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RESEARCH ARTICLE

# No longer silent: the history and memory of women's roles in the Resistance

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## Abstract

This article offers a critical rereading of the historiography on the role of women in the Italian Resistance. It starts with the postwar period, marked by a general silence and the prevailing image of women as mothers and *staffette*. In the 1970s, the first historical elaboration of women's experiences began in all northern regions, leading to the now iconic concept of the 'silent Resistance'. In the 1990s, a dialogue developed with other historiographical categories, such as the concept of 'civil resistance' developed by Jacques Sémelin and the 'war on civilians', but this approach ran the risk of reducing women's contribution to 'powerless' acts. Although today women's history is fully integrated into the narrative canon of the Resistance, it faces new challenges, such as the confrontation with 'other' (mainly non-European) resistances and new public uses of history. The article suggests that women's history has been, if not the only, then certainly the most important means by which new dimensions of the partisan movement and the Second World War have been brought to the fore, shedding light on the specificities of the conflict experienced by women, but also shaping the very notion of resistance by overcoming a purely militarist vision.

**Keywords:** women; Resistance; historiography; feminist movements; Italian colonialism

## Introduction

In September 2023, Benedetta Tobagi was awarded the Campiello Prize, one of Italy's most prestigious literary awards, for her book *La Resistenza delle donne*. Combining historical research and narrative sensibility, this unusual text offers a collective portrait of Italian partisan women, starting from photographs preserved in the archives of various historical institutes of the Resistance. The runner-up was a novel dedicated to the literary partisan Joyce Lussu, *La Sibilla*, while the lifetime achievement award went to Edith Bruck, a Holocaust survivor. These honours testify to the relevance of women's experiences in the Second World War in the country's current cultural landscape and public imagination. Eighty years after the liberation, the women's Resistance is no longer what was once called the 'silent Resistance': partisan women are popular. Their story is no longer an *aside*, an exorbitant appendix to the history of a male movement, but a prime-time topic.

Over the years, much has been said about the gendered dimension of the Resistance, often by women themselves, who, like Tobagi, are in search of 'chosen ancestors' (Tobagi 2022). We know that women were actively involved in the conflict and that they were

marginalised in the male chauvinist narrative of the time. In recent decades, this awareness has led to the publication of numerous novels, biographies, historical reconstructions and stories about partisan women, generally driven by a strong desire to fill this gap.

There are far more historical publications on the life of Italian women during the 20 months of the Resistance than on their role in movements, trade unions and parties in the following 80 years. In the well-known 'karstic' landscape that characterises the history of women's movements, which have always moved between the underground and the surface, the Resistance is an important presence. If the liberation struggle is the founding event of republican citizenship (the 'republic born from the Resistance'), this is all the more true for women. For them, being a partisan (even to the detriment of other movements and struggles) is seen as a constitutive act of inclusion in the political body of the nation. The focus on the Resistance thus partly reflects the fascination with origins that – according to Marc Bloch – haunts all historians, and which in this case has led them to focus on the first steps of women's citizenship rather than its development. However, among the wealth of research on partisan women, there is also a sincere search for roots and legitimisation by different generations of women (Rossi-Doria 2010).

This article offers a critical rereading of the different historiographical phases in which the contribution of women to the Italian Resistance has been discussed, focusing on the way they interacted with their time and with the public debate. We will see that, after the silences of the postwar years, the history of partisan women was fully integrated into the history of the Resistance *tout court*. More importantly, I argue that women's history was, if not the only, then certainly the main means by which new dimensions of the partisan movement and the Second World War were brought to the fore, shedding light on the specificities of the conflict experienced by women, but also reshaping the very idea of resistance. Moreover, the role of women in the Resistance movement is a case of public history *ante litteram*, which has been able to engage with a wide, non-specialist audience and disseminate important historiographical categories (e.g. civil resistance). No longer silenced but debated, studied and disseminated, the contribution of partisan women – as a turning point in the social and political history of the nation – is now one of the most recognised and bipartisan dimensions of a divisive issue such as the Resistance.

