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## GENDERED RESISTANCE

### WOMEN PARTISANS IN YUGOSLAVIA (1941-45)

#### Introduction

The struggle against German occupation and the national myths into which its collective interpretations soon developed have decisively shaped post-war Europe's social and political order.<sup>1</sup> This holds true also of the second Yugoslavia, which emerged out of the liberation and civil war of 1941 to 1945 as a federal, socialist, one-party state. In the Tito era, the experience of resistance provided the basis for a founding narrative which accounted for the re-emergence of a common Yugoslav state and explained its sociopolitical system.<sup>2</sup> The fundamental importance of the National Liberation Struggle (*Narodnooslobodilačka borba*), however, also meant that critical research on the topic was difficult, especially in Yugoslavia itself, where many professional historians chose to focus on less potentially controversial issues.<sup>3</sup>

The Yugoslav "partisan myth"<sup>4</sup> was, of course, gendered. Socialist-period interpretations of the National Liberation Struggle usually claimed that women had participated in the resistance, including armed combat, on

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<sup>1</sup> See Tony Judt, 'The Past Is Another Country: Myth and Memory in Postwar Europe', in Tony Judt and Istvan Deak, eds., *The Politics of Retribution in Europe. World War II and Its Aftermath* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 298-300.

<sup>2</sup> See Wolfgang Höpken, 'Krieg und historische Erinnerung auf dem Balkan' ['War and Historical Memory in the Balkans'], in Eva Behring, Ludwig Richter, and Wolfgang F. Schwarz, eds., *Geschichtliche Mythen in den Literaturen und Kulturen Ostmittel- und Südosteuropas* [Historical Myths in the Literatures and Cultures of East Central and South Eastern Europe] (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1999), 371-78, here 375. Thereafter Höpken, 'Krieg'.

<sup>3</sup> See Heike Karge, *Steinerne Erinnerung – versteinerte Erinnerung? Kriegsgedenken im sozialistischen Jugoslawien* [Memory in Stone – Petrified Memory? Commemorating War in Socialist Yugoslavia], Ph.D. thesis, European University Institute Firenze, 2006, 65-67. Thereafter Karge, *Steinerne Erinnerung*.

<sup>4</sup> Höpken, 'Krieg', 375.

an equal basis with men, and that gender-based discrimination had never been an issue in the ‘progressive’ partisan movement. Historical works either ignored women’s (armed) resistance completely or presented it in accordance with the partisan myth:

“As an expression of the new revolutionary democracy which had developed under conditions of war, [...] the women of Yugoslavia participated on an equal basis in the [National Liberation] struggle.”<sup>5</sup>

The contribution of women to the Yugoslav resistance was not studied seriously until the 1980s, when Zagreb-based sociologist Lydia Sklevicky conducted research on the role of the Croatian “Antifascist Front of Women” in war and reconstruction. Until her premature death, Sklevicky authored several relevant papers in the field.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, the US-American political scientist Barbara Jancar-Webster began her research on Yugoslav women’s armed resistance, which resulted in sundry articles and an important monograph.<sup>7</sup> Both authors showed convincingly that the “partisan myth of equality” was just that – a politically motivated founding narrative.<sup>8</sup>

Since then, international research into the gender history of war has raised new questions about women’s roles in and experiences of armed conflict.<sup>9</sup> Taking up some of these challenges, the following article will discuss the regional traditions, revolutionary aspirations, and practical

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<sup>5</sup> Branko Petranović, *Istorija Jugoslavije 1918-1978* [*History of Yugoslavia, 1918-1978*] (Belgrade: Nolit, 1981), 370.

<sup>6</sup> See Lydia Sklevicky, ‘Emancipated Integration or Integrated Emancipation: The Case of Post-revolutionary Yugoslavia’, in Arina Angermann, Geerte Binnema, Annemieke Keunen, Vefie Poels, and Jaqueline Zirkzee, eds., *Current Issues in Women’s History* (London/New York: Routledge, 1989); and relevant chapters in Lydia Sklevicky, *Konji, žene, ratovi* [*Horses, Women, and Wars*] (Zagreb: Ženska infoteka, 1996). Thereafter Sklevicky, *Konji*.

<sup>7</sup> Barbara Jancar, ‘Women in the Yugoslav National Liberation Movement: An Overview’, *Studies in Comparative Communism*, 14, 2-3 (1981); Barbara Jancar, ‘Yugoslavia: War of Liberation’, in Nancy Loring, ed., *Goldman Female Soldiers – Combatants or Noncombatants? Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (Westport/London: Greenwood, 1982); Barbara Jancar-Webster, *Women & Revolution in Yugoslavia 1941-1945* (Denver: Arden Press, 1990). Thereafter Jancar-Webster, *Women*.

<sup>8</sup> Jancar-Webster, *Women*, 98; see also Sklevicky, *Konji*, 14-15.

<sup>9</sup> See Karen Hagemann, ‘Von Männern, Frauen und der Militärgeschichte’ [‘Of Men, Women, and Military History’], *L’Homme. Z. F. G.*, 12, 1 (2001), 144-153; Christa Hämmerle, ‘Von den Geschlechtern der Kriege und des Militärs. Forschungseinblicke und Bemerkungen zu einer neuen Debatte’ [‘Of the Genders of the Wars and the Military. Research Insights and Comments on a New Debate’], in Thomas Kühne and Benjamin Ziemann, eds., *Was ist Militärgeschichte?* [*What is Military History?*] (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2000).

considerations which together defined the possibilities and limits of women's military engagement in the Yugoslav resistance.<sup>10</sup> A second focus will be on the war experience of the historical actors – the women partisans – themselves.<sup>11</sup> This will not only highlight the political and practical significance of social gender concepts in the Yugoslav resistance, but also underline the personal perspectives of women veterans as subjects of history.

