstration by women (and men) who, openly defying the RSI and its authority, brought flowers and wreaths with the GDD's initials, placards, and leaflets to the cemetery, and organized flying rallies on trams and in workplaces, interrupting production.<sup>52</sup>

With the street protests, women's resistance was at its most visible and showed a form of opposition specific to women. Examples of this are two demonstrations organized by the Women's Defence Groups in the centre of Bologna in the spring of 1945. The first was held at the beginning of March, to commemorate Women's Day, and was a protest against a German and Fascist poster promising money and salt – a precious commodity at the time – to those who denounced the partisans. The GDD called on the women to take to the streets and go to the town hall to talk to the mayor and demand that the salt be distributed to the population, instead of being given to the spies; the women then formed a large procession and marched through the streets towards the salt depot, involving the women working in the tobacco factory in the demonstration, who stopped work. The second protest took place on 16 April 1945, a few days before the liberation of Bologna. Once again the protagonists were the GDD women, who carried placards in the main street, Via Indipendenza, praising the end of the war, the expulsion of the Nazis and Fascists, and peace, and Penelope Veronesi gave a speech under the statue of Garibaldi, a symbol of Italian unity and the Resistance.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Testimony of Teresa Cerutti, in Bianca GUIDETTI SERRA: op. cit., vol. II, pp. 418-419.

<sup>52</sup> Testimony of Nelia Benissone Costa, in Anna Maria BRUZZONE and Rachele FARINA: op. cit., pp. 39 and 49-51. On Libera and Vera Arduino and their family see "Museo Torino": <https://www.museotorino.it/view/s/83b2f4667df14ab38a69fac07bb9cb70>; <https://www.museotorino.it/view/s/f76a9a8d93fb4b77896e8bf26bc11269> [accessed 12 November 2024]. The funeral is recalled by many women in their testimonies, in Bianca GUIDETTI SERRA: op. cit., vol. I and vol. II.

<sup>53</sup> Fondazione Gramsci Emilia-Romagna, Partito comunista italiano, Triumvirato insurrezionale Emilia-Romagna, Direttive, b. 3, fasc. 16, Relazione, 3 March 1945; Testimony of Penelope Veronesi, in Luciano BERGONZINI: op. cit., vol. V, pp. 892-896.

## Imagining the future

We have mentioned the Women's Defence Groups more than once, the main mass organization of women linked to the Resistance, officially established in Milan in the autumn of 1943 at a meeting between anti-Fascist women belonging to different political parties. In reality, the GDD were formed at the behest of the left wing of the anti-Fascist camp, primarily of the Communist Party (PCI), but were open to women of all political orientations, social backgrounds and religious sentiments following the example of the Popular Front strategy developed in the 1930s.<sup>54</sup>

It was indeed the PCI that issued the "Directives for work among the female masses" on 28 November 1943, which included the Groups' action programme. This called women together «united by the need to fight, by the love for the Fatherland [...] for the common need that there be bread, peace and freedom, that the best sons of Italy who take up arms against the enemy be encouraged and assisted». It also listed a series of tasks to be entrusted to the GDD:

They should spread the conviction amongst women of the need to fight against the Fascist traitors and against the Germans; in the factories, offices and villages they should organize resistance to the Germans, the sabotage of production, blocking of provisions and supplies; they should prepare the women to fight alongside the workers all for the common liberation, isolate the traitors and the Germans, and create around them and their families an atmosphere of hatred and contempt waiting for the just vengeance of the people to strike them.

They should collect money, food, and clothing for the fighters and assist the freedom fighters with the information they deny the enemy; they should help the families of partisans and fighters interned in Germany [...].

Moreover, the women of the GDD were called to civil resistance with the aim of preserving life in the face of the privations of war and the Fascist and Nazi violence: «With strikes and work stoppages; with mass demonstrations, with violent action against Fascist spies and henchmen» women were to aim to obtain increases in wages and food rations, housing, clothing and shoes for working women and their children,

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<sup>54</sup> Anna ROSSI-DORIA: *Dare forma al silenzio. Scritti di storia politica delle donne*, Roma, Viella, 2007, p. 133. On the Groups see Maria MICHETTI, Marisa OMBRA and Luciana VIVIANI (eds.): *Gruppi di difesa della donna 1943-1945*, Roma, Udi, 1995; "Noi compagne di combattimento..."; Laura ORLANDINI: *La democrazia delle donne. I Gruppi di Difesa della Donna nella costruzione della Repubblica (1943-1945)*, Roma, BraDypUS, 2018. In English Jomarie ALANO: "Armed with a Yellow Mimosa: Women's Defence and Assistance Groups in Italy, 1943-45", in *Journal of Contemporary History*, 38:4 (2003), pp. 615-631.