## The postwar years: a time of martyrs and heroes

In one of the first essays on the role of women in the Resistance, Ada Gobetti, a well-known antifascist and partisan, wrote that 'women were everywhere … There was no activity, struggle, organisation or collaboration in which she did not take part' (Gobetti Marchesini 1961). Many years later, the historian Anna Bravo confirmed Gobetti's statement but pointed to 'the significant exception of enclaves of high power and prestige' (Bravo 2000). There is no need to recall the variety and diversity of the tasks performed by women in the Resistance: from logistics to the press, from healthcare to the provision and storage of weapons, from administrative tasks to undercover work, from the creation of aid networks for the victims of Nazi/Fascist persecution to the organisation of demonstrations and riots (Slaughter 1997). Nor is it a secret that Italy at the time was steeped in male chauvinism, including the partisan movement, which relegated women to the sidelines, pushed them into the role of caretakers and often discouraged them from taking up arms. In this article, I focus on the postwar period and the first stories about the Resistance that emerged in the aftermath of the liberation. The wide range of roles and the protagonism that Italian women had experienced in 1943–5 were soon flattened by the reductive and devaluing definition of the *staffetta* (courier), an ancillary term that was widely used

to refer to partisan women but which clearly separated those who gave the orders from those who transmitted them, perhaps with little awareness or understanding of their content.

This process of marginalisation was exemplified in the exclusion of partisan women from demobilisation parades, which were organised in every city in northern Italy at the end of the war. These were important moments of self-representation in which the partisans wanted to give the Allies the impression of a virile, victorious and antifascist Italy; there was no room for the disturbing image of armed women, which would break the male monopoly on the binomial between the duty to fight for the fatherland and the right to vote. The professionalisation of the Resistance – that is, the progressive transformation from guerrilla army to regular army – also meant sacrificing women's protagonism, as had already happened in the Spanish civil war (Nash 1995).

Little changed in the years that followed. The first celebrations and commemorations of the Resistance focused exclusively on the figure of the young male partisan fighter. Partisan women were usually only mentioned in passing in official speeches by male speakers, who thanked women (almost always as an indistinct whole) for their 'contribution' and 'participation' – terms that imply subalternity and not full membership in the movement. Using an emphatic and emotive rhetoric in which all fighters were heroes and all the dead martyrs, they described the few heroines worth remembering with the masculinising lexicon of 'virile courage' (Willson 1999). In addition, the Resistance narrative tended to be choral, making the female component invisible. The decision to join the Resistance had often implied total militancy, involving the couple or the whole family unit, but in public rhetoric the collective dimension absorbed women, who became accessories to the male household (i.e. wives, sisters or daughters) even when they had been the driving force behind the decision, if not supporting actors.

The novelty of gender equality in the partisan struggle thus gave way to stereotyped and domesticated archetypes, first and foremost that of the fallen man's mother, an archetype that nevertheless struggled to adapt to the conflict; the myth of the sorrowful mother, whose grief redeems and makes all dead children equal, did not fit the civil war scenario (D'Amelia 2005). Different, unconventional narratives and iconographies emerged early on but remained sporadic and isolated (Guerra 1999). For example, Marcello Venturi's short story 'La ragazza se ne va con Diavolo' (1946) tells the story of a woman named Vera, who uses her body to seduce a Fascist commander. After flattering his masculinity and military prowess, she asks him – seemingly innocently – to teach her how to shoot, but as soon as she gets her hands on his weapon, she reveals that she is a partisan, kills him without hesitation and clips his gun to her waist, a symbol of a power that can no longer be only masculine. Another good example is the novel *Dalla parte di lei* by Alba de Céspedes (1949). The protagonist is Alessandra, a woman who ends up killing her husband – an important antifascist leader – as a reaction to her subalternity, which also emerges from the story of their shared partisan struggle: 'They then illustrated the now famous adventures of my husband … I began to suspect that the bombs I had carried must have been fake if only those of the men were considered dangerous … I was so intimidated that I often stayed in a corner and kept silent.'

However, resistant and undisciplined bodies such as those of Vera and Alessandra remained on the sidelines, while the image of the partisan *staffetta* Agnese, the protagonist of Renata Viganò's famous novel (*L'Agnese va a morire*, 1949), entered the public scene and placed the story of partisan women in a more reassuring narrative canon, linked to the semantics of the maternal (D'Angelo and Zaczek 2008). This is also what characterised Ada Marchesini Gobetti's *Diario partigiano* (1956), the first key text on the Resistance written from a woman's perspective (Cooke 2011). Marchesini's social and intellectual background – like that of many other women who joined Giustizia e Libertà – makes her, in a sense, the

spiritual heir of the female elites of the Risorgimento; women like Adelaide Cairoli offered narrative models and the ideal of a mother who was close to and participated in her son's struggles, pushing gender aspirations and demands into second place. The maternal code ends up dominating the diary, and it is no coincidence that Italo Calvino introduced it as 'the book of a mother, of a mother who goes off to the partisan war with her son' (Marchesini Gobetti 1956).