It may be useful to clarify two central terms in advance. In the following discussion, *armed resistance* stands for both direct support for and direct participation in assassinations, large-scale diversions, and combat.<sup>12</sup> *Women partisans*, again, refers to all female members of the Yugoslav National Liberation Army (*Narodnooslobodilačka vojska*, NLA) regardless of their specific function in the organization.

### The historical context

On March 27, 1941, a group of military men ousted the pro-Axis government of Yugoslavia. The coup, greeted enthusiastically by a large part of the country's population, infuriated Hitler, who immediately decided to 'crush' Yugoslavia. With Operation Barbarossa ahead, Germany needed the political and economic cooperation of the Balkan state to fuel its war machine and secure the hinterland south of the future Eastern Front.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> It would be extremely interesting to also consider men's resistance from a gender-informed perspective, but (at least to my knowledge) there are no detailed "gender histories" of men's experiences as partisans. For more general literature on "Balkan" masculinity, violence and warfare, see the articles and books quoted in footnote 27.

<sup>11</sup> See Nikolaus Buschmann and Horst Carl, 'Zugänge zur Erfahrungsgeschichte des Krieges. Forschung, Theorie, Fragestellung' ['Approaches to a History of the Experience of War. Research, Theory, Issues'], in Nikolaus Buschmann, ed., *Die Erfahrungsgeschichte des Krieges. Erfahrungsgeschichtliche Perspektiven von der Französischen Revolution bis zum Zweiten Weltkrieg* [The History of the Experience of War. Perspectives of a History of Experience from the French Revolution to the Second World War] (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2001).

<sup>12</sup> This definition follows Werner Röhr, 'Forschungsprobleme zur deutschen Okkupationspolitik im Spiegel der Reihe Europa unterm Hakenkreuz' ['Research Problems on German Occupation Policy As Reflected in the Series Europe under the Swastika'], in Werner Röhr, ed., *Europa unterm Hakenkreuz. Analysen – Quellen – Register* [Europe under the Swastika. Analyses – Sources – Register], (Berlin/Heidelberg: Hühig, 1996), 25-343, here 183, 190.

<sup>13</sup> For a reliable overview in English, see John R. Lampe, *Yugoslavia as History. Twice there was a Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), chapter 7.

On April 6, 1941, the Wehrmacht and allied Italian and Hungarian troops attacked Yugoslavia without a prior declaration of war. Air raids on the capital Belgrade were intended to terrify the local population, whom Hitler perceived as hostile and rebellious, into submission.<sup>14</sup> After only eleven days, the ineffectively led, badly equipped, and demoralized Yugoslav army capitulated before the onslaught. King and government had already fled into exile.<sup>15</sup> Subsequently, the aggressors divided up the country and installed occupation regimes or collaborationist governments.

Yugoslavia's population was as divided as the country. Ideological differences and conflicting evaluations of the current situation were at least as important as ethnic and religious affiliation. While the *Ustaša*, who came to rule the so-called Independent State of Croatia<sup>16</sup>, and other (pro-)fascist organizations collaborated wholeheartedly with the initially victorious Axis powers, the Serbian royalist *Četnik* movement<sup>17</sup> originally opted for tentative resistance. The yet minuscule Communist Party of Yugoslavia (*Komunistička partija Jugoslavije*, CPY) under its leader Josip Broz Tito (1892–1980), again, saw the conflict as an opportunity to build patriotic credibility and gain political influence by resisting foreign rule at all costs.<sup>18</sup>

On July 4, 1941, the CPY called on the peoples of Yugoslavia to take up arms against the occupiers. The uprisings of summer 1941 were inspired

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<sup>14</sup> See Detlef Vogel, 'Operation "Strafgericht". Die rücksichtslose Bombardierung Belgrads durch die deutsche Luftwaffe am 6. April 1941' ['Operation "Strafgericht": The Relentless Bombing of Belgrade by the German Air Force on April 6, 1941'], in Wolfram Wette and Gerd Ueberschär, eds., *Kriegsverbrechen im 20. Jahrhundert* [War Crimes in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century] (Darmstadt: Primus, 2001).

<sup>15</sup> See Jozo Tomasevich, *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia, 1941-1945. The Chetniks* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975), 55-76. Thereafter Tomasevich, *Chetniks*.

<sup>16</sup> For details see Martin Broszat and Ladislaus Hory, *Der kroatische Ustascha-Staat 1941-1945* [The Croatian Ustasha-state 1941–1945] (Stuttgart: DVA, 1964); and Holm Sundhaussen, *Wirtschaftsgeschichte Kroatiens im nationalsozialistischen Großraum 1941-1945. Das Scheitern einer Ausbeutungsstrategie* [Croatia's Economic History in the Wider Region of National Socialism, 1941-1945. The Failure of an Exploitation Strategy] (Stuttgart: DVA, 1983). Thereafter Sundhaussen, *Wirtschaftsgeschichte*.

<sup>17</sup> The standard work is still Tomasevich, *Chetniks*. See also Matteo J. Milazzo, *The Chetnik Movement & the Yugoslav Resistance* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975).

<sup>18</sup> For details see Holm Sundhaussen, 'Okkupation, Kollaboration und Widerstand in den Ländern Jugoslawiens, 1941-1945' ['Occupation, Collaboration and Resistance in the Countries of Yugoslavia, 1941-1945'], in Werner Röhr, ed., *Europa unterm Hakenkreuz. Okkupation und Kollaboration (1938-1945). Beiträge zu Konzepten und Praxis der Kollaboration in der deutschen Okkupationspolitik* [Europe under the Swastika. Occupation and Collaboration (1938-1945). Contributions on the Concepts and Practice of Collaboration in German Occupation Policy] (Berlin/Heidelberg: Hühig, 1994), 347-65.

by regional traditions of anti-Ottoman rebellions and the experience of World War I. Ethnic persecution provided their most important motive: In the 'Independent State of Croatia', ethnic Serbs were brutally victimized by the Ustaša regime. In German-occupied Slovenia, the Slavic population was subjected to a severe denationalization policy, which included measures ranging from the prohibition of use of the Slovenian language in public life to forced resettlements. Yugoslavia's Jews, again, faced persecution and genocide at the hands of the Germans and their local collaborators. Communist convictions, on the other hand, motivated only a small (but eventually decisive) number of activists.