and suitable heated premises for schools.<sup>55</sup> In this sense, as Dianella Gagliani has noted, it was once again the rejection of war that was the mainspring for participating in the Resistance, and it was the «defence of life and its dignity» – linked to the defence of rights, freedom and justice – that became the code of women's action in opposing the Fascists and the Germans.<sup>56</sup>

On the basis of the November 1943 programme, the GDD spread to various areas of Nazi-occupied Italy, achieving a considerably-sized organization, especially from the spring of 1944. As the numerous protests carried out in Emilia-Romagna show, the opportunity to make a qualitative leap in the GDD women's actions came from March 1944, with strikes and demonstrations to prevent the mobilisation and transfer of male and female workers to Germany and those against the deportation or shooting of draft evaders and prisoners. Then, in the summer of the same year, mobilisation concentrated on agricultural objectives to hinder the husking of rice and the reaping and threshing of wheat, so as not to hand over the harvests to the Fascist stocks and the Germans.<sup>57</sup>

In July 1944, the National Liberation Committee for Northern Italy (*Comitato di liberazione nazionale Alta Italia*, CLNAI), the main governing body of the Resistance, recognised the Women's Defence Groups as a «mass unitary organization [...] adhering to the National Liberation Committee» and invited party militants and every Italian woman «to collaborate with and join the Women's Defence Groups and all their initiatives aimed at mobilising the female masses and their participation in the insurrection to drive the Fascists out of Italy».<sup>58</sup>

The leaders and most active participants of the GDD were generally militants of the PCI or other anti-Fascist parties and they often also held other positions within the partisan movement, such as the aforementioned Laura Polizzi, Teresa Vergalli, Nelia Benissone Costa and many others. Far larger, however, was the number of women who participated in the Groups' grassroots activities. According to post-war estimates, the

<sup>55</sup> Fondazione Gramsci Emilia-Romagna, Partito comunista italiano, Triumvirato insurrezionale Emilia-Romagna, Direttive, b. 1, fasc. 1, "Directives for work among the female masses", 28 November 1943. See also Maria MICHETTI, Marisa OMBRA and Luciana VIVIANI (eds.): op. cit., pp. 49-50. The activities of the GDD are described in Ada GOBETTI: op. cit. and in numerous accounts by women resisters: see for example Testimony of Giuseppina Scotti and Edera Felici, in Bianca GUIDETTI SERRA: op. cit., vol. II, pp. 368-371 and 527-531; Testimony of Rita Cuniberti Martini, in Anna Maria BRUZZONE and Rachele FARINA: op. cit., pp. 192-196; Testimony of Vittoria Guadagnini and Testimony of Novella Pondrelli, in Luciano BERGONZINI: op. cit., vol. I, pp. 477-478, and vol. V, pp. 672-674.

<sup>56</sup> Dianella GAGLIANI: "La guerra totale e civile: il contesto, la violenza e il nodo della politica", in Ead. et al. (eds.), op. cit., pp. 38-41.

<sup>57</sup> Roberta MIRA: "«Non una lavoratrice, né un lavoratore, né una macchina in Germania». Le donne contro le deportazioni per lavoro durante l'occupazione nazista", in Fiorenza TAROZZI and Eloisa BETTI (eds.), *Le italiane a Bologna. Percorsi al femminile in 150 anni di storia unitaria*, Bologna, Editrice Socialmente, 2013, pp. 205-212; Luigi ARBIZZANI: *Azione operaia contadina di massa*, in *L'Emilia Romagna nella guerra di Liberazione*, vol. III, Bari, De Donato, 1976.

<sup>58</sup> Fondazione Gramsci Emilia-Romagna, Partito comunista italiano, Triumvirato insurrezionale Emilia-Romagna, Direttive, b. 1, fasc. 9, "Ai Comitati provinciali dei Gruppi di Difesa della Donna", 21 August 1944.

GDD attracted about 70,000 members, but considering the fluctuating composition of the Groups, with women entering and exiting the GDD, and the participation of women only in certain activities and for a variable period of time, it is possible to assume that the women who actually came into contact with the Groups and were mobilised, even temporarily, were more numerous.