The picture does not change much when it comes to historiographical production. Until the end of the 1960s, the main reconstructions of the Resistance period were produced by the 'historian-protagonists': authoritative partisan leaders, usually communists and always male, who intertwined the historical dimension with the biographical one (Peli 2022). A good example is *Un uomo, un partigiano* by the commander and historian Roberto Battaglia. Despite being exceptionally unrhetorical and sincere, the volume (written as early as 1945) describes the Resistance as a predominantly – and almost exclusively – male endeavour, starting from its title. The disruptive roles that the Italian Communist Party had imagined for women, promoting new legitimising narratives and icons (think of legendary heroines such as Irma Bandiera, Gabriella Degli Esposti and the Arduino sisters), were poorly digested by the more conservative components of the Resistance; they were soon sacrificed for the sake of a unified Comitato di Liberazione Nazionale and the need to gain respect as a reliable and mass party. Although women were extremely frustrated by this change of course, which relegated them from 'professional revolutionaries' to assistants to male commanders, they reluctantly accepted it, partly in the name of a total and all-encompassing militancy that had long accustomed them to putting themselves aside for the good of the party. 'They used to tell me: remember, you are not a woman, you are a communist,' the partisan Anna 'Cecilia' Cinanni recalled years later (Bruzzone and Farina 1976). For many male partisans, the long postwar period was marked by disappointment, the frustration of hopes and expectations for change. But for women, it was a double disappointment, and their stories give voice to the sense of disillusionment with greater intensity than those of the men. As Marisa 'Lilia' Ombra writes: 'For us girls, the transgression ended … our lives would never be extraordinary again' (Ombra 2009).

The reluctance to grant women the right to vote and the relegation of their political activism to roles almost exclusively associated with care, child rearing and social services ('politics by and for mothers') reflect the continuities with which the new republican era began. Clearly, the broad and significant participation of women in the struggle against Nazi-Fascism did not directly translate into a radical rethinking of gender relations, substantive equality or even inclusion in a shared narrative canon. However, this is not exclusive to the Italian Resistance. In liberation movements, the needs of national cohesion often prevail over emancipationist demands, especially those of women (Berkin and Lovett 1980), who are easily erased by male nationalist post-liberation rhetoric, and their great wartime contribution is rarely adequately rewarded in the postwar distribution of new rights and roles. Most importantly, it almost never leads to a lasting redistribution of power and authority between the sexes (McClintock 1996).

## The 1970s and the 1980s: redemption and compensation

At the end of the 1970s, the theme of women's role in the Resistance exploded in a variety of publications and studies linked to the political and cultural impact of feminism. This new phase not only swept away the rhetoric of subaltern participation and attributed a central role to partisan women in the liberation movement, but it also turned the question upside down. The point was not what contribution women had made to the Resistance, but what contribution the Resistance had made to women's freedom. This polemical question,

which arose in the context of the extra-parliamentary left's attack on traditional celebratory rhetoric, represents a gendered version of the myth of the 'betrayed Resistance', where those who stab women in the back are the antifascist parties and the 'comrade-enemies' themselves.

For the feminist generation of the 1970s, studying the Resistance also meant reflecting on the legitimacy of political violence: in particular, on the continuities and discontinuities between the Resistance and terrorism. *Mara e le altre* (Farè and Spirito 1979) explored the experiences of female terrorists through interviews with members and sympathisers of the Red Brigades. It contains several stories of partisan women trying to find a role model with which to dialogue; the most iconic figure is that of Cesarina Carletti, 'Grandma Mao', a partisan and survivor of Ravensbrück who was arrested in 1974 on the charge of supporting the Red Brigades (Di Cori 1994).

The cards were also reshuffled as a result of the feminists' focus on the dichotomy between the public and the private spheres. More attention was paid to the spaces in between, those no-man's lands in which the women of the Resistance had moved, as well as to the political dimension of certain phenomena (e.g. the hiding of outlaws) that took place in traditionally private spaces (Rossi-Doria 1999). Behaviours that had traditionally been attributed to women's supposed natural predisposition to care and nurture changed, entering into the field of political struggle and redefining the boundaries and instruments of the struggle.