By and by, the National Liberation Movement (*Narodnooslobodilački pokret*) and its armed wing, the NLA, managed to unite members of all of Yugoslavia's many ethnic and religious groups in a common struggle against foreign occupation. As a result of its ethnic (and to a large extent also political) inclusiveness, combined with the ruthless determination of its leaders, the communist resistance succeeded, over the years, in effectively undermining the occupation regimes. But its guerilla war also contributed to the escalation of anti-civilian violence in the Yugoslav theatre. In retaliation for diversion and partisan assaults, the Wehrmacht committed cruel massacres with thousands of victims.<sup>19</sup> Anti-partisan measures also provided a pretext for the genocide of Yugoslavia's Jews.<sup>20</sup> Local armed groups, especially the Ustaša and the Četniks, also perpetrated horrendous crimes against civilians they suspected of aiding the partisans. Of course,

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<sup>19</sup> One memorable example is the Kragujevac massacre of October 21, 1941, which took 2.796 lives. See Staniša Brkić, *Ime i broj. Kragujevačka tragedija 1941* [Name and Number. The Kragujevac Tragedy, 1941] (Kragujevac: Spomen-park Kragujevački oktobar, 2007); Walter Manoschek, 'Kraljevo – Kragujevac – Kalavryta. Die Massaker der 717. Infanteriedivision bzw. 117. Jägerdivision am Balkan' ['Kraljevo – Kragujevac – Kalavryta. The Massacres of the 717. Infantry Division, resp. the 117. Rifle Division in the Balkans'], in Loukia Droulia and Hagen Fleischer, eds., *Von Lidice bis Kalavryta. Widerstand und Besatzungsterror. Studien zur Repressalienpraxis im Zweiten Weltkrieg* [From Lidice to Kalavryta. Resistance and Occupation Terror. Studies on the Practice of Repression in the Second World War], (Berlin: Metropol, 1999), 93-104.

<sup>20</sup> See Christopher Browning, *Fateful Months. Essays on the Emergence of the Final Solution* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1985), chapters 2 and 4; Walter Manoschek, 'Serbien ist judenfrei.' *Militärische Besatzungspolitik und Judenvernichtung in Serbien 1941/42* ['Serbia is Free of Jews.' *Military Occupation Policy and the Destruction of the Jews in Serbia 1941/42*] (München: Oldenbourg, 1993); Jaša Romano, *Jevreji Jugoslavije 1941-1945: Žrtve genocida i učesnici NOR-a* [The Jews of Yugoslavia 1941-1945: Victims of Genocide and Participants in the National Liberation War] (Belgrade: Savez jevrejskih opština, 1980). Thereafter Romano, *Jevreji*.

the NLA also did not refrain from violence and terror if this seemed to serve its political ends, especially towards the end of the war.<sup>21</sup>

In Yugoslavia, brutal occupation policies, collaborationist repression, and ethnically or ideologically motivated violence converged to create a complex and extremely bloody conflict which affected everyone. Together with a major refugee crisis, massive deportations for forced labor<sup>22</sup> and severe supply difficulties, the war of all against all in Yugoslavia caused a breakdown of the old social order.<sup>23</sup> The ensuing vacuum enabled – or compelled – many women to chose sides and become politically active.

### The mobilization of women for armed resistance

The Tito-era claim that 100.000 women served in the NLA cannot be verified, but reliable evidence enables us to estimate the percentage of women in the partisan ranks.<sup>24</sup> NLA units listed male and female members separately and thus document a share of up to 15 percent women. Usually, female representation in the partisan army reached between eight and ten percent.<sup>25</sup> These data gained by random sampling are corroborated by the gender ratio of fallen partisans. Among the dead of the Battle of Sutjeska (May/June 1943), for example, eight percent were women.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> See Ekkehard Völkl, 'Abrechnungsfuror in Kroatien' ['Retribution Furor in Croatia'], in Hans Woller and Klaus-Dietmar Henke, eds., *Politische Säuberung in Europa. Die Abrechnung mit Faschismus und Kollaboration nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg* [Political Cleansing in Europe. Settling Accounts with Fascism and Collaboration after the Second World War] (München: DTV, 1991).

<sup>22</sup> See the chapters on Croatia, Serbia and Slovenia in Alexander von Plato, Almut Leh, and Christoph Thonfeld, eds., *Hitler's Slaves. Life Stories of Forced Labourers in Nazi-occupied Europe* (New York: Berghahn, 2010).

<sup>23</sup> Holm Sundhaussen argues that the destruction by the *Ustaša* regime of human lives and material assets on a horrifying scale resulted in a "classless" society, which increasingly questioned social conventions and traditional norms. See Sundhaussen, *Wirtschaftsgeschichte*, 318.

<sup>24</sup> For the official number, see 'Žene u NOR' ['Women in the National Liberation War'], in *Leksikon narodnooslobodilačkog rata i revolucije u Jugoslaviji 1941-1945* [Lexicon of the National Liberation War and the Revolution in Yugoslavia 1941-1945; subsequently quoted as *Leksikon NOR-a*] (Ljubljana/Belgrade: Narodna knjiga, 1980), vol. 2, 1246-51. For a detailed discussion of this figure, see Barbara N. Wiesinger, *Partisaninnen. Widerstand in Jugoslawien (1941-1945)* [Women Partisans. Resistance in Yugoslavia (1941-1945)] (Köln: Böhlau, 2008), 27. Thereafter Wiesinger, *Partisaninnen*.

<sup>25</sup> See Wiesinger, *Partisaninnen*, 32 and 39-40.