The organization of the GDD and the preparation of the work of the Groups was carried out by liaising with political party leadership and through informal contacts with work colleagues, neighbours, friends and acquaintances; to spread the news of their programme, and information on the Groups' activities and on the progress of the war and the Resistance, and to call women together, the Groups used leaflets and their publication *Noi donne* (We women), which came out with a national edition and local editions with pages dedicated to the activities of the GDD in the different regions.<sup>59</sup>

Among the tasks assigned to the Women's Groups were those of caring for and supporting the fighting partisans. This is evident from the full name of the GDD, Groups for the Defence of Women and for Assistance to Freedom Fighters (*Gruppi di difesa della donna e per l'assistenza ai combattenti della libertà*), which was disliked by many women, including leaders such as Ada Gobetti, active in the Justice and Freedom movement (*movimento Giustizia e Libertà* - GL) and in the Action Party, and inspector for the GL partisan brigades in Piedmont and head of the GDD in the area. In her diary of 10 December 1943, when she met the communist Rosetta who brought her the programme of the Defence Groups that Ada would be in charge of, we read an appreciation for the contents, but a certain disappointment at the excessively long name and at the expressions "defence of women" and "assistance to fighters", as she would have preferred «freedom volunteers» just as the men were referred to.<sup>60</sup>

Franca Pieroni Bortolotti noted that the more politically experienced women, as Ada Gobetti, were able to involve the others in what their priority interests were and interpreted the concept of women's defence in terms of liberation and emancipation, with the aim of extending the rights of all women.<sup>61</sup> From involvement in small goals – such as protesting to demand more food rations or making socks for the partisans – the aims of the GDD action needed to be broadened, not only in the immediate partisan struggle, but also beyond it. In the Groups' programme, we find reference to the condition of women in post-war Italy and discover that the Defence Groups demanded the right to work for women and the prohibition of heavy work and night work, equal pay with men for equal tasks, periods of leave before and after childbirth, access to vocational education, to all categories of employment, including skilled employment, to

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<sup>59</sup> Tiziana BARTOLINI and Costanza FANELLI (eds.): *Noi donne clandestine. Edizioni 1944/45. Raccolta*, Roma, Editrice cooperativa Libera stampa, 2017: <https://www.noidonnearchivistorico.org/scheda-ri-vista.php?pubblicazione=000013> [accessed 23 August 2024].

<sup>60</sup> Ada GOBETTI: op. cit., p. 63.

<sup>61</sup> Franca PIERONI BORTOLOTTI: op. cit., pp. 77-80.

teaching in any kind of school, the management of care and welfare for mothers and children, and, above all, to «participate in social life, in trade unions, cooperatives, and local and national elected bodies». <sup>62</sup>

This was a true reversal of the Fascist plan for women and was accompanied by a new vision of Italy, a new country, rebuilt «under the sign of freedom, love and progress». Once «liberated from the foreign invader, [...] redeemed from Fascist oppression», Italy was to become «the homeland of the people who inhabit it, who work there and build there» and was to be «prosperous and pacifist» by the will of the people, a place where «every pain is alleviated» and «every joy is freed» and where women could «live and collaborate in a better life». <sup>63</sup>

The GDD programme therefore represents a significant example in the women's field of the formulation of a future for post-war Italy of peace, democracy, and equal rights for all members of society, one that is typical of the Resistance movement's imagination of a future beyond war. <sup>64</sup>

### After the Liberation

In the post-war period, few points from this programme were actually implemented and the role of women in the Resistance was not given the weight it merited, starting from the recognition of women as partisans. A search of the "Partigiani d'Italia" (Partisans of Italy) database, <sup>65</sup> which keeps lists of names and personal records of those meeting the requirements to gain formal recognition as partisans, yields the following results for fighting partisans, patriots and the fallen, nationally: 190,705 male partisans; 14,749 female partisans; 95,148 male patriots; 8,502 female patriots; 26,472 men who died; and 1,509 women who died. In percentage terms, 92.82% of those recognised as partisan fighters were men compared to 7.18% women; 91.80% of patriots were men compared to only 8.20% women; and 94.61% of those who died were men, against 5.39% women.