It was precisely two researchers linked to feminist movements – Anna Maria Bruzzone and Rachele Farina – who wrote the seminal text *La Resistenza taciuta* (1976). Combining history and anthropology, it collects the testimonies of 12 Piedmontese partisan women, presented without any substantial interpretive or explanatory framework, but as life stories, concealing the interviewers' questions and giving the stories flow and narrative power. The book was a success, and the concept of the 'silenced' Resistance was subsequently extended to the many forgotten protagonists of the liberation struggle and even applied to male phenomena outside the heroic-military canon, such as military internment or deportation. Its success was partly due to the iconic title, which conveys the great ambiguity of a Resistance silenced not only by the protagonists themselves (out of humility and modesty), but also by the leadership of the partisan parties and organisations and, in general, by a world in which female protagonism was considered a fault – a world in which there was no room for their stories. Luisa Muraro spoke of an 'aphasia' shared by both men and women; the living and raw experience of the Resistance was non-transferable and disciplined into narrative canons that were generally rigid, limiting and stereotypical, as well as penalising for women. On the other hand, Muraro challenged the simplistic and reductive view of women's lack of recognition, stressing that several women with an antifascist and Resistance background had been able to build brilliant political careers (Muraro 1976).

In addition to feminist activism, a more institutional and academic strand of research also contributed to turning the spotlight on the history of partisan women. Former fighters and leaders of the Associazione Nazionale Partigiani Italiani demanded recognition and an openness within an organisation that had always been male-dominated. In an attempt to communicate with the new generation of feminists and to denounce the persistent gender division within left-wing movements and parties, the former partisan Giuliana Gadola Beltrami organised the conference 'The Other Half of the Resistance', which appealed to different sensibilities. Together with partisan and journalist Mirella Alloisio, Gadola managed to gather hundreds of testimonies from other women across Italy (Alloisio and Beltrami 1981).

On the occasion of the thirtieth anniversary of the liberation, the Emilia-Romagna region promoted a major research project, distributing hundreds of questionnaires through ANPI sections. The project led to conferences and the first historical publications on the origins

of female citizenship in the republican era, edited by Franca Pieroni Bortolotti (1978) and Paola Gaiotti de Biase (1978). Interestingly, their books were published as part of a trilogy that also included a text by a former partisan and researcher, Ilva Vaccari, who described the partisan women's enemy as follows: not only Fascism, but the ideas about women and the roles that Fascism had promoted and imposed on society (Vaccari 1978).

All in all, the 1970s and 1980s left historians with a wealth of testimonies, interviews and stories. Bruzzone and Farina paved the way for other researchers who began to interview partisan women in various provinces, recording their memories in audiovisual archives and books. This heterogeneous material was not always properly contextualised and interpreted, but it was of undeniable testimonial value. More generally, these decades gave these studies certain basic characteristics, starting with the attention to subjectivity that characterises the historiography of women partisans in Italy and anticipates the dimension of individuality of choice that was later fully explored by Claudio Pavone (Alessandrone Perona 1994). Women's history thus 'decollectivised' the Resistance, which had previously been above all the history of the parties that had sought legitimacy and roots in the partisan struggle. The women's stories furthermore problematised the heroic-triumphant visions of much of the documentation produced by partisan formations, offering a demythologising gaze that paid attention to fears, emotions, failures, small gestures and the habits of everyday life. In its search for a non-existent historiographical tradition and its attempt to fill an obvious gap, women's history thus discovered and legitimised subjective and oral sources, opening up to contamination by anthropology and the social sciences.

## The 1990s and 2000s: a 'civil resistance'

In the 1990s, a new and innovative strand of research on the role of women in the Resistance began to emerge. The fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of bipolarity dealt the final blow to the grand narratives and the heroic epic of the national Resistance movement. Dramatic conflicts in which women and civilians were strategic targets, especially in neighbouring Yugoslavia, raised new questions and established new categories. Moreover, Berlusconism marked the crisis of female citizenship; public discourse became trivialised and women in politics increasingly struggled to be recognised as authoritative subjects (Asquer and Ginsborg 2011). The de-legitimisation of women's demands went hand in hand with the rediscovery of the longstanding problem of the weak parliamentary representation of women in Italy, leading many to speak of a 'democracy split in half'.

All these impulses generated new research questions and claims, as well as the need to identify authoritative ancestors. The creation of equal opportunity bodies within public administrations made it possible to support and finance new projects in collaboration with universities and research institutes. In addition, the growing institutionalisation of gender studies in Italy, with the creation of a scientific society (the Società Italiana delle Storiche) and the inclusion of specific courses in university curricula, allowed scholars to develop new tools. A dialogue developed with ongoing research into European resistance movements, especially in German territory. While there had been no widespread armed resistance in Germany, there had been episodes of opposition to Nazism, and with the end of the paradigm of German guilt, these could now be recognised and appreciated. Attention to unarmed and non-violent resistance also grew thanks to the dialogue with pacifist associations, networks for disarmament and conscientious objection, and the Catholic and evangelical world (Ongaro 2013).