<sup>26</sup> See Viktor Kučan, *Sutjeska – dolina heroja* [Sutjeska – The Heroes' Canyon] (Tjentište/Belgrade/Ljubljana: Partizanska knjiga, 1978), 29.

At first glance, this percentage seems surprisingly high. After all, traditional gender ideology and social norms, which were in effect especially in Yugoslavia's extensive rural areas, prohibited women's participation in political affairs in general and in guerilla warfare especially.<sup>27</sup> Just like in other countries, Yugoslav public opinion held that women who lived among men who were not their family members must be of dubious sexual morals. Consequently, girls and women who decided to join the NLA had to expect open derision in addition to the physical hardships and risks of resistance.

Also, the CPY had not originally intended to mobilize women for armed resistance. Instead, female party activists and sympathizers were expected to organize the underground network in areas effectively under enemy control (such as urban centers or strategically important industrial sites). Only when threatened by arrest should women be allowed to go "into the forest", that is, to join the NLA.<sup>28</sup>

This policy changed when the conflict escalated in the autumn of 1941. As they became conscious of their growing need for medical personnel, the partisan leaders started to recruit women intentionally. Women's engagement as nurses seemed more easily acceptable socially since nursing was traditionally regarded as women's work. Also, women had already served in the Serbian Army's medical corps during World War I, so there was a historical precedent.<sup>29</sup> Altogether, 173 medical doctors and about 10.000 qualified nurses joined the NLA voluntarily, be it for ideological reasons,

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<sup>27</sup> Vgl. Karl Kaser, 'Der Balkanheld – wissenschaftlich beinahe ausgestorben' ['The Balkan Hero: In research nearly extinct'], in *L'Homme*. Z. F. G., 12, 2 (2001), 329; Ivan Čolović, *Bordel ratnika* [*The warrior's brothel*] (Belgrade: xx. vek, 2000), 75-77; Elisabeth Katschnig-Fasch, 'Zur Genese der Gewalt der Helden. Gedanken zur Wirksamkeit der symbolischen Geschlechterkonstruktion' ['On the Genesis of the Hero's Violence. Thoughts on the Effectiveness of Symbolic Gender Constructions'], in Rolf Brednich and Walter Hartinger, eds., *Gewalt in der Kultur* [*Violence in Culture*] (Passau: Lehrstuhl für Volkskunde, 1994).

<sup>28</sup> See 'Pismo PK KPJ za Srbiju OK KPJ za Šabački okrug od 20.8.1941' ['Letter by the Regional Committee of the CPY to the District Committee of the CPY in the Šabac district of August 20, 1941'], in Vojnoistorijski institute, ed., *Zbornik dokumenata i podataka o narodnooslobodilačkom ratu jugoslovenskih naroda* [*Collection of Documents and Data on the National Liberation War of the Yugoslav Peoples*], subsequently quoted as ZDPNOR, series 1, vol. 1 (Belgrade: Vojnoistorijski institut, 1949-1982), 66.

<sup>29</sup> See Monica Krippner, *The Quality of Mercy. Women at War, Serbia 1915-1918* (London: David & Charles, 1980).



out of patriotism, or to escape political or ethnic persecution.<sup>30</sup> Many more women partisans were trained in NLA nursing schools to render first aid and elementary medical services.<sup>31</sup> By demonstrating that they were able to bear the hardships of partisan warfare and even to fight when necessary, the female doctors and nurses of the NLA paved the way for the recruitment of girls and women for combat roles.

Concurrent experience with a small number of women who had fought since the beginning of the uprising in some Serbian and Slovenian units affirmed the pertinence of broadening the scope of women's roles in the NLA.<sup>32</sup> In August 1941, the Serbian CPY had already stated: "Female comrades can be of great use in the units – not only in other functions, but, if need be, also with a weapon in their hands".<sup>33</sup>

However, the final decision on whether to engage women for armed combat or not lay with the Supreme Commander. In a letter of February 1942, Tito explained his position as follows:

"Since ever more women demand to join the [partisan] units, we have decided to accept them [...] not only as nurses, but also as fighters. It would be a real disgrace for us to make it impossible for women to fight with a weapon in hand for national liberation."<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> See Vera Gavrilović, *Žene-lekari u ratovima 1876-1945 na tlu Jugoslavije* [Women Doctors in the Wars of 1876-1945 on Yugoslav Soil] (Belgrade: Naučno društvo za istoriju zdravstvene kulture Jugoslavije, 1976), 56-65. Additional female medical personnel were conscripted towards the end of the war.

<sup>31</sup> See 'Sanitetski kadrovi i nastava u NOR' ['Medical Cadres and Instruction in the National Liberation War'], in Leksikon NOR-a, vol. 2, 981-82. In 1942, for example, partisan hospitals in the Bosnian towns of Grmeč, Livno, Duvno and Glamoč featured nursing schools. See 'Izveštaj referenta saniteta pri VŠ od 12.8.1942' ['Report by the medical officer of the Supreme Command of August 12, 1941'], in ZDPNOR, series 2, vol. 5, 291.

<sup>32</sup> See Bosa Cvetić, ed., *Žene Srbije u NOB* [The Women of Serbia in the National Liberation Struggle] (Belgrade: Nolit, 1975), 190, 251, 263-65, 286, 289, 325-27, 351-53, 393, 423-24, 496-98, 519-20, 551-53, 679, 724-25, 765-66, 811-12, 861; thereafter Cvetić, *Žene Srbije*; and Stana Gerk, Ivka Križnar, and Štefanija Ravnikar-Podbevšek, eds., *Slovenke v narodnoosvobodilnem boju. Zbornik dokumentov, člankov in spominov* [Slovenian Women in the National Liberation Struggle. Collection of Documents, Articles and Memoirs] (Ljubljana: Borec, 1970), 121-23. Thereafter Gerk et al., *Slovenke*.