The official female presence within the Resistance therefore appears rather limited and is certainly underestimated compared to the particular forms of resistance and opposition to the Nazis and Fascists by women mentioned above. This reduction in size is the result of the approach given to the question of the requirements to be recognised as a partisan, an issue that Italian governments considered as early as 1944, after the liberation of Rome and while the war was still in progress, but which penalised the female component of the partanship because of the way it was dealt with. Among the

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<sup>62</sup> Fondazione Gramsci Emilia-Romagna, Partito comunista italiano, Triumvirato insurrezionale Emilia-Romagna, Direttive, b. 1, fasc. 1, "Directives for work among the female masses", 28 November 1943.

<sup>63</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>64</sup> See Claudio PAVONE: *Una guerra civile...*, pp. 560-585.

<sup>65</sup> "I partigiani d'Italia. Lo schedario delle commissioni per il riconoscimento degli uomini e delle donne della Resistenza": <https://partigianiditalia.cultura.gov.it> [accessed 29 August 2024].

first acts that the government in Rome, comprising the anti-Fascist parties, dedicated to the assistance and recognition of Italian partisans was the legislative decree no. 158, promulgated on 5 April 1945, which established a national commission, in charge of assigning qualifications and recognitions for the activities carried out during the Resistance to partisans who requested them.<sup>66</sup> With the subsequent Decree no. 518 of 21 August 1945, the role of the single central commission was handed over to 11 (12 from 1948) local commissions, each of which was composed of a ministerially appointed chairman, two Armed Forces officers and representatives of the National Partisan Association (ANPI) chosen from the members of the partisan formations and the parties of the National Liberation Committee (CLN); the decree defined the qualifications and criteria for obtaining them in detail.

According to Article 7, the qualification of «fighting partisan» was awarded to «those decorated for valour for partisan activity», to those wounded in combat or during partisan activity, to those who had served «for at least three months in a partisan armed formation or in GAP» and who had «taken part in at least three acts of war or sabotage», to members of SAP (*Squadre di azione patriottica*, Patriotic Action Squads) formations with «a minimum period of membership of six months» and participation «in at least three actions of war or sabotage», to members «of a command or command service (information, air-drops, operational logistics, etc..)» for a period of three months in central-southern Italy or six months in central-northern Italy. This qualification could also be awarded to those imprisoned «in prison, exile or concentration camps for more than three months following capture by Nazi-Fascists for partisan activities» and «those who [...] have carried out activities and actions of particular importance in the opinion of the Commissions».

Article 8 established that the title of «fallen in the struggle for liberation» could be awarded «to those who had died in partisan actions» and to those who had died «from wounds contracted in partisan actions, or from illness contracted in partisan service»; also to those who had been killed by Nazis and Fascists as hostages or political prisoners or in reprisals and to «political prisoners who died from mistreatment in prison or in a concentration camp». Article 9 recognised the qualification of «mutilated or made invalid in the struggle for liberation» to the same persons as in Article 8 if they had been mutilated or made invalid.

Finally, Article 10 introduced the qualification of «patriot» for «all those who, not falling into the previous categories [...] [...], nevertheless collaborated or contributed to the struggle for liberation, either by serving in partisan formations for a shorter

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<sup>66</sup> Dll. 5 April 1945, no. 158, in *Gazzetta Ufficiale*, no. 53, 2 May 1945.

period than the period envisaged, or by providing constant and considerable help to the partisan formations». <sup>67</sup>

This was the only exception to the obviously military character of the qualifications and the requirements to obtain them. <sup>68</sup> This is not the place to discuss the reasons in depth, but it is worth recalling some of them. First of all, there was the need to “legalise” the partisan activity carried out between 1943 and 1945 in Nazi-occupied territory in violation of the regulations of the Italian Social Republic then in force, by placing this activity under the umbrella of the legitimate authority of the CLNAI, the Southern Italian government’s delegate in occupied northern Italy. At the same time, it helped to support the idea that a unified, organized, militarily efficient and patriotic partisan army, which could be recognised as a legitimate, albeit voluntary, belligerent force in the conflict, according to the international law of the time, had carried out the fight for freedom. <sup>69</sup> Another significant factor was the intertwined needs to legitimise the Resistance in the Centre-North and to create and develop the new Italian army in the liberated Centre-South of the country, with one eye on the continuity of the State and the other on the conditions of the armistice signed with the Anglo-American forces in September 1943, which incentivised the Italian government and people to make an increasing contribution in the war against Nazi Germany. <sup>70</sup> Military criteria therefore seemed more suitable for the purpose of establishing the image of an army that had played its part in the defeat of Fascism and Nazism and the redemption of Italy, as well as providing a simpler evaluation scale to be used, such as the number of months spent in the formations or the number of armed actions performed, even if these criteria could be restrictive. <sup>71</sup>

As is easy to guess, meeting these requirements was especially difficult, if not impossible, for women, who had been partisans, but in most cases without weapons and often without a formal position in the combatant groups. This is why we find fewer women officially recognised than actually took part in the Resistance.