The real novelty of those years, however, was Jacques Sémelin's concept of 'civil resistance', based on Jørgen Hæstrup's studies of the Danish resistance. The term described a wide range of unarmed forms of opposition to Nazi-Fascism: from non-cooperation to

the creation of social cohesion and rescue networks, strikes and sabotage to block production and transport (Sémelin 1989). These acts did not concern women alone, who were in fact underestimated in the French sociologist's analysis, which did not even include Italy among the selected case studies. Yet, in Italy, the category was received marginally in its original meaning and applied almost exclusively to acts of resistance by women. Civil resistance thus became a lens through which to read a whole range of behaviours by women that had previously been difficult to categorise and considered subordinate to the armed struggle.

It was mainly thanks to Anna Bravo and Anna Maria Bruzzone's *In guerra senza armi*, a symbolic text of this period, that the concept of civil resistance engaged in a dialogue with the issue of female combatants (Bravo and Bruzzone 1995). The book relies mainly on oral sources (125 video interviews with partisan women and witnesses to the war in Piedmont), but compared to the previous decades, it places them more fully within a mature interpretative framework. Bravo's thesis (fine-tuned in subsequent writings) is that the war, rather than accelerating gender equality, reinforced existing inequalities and privileges. The spaces of freedom that the conflict had opened up for women because of the exceptional situation were quickly reabsorbed, and the new roles gained during the conflict rarely found lasting consolidation after the war.

In terms of historical studies, the 1990s and 2000s were marked by the development of particularly rich reflections and interpretations, some of which are still unsurpassed. Once again, the protagonists were women, and important regional studies explored and confirmed, 'in the field', new concepts and interpretations. Bravo thus began a series of reflections on the maternal, condensed into the concept of *maternage di massa*, 'mass maternalism'. According to the historian, during the Resistance and even later, the narratives that centred on the symbols and actions typical of the mother–child relationship had allowed women to place their experiences in an acceptable and domesticable framework. But they had also created important expectations. The role of the mother who asks little or nothing for herself is almost unimaginable in the postwar demand for rights and compensation. Moreover, the self-representation of the Resistance in these narratives was ascetic and desexualised, and very little attention was paid to the bodies of the women and men who made up the partisan movement, to their feelings and to their emotions (Bravo 1991).

Another example worth mentioning is the project of a group of historians from the University of Bologna, which involved the collection of more than 120 video interviews with partisan women, which were preserved in the newly created Archivio della memoria delle donne, followed by conferences, meetings and publications (Gagliani et al. 2000). Dianella Gagliani fully placed the history of Italian women in the context of the total war, and together with Mariuccia Salvati she developed new reflections on the relationship between the public and private spheres, on the boundaries between the political and the apolitical. This work significantly refined the methodological toolkit of historians, enabling them to study in depth an extremely fluid, multifaceted and vital phenomenon such as the Resistance (Gagliani and Salvati 1992). It was again Gagliani who would later use women's history for an innovative reading of the Resistance as a movement driven by a profound rejection of war, in opposition to the violence and militarism that had fuelled Fascism (Gagliani 2006).

In the Veneto region, the 'white' alter ego of the 'red' Emilia in which the abovementioned historians operated, Margaret Fraser collected more than 40 life stories of left-wing women. Fraser pointed out how, in a region with a Christian Democrat majority, there was a particularly strong fear of the 'sexual corruption' that gang life could have induced in women. This fear translated into a more pronounced system of 'family resistance' on the part of Venetian women, whose story was masterfully narrated in those years by two authoritative partisan voices, Tina Merlin and Tina Anselmi (Fraser 1994).

Finally, the ways in which the partisan women described their lives in subjective sources have been deconstructed and problematised in their narrative strategies and silences (Gabrielli 2007). Their experiences have been placed within the broader context of twentieth-century Italian women's history and brought into dialogue with early twentieth-century feminism and neo-feminism. Anna Rossi-Doria's studies have extended the analysis to the construction from below of women's citizenship in the postwar period, and to the role of major women's organisations – the Catholic CIF and the Communist Unione Donne Italiane – that arose from the Women's Defence Groups (Rossi-Doria 1996).

In short, the need to recognise women's full participation in the partisan movement was accompanied by a desire to study the specificities and different forms of women's involvement in the Resistance, placing it in the broader context of the global conflict and the cultures of war (and peace) in the long term. Rather than adding a piece of history that had been guiltily silenced, women's studies now managed to make a profound impact on general historiography. They dialogued with other research being conducted in those years, especially that on terrorist massacres and the 'war on civilians', shifting the focus from the fighters to other actors, while the contribution to the struggle was no longer counted exclusively in the deaths inflicted on the Nazi and Fascist enemy but also in the lives saved by its policy of extermination (Bravo 1999). In other words, the narrative canon that had been imposed in the postwar period, centred on the male warrior, was completely turned on its head.