<sup>33</sup> 'Pismo PK KPJ za Srbiju OK KPJ za Šabački okrug od 20.8.1941' ['Letter by the Regional Committee of the CPY to the District Committee of the CPY in the Šabac district of August 20, 1941'], in ZDPNOR, series 1, vol. 1, 66.

<sup>34</sup> 'Pismo Vrhovnog komandanta NOPO i DV Jugoslavije od 23.2.1942 delegatima VŠ [...] Edvardu Kardelju i Ivi Ribaru-Loli' ['Letter of the Supreme Commander of the National Liberation Partisan Units and the Volunteer Army of Yugoslavia of February 23, 1942, to Edvard Kardelj and Ivo-Lola Ribar, delegates of the Supreme Command'], in ZDPNOR, series 2, vol. 2, 436.



The party organ *Proleter* (The Proletarian) immediately announced Tito's decision.<sup>35</sup> From then on, even units whose leaders were critical of women's engagement in combat (as had been the case in many Croatian and Montenegrin partisan groups) had to comply, if often rather unenthusiastically, with the new party line.<sup>36</sup>

Pragmatic reasons were an important motive behind the CPY's change of policy on women in armed resistance: Besieged by the occupiers, collaborating armed groups, and the rival Četnici, the NLA needed every volunteer it could mobilize regardless of their sex if it hoped to eventually prevail. Presumably, women's proven efficiency both as nurses and fighters also influenced the decision. But the key factor was, as Tito pointed out in the letter cited above, the women's own initiative.

### Women's self-mobilization for armed resistance

Why did thousands of Yugoslav girls and women decide to transgress conventional gender norms and expose themselves to the perils of partisan war? I would argue that the answer lies in the chaos and terror created by occupation and collaboration.

Following the country's defeat in April 1941, the Axis powers had installed both incompetent and brutal regimes to govern Yugoslavia.<sup>37</sup> Their

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<sup>35</sup> See J., 'Važnost učešća žena u današnjoj narodno-oslobodilačkoj borbi' ['The Importance of Women's Participation in Today's National Liberation Struggle'], *Proleter*, 14-15 (1942), 16.

<sup>36</sup> On Croatia see Desanka Stojić, *Prva ženska partizanska četa* [*The First Women's Partisan Unit*] (Karlovac: SSRN Hrvatske, 1987), 12-16; thereafter Stojić, *Partizanska. Sklevicky, Konji*, 38-39; Helmut Kopetzky, *Die andere Front. Europäische Frauen in Krieg und Widerstand 1939-1945* [*The Other Front. European Women in War and Resistance 1939-1945*] (Köln: Pahl-Rugenstein, 1980), 80-81; on Montenegro see Jovan Bojović, Radman Jovanović, Zoran Lakić, Radoje Pajović, and Slavko Stanišić, *Žene Crne Gore u revolucionarnom pokretu 1918-1945* [*The Women of Montenegro in the Revolutionary Movement 1918-1945*] (Titograd: Istorijski institut, 1969), 127 and 153-56; thereafter Bojović et al., *Žene*. Neda Božinović, 'Studentkinje i diplomirane studentkinje Beogradskog univerziteta u narodnooslobodilačkom ratu i revoluciji' ['Female Students and Alumnae of Belgrade University in the National Liberation War and the Revolution'], in Dobrica Vulović and Božidar Draškić, eds., *Studentkinje beogradskog univerziteta u revolucionarnom pokretu* [*Female Students of Belgrade University in the Revolutionary Movement*] (Belgrade: Centar za marksizam univerziteta, 1988), 115; thereafter Božinović, 'Studentkinje'. Dušanka Kovačević and Dragutin Kosorić, eds., *Borbeni put žena Jugoslavije* [*The Struggle of Yugoslavia's Women*] (Belgrade: Sveznanje, 1972), 89. Thereafter Kovačević and Kosorić, *Borbeni*.

<sup>37</sup> For a detailed discussion see Jozo Tomasevich, *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia, 1941-1945: Occupation and Collaboration* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001).

reign of terror was additionally exacerbated by the civil war between monarchist Četnici, fascist Ustaša and the communist NLA, to name but the largest contending parties. For the civilian population, the escalating conflict meant the destruction of livelihoods and traditional social networks as well as a constant menace of violence.

The nature and scale of the threats civilians faced in occupied Yugoslavia – forced resettlement (*Umsiedlung*) and expulsion, conscription for forced labor, internment in prisons and concentration camps, theft and pillage, abuse and murder – allow us to comprehend why so many women opted for resistance. The destruction of families and local communities caused by the war left girls and women on their own, compelling them to defend their integrity and lives themselves. Joining an armed group which provided an alternative social network, meager means to live, and arms for self-defense, offered them much-needed, albeit precarious, protection. The general anomy brought about by the conflict also implied a decrease in social control, which enabled girls and women to transgress gender conventions more easily and try out new roles. As the NLA was the only party in the conflict which systematically recruited women, becoming a partisan was an obvious option for many of them.<sup>38</sup>

The words of women veterans support these hypotheses. Stana Nidžović-Džakula, an ethnic Serb from Croatia who joined the NLA after the destruction of her native village by Ustaša troops, underlined that the menace of rampant violence was the decisive motive for her and other young women to become partisans:

“What affected me were the general conditions. [...] Look, among us, at the time, patriarchal notions were that female children [...] could not go far from the house without a chaperon. And now to decide in this patriarchal notion [sic] to join the ranks, [to live] among men... That means, something had to compel her [the woman partisan]. There had to be some decisive event or something. [...] Not only in my case, but in general.”<sup>39</sup>

Radmila Velimirović from Belgrade lost her Jewish father at the hands of the occupiers. Her hatred of them and fear for her life were supplemented by her desire to protect her personal integrity. Rumors she had heard about sexual violence committed by the collaborating police strengthened her resolve to join the NLA, where she served as a nurse until the end of the war:

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<sup>38</sup> For a similar argument, see Bogdan Denitch, *The Legitimation of a Revolution. The Yugoslav Case* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 41.