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<sup>67</sup> Dll. 21 August 1945, no. 518, in *Gazzetta Ufficiale*, no. 109, 11 September 1945. For the work of the committees see “I partigiani d’Italia. Lo schedario delle commissioni per il riconoscimento degli uomini e delle donne della Resistenza, Le commissioni”: <https://partigianiditalia.cultura.gov.it/commissioni/> [accessed 29 August 2024].

<sup>68</sup> Claudio DELLAVALLE: “Partigianato piemontese e società civile”, in *Il Ponte*, 51:1 (1995), pp. 18-35.

<sup>69</sup> Santo PELI: op. cit., pp. 85-91, 124-125 and 136-137; Roberta MIRA: *Tregue d’armi. Strategie e pratiche della guerra in Italia fra nazisti, fascisti e partigiani*, Roma, Carocci, 2011, p. 33.

<sup>70</sup> Nicola LABANCA: “Corpo italiano di liberazione”, in Enzo COLLOTTI, Renato SANDRI and Frediano SESSI (eds.), op. cit., pp. 207-215; Claudio PAVONE: *Alle origini della Repubblica. Scritti su fascismo, antifascismo e continuità dello Stato*, Torino, Bollati Boringhieri, 1995, especially chapter 2.

<sup>71</sup> Claudio DELLAVALLE: “Partigianato...”, pp. 25-26; Maria Rosaria PORCARO: “Partigiane, contarle e riconoscerle”, in Dianella GAGLIANI et al. (eds.), op. cit., pp. 353-354; Carlo Maria FIORENTINO: “Il fondo archivistico dell’Ufficio per il servizio riconoscimento qualifiche e per le ricompense ai partigiani (RICOMPART)”, in Enzo FIMIANI (ed.), *La partecipazione del Mezzogiorno alla Liberazione d’Italia (1943-1945)*, Firenze, Le Monnier, 2017, pp. 209-249.

It must also be said that several women did not apply for recognition. It was not only the military requirements that held them back, but also, at least for some of them, the interpretation of their activity as something not so relevant. Recilia Pesci – a farm labourer and rice field worker from Medicina, in the province of Bologna, and a member of the Communist Party after the war – did not ask for recognition and after the war described her activity in the partisan detachment of the 7th GAP brigade in Medicina as follows: «I didn't fight, I didn't carry weapons, like other women in my group, I went around with provisions; it was still risky but it wasn't the same». <sup>72</sup> She seems to be echoed by the Piedmontese Magda Barbero, who during the war included names of partisans and racially persecuted people in lists to be delivered to the German command for the issuance of work permits, and who, when it was pointed out to her that this was a Resistance action, replied that not she, but her sister – active in a regular partisan formation – had been in the Resistance. <sup>73</sup> Even Jolanda Rosi, born in Talbignano in the Modena area, a Communist, active as a courier, who actually received the title of partisan, tended to downplay her own Resistance experience both in relation to other women, who in her opinion were more important («it's not that we then did great things: we hid those who needed to be hidden...we just brought them food [...]. Whereas [...] Gina Borellini [...] she really fought... she was in the formation!»), as well as in relation to her husband («He was a real partisan... I just helped!») <sup>74</sup>

Not always what sounds like a devaluation of women's partisan activity by the protagonists of the Resistance themselves is the result of a lack of consideration of what was done. Partisan women, in fact, were proud of what they did, but often regard their participation in the Resistance as something natural, something that had to be done. This is how it appears to us in the words of Vinka Kitarovic, an anti-Fascist in Italian-occupied Croatia and who – after being arrested, taken to Italy and escaping thanks to a network of opponents – became a partisan in Bologna and Modena. For her important roles in the 7th GAP brigade in the city and in the Resistance Military Command of Emilia-Romagna, Vinka obtained recognition as a fighting partisan and the rank of captain, but, she jokingly recounted that when a British soldier saluted her on meeting her in Bologna after the war, she turned to check whether an officer was passing behind her. In the conclusion of an interview about her partisan experience she said, «I don't think I did anything extraordinary, I did what others did [...]. And I don't want honours [...] I am one of many». <sup>75</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Testimony of Recilia Pesci, in University of Bologna, Department of History and Cultures, Archivio della memoria delle donne (AMD).