If the category of civil resistance has revealed an undeniable heuristic value, over the years it has also proved to be a slippery concept. Stripped of its most problematic element – namely, the nerve of a violence that was inflicted and not just suffered – women's resistance and civil resistance have been endlessly expanded, even to include ambiguous figures far removed from the decision to join the Resistance. In the public debate, they have often ended up overshadowing armed forms of resistance. There is a risk that the old polarity between man/war and woman/peace is thus reproposed or that the armed partisan women will become invisible again, but also that hierarchies are created between a good and ethical resistance that refuses weapons and a bad and unscrupulous one that shoots and kills. The historiography on the role of women in the Resistance, which has given much thought to the various reasons to take up arms and the consequences of doing so, can perhaps help to avoid oversimplifications. It is true that they rarely shoot, but the partisan women are fundamental nodes in the network of the distribution of weapons; they often act without weapons, but they rely heavily on physical and verbal violence, and the killing of the enemy or an attack is almost always made possible by the information they provide or by their cover. As the most recent contributions show, armed resistance is certainly not the only resistance, but it is the one that makes all other forms of resistance possible and reinforces them, and the decision to become a partisan is based on the decision to risk one's life, but also on the inexpressible and devastating – even if not personal – decision to provoke death (Filippetta 2018).

Finally, it should be noted that women have been given little space in the masterpiece of those years, Claudio Pavone's *Una guerra civile* (1991). Although he is generally very attentive to the partisan press, Pavone chooses not to thematise the conscious battle for emancipation and the conquest of rights for women that emerge from the press and propaganda of the Women's Defence Groups. In view of more recent studies on this subject (Alano 2003; Orlandini 2018), it is worth asking whether, in addition to the three wars (patriotic, civil, class) that – for Pavone – coexisted and intertwined in the Resistance, there might have been a fourth one: a gender war, with its own actors, expectations, demands, modalities and hopes.

## The current status quo

Today, the history of Italian partisan women is fully integrated into the narrative canon of the Resistance, both in public discourse and in historiography. Historical overviews of the partisan movement that have appeared in Italy in recent years include, problematise and fruitfully dialogue with women's history, thanks also to the end of compartmentalisation; even male historians now write about partisan women, women's affairs or gender dynamics (Flores and Franzinelli 2019). New studies have reaffirmed the importance of women in areas that were crucial to the Resistance movement in military terms, such as the urban terrorism of the Gruppi di azione patriottica, small nuclei in which men and women acted in total equality, bound by strict rules of clandestinity (Peli 2014). Think also of the Allied missions, in which two of the four partisan women who received the Gold Medal for Military Valour and who did not die in combat were awarded the highest honour that the Italian army granted to women (Cacciatore 2023).

Having established its existence and defined its specific features, the history of women's participation in the Resistance has recently expanded, entering into a dialogue with the broader framework of women's experiences in the Second World War (Ponzani 2012). This has led scholars to pay attention to new geographies (especially the South), new types of violence (e.g. bombings and rape) and new periodisations (i.e. beyond 25 April 1945). This potentially enriching approach runs the risk of widening the field to include experiences that are too diverse, once again reducing women to an undifferentiated mass. In the proliferation of heterogeneous categories, there is a danger of reproducing a victimising vision in which all women – including murdered partisan women, rape victims and Nazi lovers punished after the war – are no more than war prey and spoils of war, without choice or agency. It is no coincidence that one of the most aggressive attempts to delegitimise the Resistance in Italy today concerns precisely a murdered Fascist woman, Norma Cossetto, in a narrative that focuses on the pain of women, all victims and strategic targets of war. While complex historical female characters such as Cossetto are reduced to victims, traditionally feminist themes (e.g. gender violence, rape and femicide) are used to legitimise the political agenda of populist parties and the extreme right (Tenca Montin 2023).

Despite the widespread reception of Gabriella Gribaudi's work on the theme of 'total war' and its gendered expressions (Gribaudi 2005), there is still a persistent difficulty in studying the theme of rape during the Second World War in depth, through research capable of going beyond formulaic denunciations and political instrumentalisation. This difficulty is partly due to the lack of sources for reconstructing a crime that was often hidden and not denounced, but it is also the result of a persistent insensitivity to sexual violence in Italy, a country that only in 1996 adopted a law that considers sexual violence a crime against the person rather than against public morality.