<sup>39</sup> Stana Nidžović-Džakula, Interview by Barbara Wiesinger (thereafter BW), November 2003.

“[As a partisan,] I suffered such terrible ordeals, but I preferred that to... I am from Dedinje and there the police often drove by with young girls, screams, they beat them, and then they forced [...] the parents to watch while five or six of them had their way with the girl. [...] And I preferred that, even if I should perish, with this conviction I joined [the NLA].”<sup>40</sup>

For Jewish women, joining the resistance provided an opportunity to escape persecution and to contribute to the defeat of National Socialism at the same time.<sup>41</sup> Eta Najfeld from Croatia, who served in the NLA as a medical doctor, recapitulated her engagement as follows:

“And I have to say that the feeling that I was equal, that I had equal rights, that I was not the persecuted Jewish beast afraid of herself and everyone else anymore, was a great relief. I was not only equal; I was respected for my diligence, my work, my dedication and my gratefulness towards those who had saved me. If it were not for the partisans, we [she and her family] would not have survived.”<sup>42</sup>

But being part of the NLA could also mean improved material conditions. Dragica Vujović, an ethnic Croat from Herzegovina who was forcibly recruited by the partisans, eventually decided to stay because the NLA provided her with clothes and regular, if meager, provisions; something which her impoverished parents could not guarantee.<sup>43</sup>

Ideological convictions, on the other hand, inspired only a minority of women, most of whom had already been members of the CPY or the communist youth organisation SKOJ (*Savez komunističke omladine Jugoslavije*) before the war. For Croat partisan Radojka Katić and ethnic Hungarian party activist Ida Sabo, the National Liberation War was not only a war of liberation, but also a socialist revolution.<sup>44</sup> The majority of Yugoslav women partisans, however, opted for armed resistance in order to defend themselves in an existentially threatening situation rather than in response to the CPY's hazy promises of social and political change.

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<sup>40</sup> Radmila Velimirović, Interview by BW, March 2003.

<sup>41</sup> See also Anika Radošević, Interview by BW, December 2003. More information on Jewish women partisans can be found in Romano, *Jevreji*, 307-511.

<sup>42</sup> Eta Najfeld, Interview by BW, December 2008.

<sup>43</sup> See Dragica Vujović, Interview by BW, April 2003.

<sup>44</sup> See Radojka Katić, Interview by BW, January 2004, and Ida Sabo, Interview by BW, June 2003.

## Military practice

Following Tito's decision of February 1942, the NLA intensified the recruitment of women for armed resistance. In order to mobilize female volunteers, partisan propaganda painted an idealized picture of life in the army and conventionalized women activists as exemplary heroines motivated by patriotism, love of freedom and devotion to the community.<sup>45</sup> An obituary in the movement's press<sup>46</sup> for Croatian partisan Kata Bubalo, for example, presents her death as a selfless sacrifice for the nation. The fighter dies, "[h]er chest pressed to the ground [...] so that nobody would witness the moment when she gives her warm blood to her country, her people and her fatherland."<sup>47</sup>

The most vociferous advocate of women's participation in armed resistance, however, was neither the CPY nor the NLA, but the Antifascist Front of Women (*Antifašistički front žena*, AFŽ). In its founding resolution, the women's branch of the resistance movement called on the NLA to "continue to engage women, together with men, in armed [resistance] and diversion against the occupier."<sup>48</sup> Numerous articles in AFŽ journals asked girls and women to sign up as volunteers and praised their contributions to the National Liberation Struggle. Partisan propaganda focused on two roles for women partisans: the nurse and the fighter. An article in *Zora* (Dawn), the journal of the Serbian AFŽ, compared modern-day partisans to the mythic figure of the Kosovo Maiden (*Kosovka devojka*) of Serbian epic poetry – but with an important qualification:

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<sup>45</sup> See Anđelka Milić, 'Patrijarhalni poredak, revolucija i saznanje o položaju žene' ['The Patriarchal Order, the Revolution and Insights into Women's Situation'], in Latinka Perović, ed., *Srbija u modernizacijskim procesima* [*Serbia in the Processes of Modernization*], (Belgrade: INIS, 1998), vol. 2, 556.

<sup>46</sup> The most important partisan paper was *Borba* [*The Struggle*]. During the war, the Antifascist Front of Women alone published 27 different local and regional papers, which were aimed at a female readership and prominently dealt with women's contributions to the resistance. *Žena danas* [*Woman today*], a continuation of the interwar leftist-feminist periodical of the same name, was the partisan movement's "federal" women's paper.

<sup>47</sup> See 'Najveći dar' ['The Greatest Gift'], quoted in Marija Šoljan, ed., *Žene Hrvatske u narodnooslobodilačkoj borbi* [*The Women of Croatia in the National Liberation Struggle*], vol. 2 (Zagreb: Savez ženskih društava Hrvatske, 1955), 189. Thereafter Šoljan, *Žene Hrvatske*.

<sup>48</sup> 'Rezolucija sa prve zemaljske konferencije AF' ['Resolution from the first federal conference of the Antifascist Front of Women'], *Žena danas*, 31 (1943), 15-16. See also 'Žene učvršćuju svoju organizaciju' ['Women Strengthen Their Organization'], *Borba*, 28 (1942), 4.

“The epitomization of these women is the Kosovo Maiden, but her successors, today’s Kosovo Maidens, are rendering First Aid in battle as well as fighting themselves.”<sup>49</sup>

Due to the nature of partisan warfare, the roles of nurse and fighter were not neatly distinguishable anyway. Medics sometimes fought in order to defend themselves and their patients, while fighters helped take care of the sick and wounded. Also, many women held both functions during their NLA ‘careers’. In the case of Yugoslavia’s women partisans, then, the dividing line between combatant and non-combatant roles is particularly hard to define.