<sup>73</sup> Cited in Anna BRAVO and Anna Maria BRUZZONE: op. cit., p. 188.

<sup>74</sup> Testimony of Jolanda Rosi, in AMD. On Gina Borellini see Caterina LIOTTI and Mariagiulia SANDONÀ (eds.): *Un paltò per l'Onorevole. Gina Borellini, Medaglia d'oro della Resistenza*, Modena, Centro Documentazione Donna, Comune di Modena, Provincia di Modena, Regione Emilia-Romagna, 2009.

<sup>75</sup> Interview with Vinka Kitarovic by Roberta Mira, October 2012.



The issue of recognition was not the only problematic point in the post-war experience of female partisans. Women who had fought in the Resistance suffered from the weight of the morals and standards of the society of the time, according to which 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. The general trend was to make women return to the home and the family, and many female partisans accepted, or were forced to accept, a more reassuring representation of themselves as figures who made a contribution but not as active protagonists of the Resistance.<sup>76</sup>

Yet their role was central both in the partisan struggle and in the construction of the new Italy. After the Resistance, women had access to active and passive voting rights, and the ideas developed by the partisan women were of great importance in the drafting of some of the articles of the Constitution of the Italian Republic, thanks to the work of the 21 elected women (out of more than 500 elected members of the Constituent Assembly), most of whom had been active in anti-Fascism and the Resistance. Among them there were the aforementioned Teresa Noce, who then became a deputy and a trade unionist, the Communist and future president of the Italian Deputies Chamber Nilde Iotti – the first woman to achieve this role in Italy in 1979 –, the Socialist Lina Merlin, then deputy and senator, the Catholic Maria Federici, future deputy of the Democratic Christian Party, the Communist Teresa Mattei, the youngest member of the Constituent Assembly.<sup>77</sup> Besides them, many other partisan women became involved in politics, in local government, in trade unions, and in associations such as the Italian Women's Union (UDI), which was founded in continuity with the Defence Groups in Rome in 1944 and expanded after the Liberation to the national level. Many of these obtained significant roles and achieved important goals.<sup>78</sup> For instance the aforementioned Ada Gobetti was vice-mayor of Turin for the Action Party and was active in organizations and associations committed to women's rights, Tina Anselmi of the Democratic Christian Party became the first woman minister in Italy, as minister of Labour in 1976 and as minister of Health in 1978, the Communists Diana Sabbi and Novella Pondrelli had responsibility roles in the trade unions and in UDI in Bologna, and were elected in the local Province Council.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Anna BRAVO and Anna Maria BRUZZONE: op. cit., pp. 202-212.

<sup>77</sup> Maria Teresa Antonia MORELLI (ed.): *Le donne della Costituente*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2007.

<sup>78</sup> Anna ROSSI-DORIA: *Dare forma al silenzio...*, chapter 4; Ead.: *Diventare cittadine. Il voto alle donne in Italia*, Firenze, Giunti, 1996; Perry WILLSON: *Women...*, chapter 8; Patrizia GABRIELLI: *La pace e la mimosa. L'Unione donne italiane e la costruzione politica della memoria (1944-1955)*, Roma, Donzelli, 2005.

<sup>79</sup> Jomarie ALANO: *A Life ...*, chapter 8; Tina ANSELMI and Anna VINCI: *Storia di una passione politica*, Milano, Sperling&Kupfer, 2006; "Diana Sabbi" and "Novella Pondrelli", in "Fondazione Argentina Bonetti Altobelli – Progetto biografie": [https://www.fondazionealtobelli.it/?post\\_type=biografia&p=1527](https://www.fondazionealtobelli.it/?post_type=biografia&p=1527); [https://www.fondazionealtobelli.it/?post\\_type=biografia&p=1499](https://www.fondazionealtobelli.it/?post_type=biografia&p=1499) [accessed 16 November 2024].

Despite this, several of the former women resisters did not hold public positions after the end of the war and the path of women's rights – and with them civil and political rights – in Italy has been tortuous and we cannot say it is yet complete. Rediscovering and bringing to fruition the most innovative thrusts of the Resistance and its female component may be a way to move forward again.