In this sense, the legal sources of the postwar trials for collaborationism – the focus of a current strand of research – may offer new avenues of interpretation. The tens of thousands of court cases that took place between 1945 and 1947 describe many sexual assaults perpetrated in Repubblica Sociale Italiana prisons and police stations. The recurrence of wartime sexual violence became the subject of debate especially when the amnesty for political offences was granted in June 1946, which provided for aggravating circumstances (later largely disregarded) for those found guilty of 'particularly heinous acts of violence'. In reality, the link between political violence and gender violence in Fascist mentality and political practice had already been explored in postcolonial studies. However, this field of investigation has found limited reception and application in Italy, mainly because of the country's resistance to acknowledging its colonial past and the violence it perpetrated in occupied areas. In addition, there is a certain reluctance in 'Italian-style' women's history to

use the notion of intersectionality to read the processes of genderalisation and racialisation inherited from colonialism (Papa 2020).

Nevertheless, in 2021, the Italian translation of Maaza Mengiste's novel *The Shadow King* offered a unique visual angle – that of the Ethiopian female combatants (*arbegnà*) who opposed the Italian invaders – that was able to communicate in a new way with Italian readers, who read the *arbegnà*'s stories in continuity with those of the partisan women. The protagonist is Hirut, an Ethiopian woman-soldier who manages to steal a box of photographs from the Italian soldier Ettore Navarra, who had portrayed her naked in order to humiliate her. Her gesture represents a strong reversal of power relations and denounces the burden of violence behind the family photos kept in many Italian drawers (Mattoscio 2022). The still understudied history of Ethiopian partisan women helps to decolonise and de-Westernise the Resistance, to fully identify in colonialism one of the matrices of Fascist violence that has so far remained under the radar, and to reaffirm its hybrid and intersectional nature (Lombardi-Diop and Romeo 2012). As always, women's history broadens the concept of resistance, redefining the boundaries between what happens on the front and behind the lines, between the fighters and the defenceless, between the public and the private. The *arbegnà* thus have the strategic task of blowing the trumpets of war and raising the shouts and chants that incite the fighters, increasing their power to kill. They are the 'water carriers' who allow the Ethiopian army to move thousands of kilometres and – like their Italian counterparts – they pretend to be sexually available to gain access to the Italian camps and steal weapons and maps. In fact, their stories reveal an extraordinary congruence with those gathered in Italy. The *arbegnà* also frequently resort to deception and camouflage, as when some women disguise a peasant as an emperor to make the troops more combative. In a rhetoric that makes their presence on the battlefield more acceptable, many claim to have taken their weapon from the hands of a dead man, responding to the emperor's call for 'anyone who had a rifle' to go to war (Minale 2001). Meanwhile, the Italian media's portrayal of Taitù, one of the characters of the novel, as a warrior queen, a woman in arms, shatters traditional images and captures the popular imagination.

Postwar legal sources have proven useful not only for studies of the link between political and gendered violence under Fascism (Nubola 2016), but also for research on female collaborationism. Thanks to the discovery of female combatants in the ranks of the Black Brigades, it has been possible to establish analogies with the partisan women, which reaffirm the 'transversal masculinism' present in both camps. Fascist women, too, were often relegated to caring and nurturing roles, pushed to the margins of the narrative and seen as unnatural women or bearers of sexual disorder if they wore men's clothing and carried weapons (De Luna and Fedele 2022). But here, too, there is a danger that the category of gender ends up reducing individual choices to an undifferentiated mass of subjectivities in which personal reasons are justified and placed on the same level. Although it could be argued that, for the female collaborationists of Salò, taking up arms was also a choice to break with the family and social context, we must ask ourselves whether this choice really has an emancipatory value, in which horizon it fits, and what future that break predicts.

Another challenge faced by those studying the Resistance today is that of a return to the quantitative dimension after decades of focusing on the qualitative and the subjective. Since 2017, an ambitious project promoted by the General Directorate of Archives to digitise the documentation relating to the recognition of partisan qualifications has produced large amounts of useful data on Italian partisans (the first results can be consulted at https://partigianiditalia.cultura.gov.it). With these data in hand, the official estimate of 35,000 women fighters and 20,000 unarmed women with the 'minor' qualification of patriot will undoubtedly be subject to critical revision. However, they again risk hiding the role of