But revolutionary rhetoric about “women’s right to fight” notwithstanding, the prototypical female function in the partisan army was clearly medical service. Long before Tito’s decision to let women “fight for national liberation”, the NLA had already recruited medical doctors and nurses. Throughout the war, many units deployed women volunteers automatically for service in the medical corps.<sup>50</sup>

Partisan nurses were either attached to a unit or worked in hospitals, which either moved about with the army or were hidden in the more inaccessible corners of the country.<sup>51</sup> In these hospitals, nurses assisted with operations, tended to patients, took care of hygiene, and the like.<sup>52</sup> They also had to wash and repair clothes and prepare food.<sup>53</sup>

In addition, nurses were responsible for the construction and maintenance of dugouts where patients and personnel could hide in case of an

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<sup>49</sup> ‘Spremamo se’ [‘We’re getting ready’], *Zora*, 1 (1945), 16.

<sup>50</sup> See Julka Mešterović, *Lekarev dnevnik [A Doctor’s Diary]* (Belgrade: Vojnoizdavački zavod, 1968), 130, 194; see also ‘Zadaci mesnih partizanskih jedinica u Sremu, 08/09-1944’ [‘Tasks of the Local Partisan Units in Syrmia, Aug./Sept. 1944’], in ZDPNOR, series 1, vol. 11, 22.

<sup>51</sup> Many hospitals were founded and directed by women, for example the Slovenian conspiratory infirmaries “Franja”, named after Dr. Franja Bojc Bidovec (1913-1985) and “Pavla”, named after Dr. Pavla Jerina Lah (1915-2007).

<sup>52</sup> See ‘Statut sanitetske službe, 10.11.1942’ [‘Statute of the medical service of November 10, 1942’], in ZDPNOR, series 2, vol. 6, 390.

<sup>53</sup> See ‘Mesečni izveštaj referenta saniteta štaba obalske artiljerije, 11-1944’ [‘Monthly report by the medical officer of the staff of the coastal artillery, Nov. 1944’], in *Zbornik dokumenata i podataka sanitetske službe u narodnooslobodilačkom ratu jugoslovenskih naroda [Collection of Documents and Data on the Medical Service in the National Liberation War of the Yugoslav Peoples; subsequently quoted as ZDPSS]*, vol. 4 (Belgrade: Sanitetska uprava državnog sekretarijata za narodnu odbranu, 1952-1969), 492; and ‘Uputstvo štaba 19. divizije, 30.6.1944’ [‘Instructions of the staff of the 19<sup>th</sup> division of June 30, 1944’], in ZDPSS, vol. 4, 292.

enemy advance.<sup>54</sup> Nurses ‘at the front’ accompanied their units into battle to evacuate the wounded, provide First Aid, and recover the dead.<sup>55</sup> Thus, medics were exposed to the same hazards as their fighting comrades. Radmila Velimirović, for example, was nearly killed by a German soldier during the liberation of Belgrade in autumn 1944 while she was preparing a wounded partisan for evacuation. Thanks to the presence of mind of her unit’s political commissar, the enemy soldier was shot before he could kill Velimirović.<sup>56</sup> A 1945 propaganda leaflet describes the perils partisan nurses faced as follows:

„In Gornja Sredica the battle is raging. Our [men] are drawing back, but on the battlefield five comrades lie in their blood. Roza bandages them up and saves them one by one, bringing them into cover. The enemy fire does not abate; a heavy machine gun mows down everything. It tears Roza’s stomach apart. She struggles with death, but continues the evacuation. Her wound deepens and Roza dies on the stretcher in terrible pain. Her last words: ‘Don’t leave them behind [...], bandage [them] up, save the comrades!’”<sup>57</sup>

This quotation is also an example of how partisan propaganda idealized nurses who died at the front as selfless heroines; a stereotype which socialist-era accounts of women’s contribution to the “National Liberation War” frequently reiterated.

Nurses who served in partisan units were usually armed with pistol, knife, and hand grenade.<sup>58</sup> As Radmila Velimirović explained, these weapons, which would have been of little use in combat anyway, enabled her and her colleagues to defend or kill themselves if need be:

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<sup>54</sup> See ‘Naređenje načelnika sanitetskog odeljenja štaba 4. korpusa NOVJ, 22.5.1944’ [‘Command of the head of the sanitary department of the staff of the 4<sup>th</sup> corps of the National Liberation Army of Yugoslavia’], in ZDPSS, vol. 5, 129–30; ‘Uputstvo sanitetskog odseka GŠ Hrvatske’ [‘Instructions of the sanitary department of the General Staff of Croatia of June 15, 1944’], 15.6.1944, in ZDPSS, vol. 5, 114–18.

<sup>55</sup> See ‘Uputstvo štaba 6. Vojvodanske brigade’ [‘Instructions of the staff of the 6<sup>th</sup> Vojvodina brigade of March 7, 1944’], 7.3.1944, in ZDPSS, vol. 9, 27; ‘Uputstvo za rukovanje sanitetom divizije i korpusa, 25.4.1943’ [‘Instructions on directing the medical service of divisions and corpora’], in ZDPSS, vol. 3, 85; ‘Uputstvo referenta saniteta 3. bataljona 3. brigade 20. divizije za rad bolničara’ [‘Instructions of the medical officer of the 3<sup>rd</sup> battalion of the 3<sup>rd</sup> brigade of the 20<sup>th</sup> division for the work of medics’], 11.3.1944, in ZDPSS, vol. 4, 207–8.

<sup>56</sup> Velimirović, Interview.

<sup>57</sup> ‘Komesar 33. Divizije X. korpusa o drugaricama’ [‘The commissar of the 33<sup>rd</sup> division of the X<sup>th</sup> corps on female comrades’], quoted in Ana Konjović, *Žena-vojnica [The woman-soldier]* (Zagreb: Glavni odbor AFŽ Hrvatske, 1945), 17–18.