women in the Resistance and reinforcing the legal framework and mentality that guided the granting of qualifications. With regard to men, we may assume that the numbers of those who obtained recognition without actually fighting and the number of those who fought without requesting or obtaining recognition cancel each other out, but the issue is much more complicated for women; many did not ask for recognition because they thought that they were not entitled to it (whether because of their subalternity, lack of awareness of the importance of civil resistance, or plain ignorance) or did not need it (for conscription or pension purposes, for example). Others requested it but did not get it, because of a penalising legislative framework and the limited and chauvinist mentality of the regional commissions in charge of judging their requests. The letter written in 1948 by Matilde Bassani – a partisan from the Jewish community in Ferrara, an intellectual and a close collaborator with the Psychological Warfare Branch – to the commission that refused to grant her the title is emblematic: 'After what has been said, I am confident that I will be recognised as a partisan fighter as soon as possible and perhaps even receive an apology' (Finzi 2004).

## Conclusion

Partisan women represent an important turning point in Italian history. Although women had become more visible in the public sphere and female activism had increased during the First World War, in 1918 the call for women's mobilisation was followed by a blunt 'thank you and goodbye', a forced return to domestic life. This again happened after the Second World War (and after the Resistance), but only to a certain extent. Women's demands for political rights, which had been thwarted after the First World War, now found an important response. Moreover, the novelty of the not insignificant presence of female combatants was only partly downsized, which implies an unprecedented and disruptive protagonism and a parity of roles that was increasingly difficult to harness (Salvatici 2022). What emerged from the Resistance was a 'gendered democracy' (Forlenza 2019) that made participation in the liberation struggle an exceptional breeding ground for a new political and social protagonism of Italian women.

The history of partisan women also marked a turning point for Italian historiography. It was the first entry of women into the almost exclusively male terrain of political history, at a time when gender history was still an unknown discipline in Italy (Casalena 2020). Indeed, perhaps it is precisely this direction that has undermined the reading of the Resistance as a predominantly political phenomenon.

Women's studies have thus been able to include their own subjects in the Resistance, which are obviously no longer only men, combatants or young male partisans with rifles in their hands. Moreover, they have been able to impose new geographies on the history of the Resistance (and of war in Italy). Today, the front line is no longer the main focus of attention; indeed, it is an inadequate boundary for understanding the complexity of the conflict. Periodisations have also changed. The date 8 September 1943 is now widely considered the beginning of the Resistance, not because of the action of the clandestine parties (which had already made their feeble voices heard in the aftermath of 25 July) or of the partisan bands (which at that time were only a hypothesis), but because of the mass mobilisation of women. If, for the protecting of dissenting soldiers, one spoke of maternal instinct, today it is more difficult not to read the political nature of this form of action in relation to other subjects, such as former Allied prisoners, against whom the Fascist regime had waged a long propaganda campaign.

The attention paid to subjectivities, to the multifaceted nature of women's experiences, has been fundamental in defining the relevance of placing the (now inevitably plural) resistances in different geographical and social contexts, in the connective tissues that have

given blood, nerves and lymph to those resistances. It is the voices of the women who, more than any other, contributed to demystifying the militarist rhetoric with which the Resistance narrative was cloaked in the early postwar period, highlighting the logic of refusing war, which was fully expressed in the internationalist and Europeanist projects of antifascists and Resistance fighters. In this sense, research on the partisan women (which paid much more attention to their voluntary and free decision to shoot, a decision that, for men, seemed to be taken for granted) has considerably refined reflections on the theme of the legitimacy and morality of violence in the Resistance. The decision to take up arms was a breakthrough not only for women but for an entire generation, which was faced with difficult choices. For the 'musket generation', the move away from the exaltation and seduction of arms (well codified in the constitutional 'repudiation of war') was an important part of coming out of Fascism, but paradoxically it also coincides with the moment of taking up arms.

Finally, opening up to subjectivity permanently broke the myth of heroic collectivity (the '*popolo alla macchia*') in order to bring to the fore men and women who acted, made decisions, gave their lives and took those of others. This is perhaps the most important legacy that partisan historiography has left. Demythologising the Resistance did not mean delegitimising it but remaking it as an affair involving women and men in the flesh, hence capable of speaking to other women and men at a distance of years, as the success of Tobagi's book demonstrates.

*Translated by Andrea Hajek*

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## Italian summary

A settantotto anni dalla Liberazione la Resistenza delle donne non è più — per riprendere una formula iconica — una 'Resistenza taciuta'. Delle partigiane si è parlato e si parla spesso: ma come? L'articolo intende ripercorrere le forme con le quali in Italia si parlato delle donne nella Resistenza, dal silenzio iniziale alle recenti uscite di taglio storico e divulgativo, rileggendo in maniera critica le diverse stagioni storiografiche.

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