<sup>58</sup> See ‘Statut sanitetske službe’, 10.11.1942’ [‘Statute of the medical service of November 10, 1942’], in ZDPNOR, series 2, vol. 6, 389.

“Of course I handled weapons, because one had to know that. [...] You shake the bomb, throw it and put an end to the story. You kill yourself, [it is] better [to kill] yourself than to fall into the hands of someone who will torture and torment you.”<sup>59</sup>

Insofar as nurses at the front were exposed to violence, but only actively engaged in it in emergency situations,<sup>60</sup> their service in the NLA did not represent as radical a breach with traditional gender norms as the deployment of women for combat. Even so, from 1944 onwards many partisan leaders decided to withdraw female nurses from the frontline units and send them to hospitals in the liberated territories instead.<sup>61</sup> This step indicates that a number of NLA commanders regarded the engagement of women in frontline service in any function whatsoever as an expedient only in a desperate situation. As the NLA's ability to recruit male volunteers grew with its military power and political influence, many partisan leaders tried to re-establish a more traditional division of the 'labor of war'. That, of course, is not to say that the partisan nurses themselves necessarily saw their redeployment to the rear negatively. After all, in territories under NLA control they were not exposed anymore to the constant stress and perils of the 'front', although their lives continued to be characterized by hardships and deprivation until the end of the war.

As opposed to women's medical service, their participation in armed combat was controversial both within the NLA and the wider population. Although individual women had fought in the anti-Ottoman uprisings of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Balkan Wars, and in World War I,<sup>62</sup> common opinion was

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<sup>59</sup> Velimirović, Interview.

<sup>60</sup> See 'Naše bolničarke' ['Our Nurses'], *Omladina*, 22 (1944), 5; see also 'Komesar VI. korpusa o drugaricama' ['The Commissar of the VI<sup>th</sup> Corps on Women-Comrades'], quoted in Ana Konjović, *Žena-vojnica* [*The woman-soldier*] (Zagreb: Glavni odbor AFŽ Hrvatske, 1945), 21.

<sup>61</sup> See 'Raspis referenta saniteta 9. divizije, 19.11.1944' ['Letter by the medical officer of the 9<sup>th</sup> division, November 19, 1944'], in ZDPSS, vol. 4, 482; 'Uputstvo štaba 39. divizije, 3.12.1944' ['Instructions of the staff of the 39<sup>th</sup> division of December 3, 1944'], in ZDPSS, vol. 11, 380; 'Izveštaj načelnika saniteta 2. Korpusa' ['Report by the head of the medical service of the 2<sup>nd</sup> corps of January 30, 1944'], 30.1.1944, in ZDPSS, vol. 1, 418 and 423. Other units had already divided labor in this way earlier. See 'Izveštaj grupe NOPO za Liku, 29.8.1942' ['Report of the Lika group of National Liberation Partisan Units of August 29, 1942'], in ZDPNOR, series 5, vol. 30, 345.

<sup>62</sup> See Jovanka Kecman, *Žene Jugoslavije u radničkom pokretu i ženskim organizacijama 1918-1941* [*The Women of Yugoslavia in the Labor Movement and in Women's Organizations 1918-1941*] (Belgrade: Narodna knjiga, 1978), 16; and Bojović et al., *Žene*, 15. Conversations with women veterans of World War I can be found in Antonije Đurić, *Žene-Solunci govore* [*Women Veterans of the Salonika Front Speak*] (Belgrade: Književne Novine, 1987).



that violence and warfare were essentially men's business. Tito's decision to recruit women for combat roles therefore caused conflicts within the resistance movement, as the case of the Lika's women's companies aptly illustrates.

In August 1942, AFŽ and SKOJ activists in the Croatian Lika region founded a women's company of about 70 members. Soon, four more followed. In October 1942, the General Staff of the Croatian NLA banned single-sex units and ordered the five women's companies to be incorporated into what was later to become the famous VI<sup>th</sup> Proletarian Division. Their commander, however, refused at first to integrate the predominantly teenage partisans into his ranks.<sup>63</sup> In her memoirs, Desanka Stojić, a member of the 1<sup>st</sup> Women's Company, explained:

"The formation of companies of female youths produced astonishment and doubt among certain parts of the population and the fighters. Can women be soldiers at all? [Soldiering] had always been a male activity. The majority of peasants [...] could not get used easily to woman's [sic] right to fight."<sup>64</sup>

Many partisans, including the commanding cadre, doubted that the young women would be able to bear the hardships of partisan war, let alone be useful combatants.<sup>65</sup> When the VI<sup>th</sup> Proletarian Division complied eventually with the General Staff's command, the young women were sent, mostly unarmed, into their first battle. Their assignment was to capture weapons for the NLA. This order seems cynical even when one considers that up to the autumn of 1943, the NLA notoriously lacked weaponry.<sup>66</sup>

Of the women who survived their first encounter with the enemy, most were deployed for medical service, although many would have preferred combat duty, if one is to believe a report by Kata Bubalo, the political commissar of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Women's Company:

"Selecting nurses was rather troublesome, because every [girl] wanted to be a fighter with a weapon in her hand. We had one wish only: To get hold of a gun and fight the enemy. All of us have heard of our comrades of the 1<sup>st</sup> Women's Company. They have proven themselves to be good and dauntless warriors. We have to become as good as them and even better. [...] We have to prove to everybody that we are able to fight just as well as our [male] comrades."<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> See Stojić, *Partizanska*, 36.

<sup>64</sup> Stojić, *Partizanska*, 33.

<sup>65</sup> See 'Partizanke u borbi' ['Women Partisans in Combat'], (*Lička*) *Žena u borbi*, 7-8 (1942), 18-19.

<sup>66</sup> See Stojić, *Partizanska*, 46-47.

<sup>67</sup> 'Drugarica iz brigade nam piše' ['A Woman Comrade from the Brigade Writes Us'], (*Lička*) *Žena u borbi*, 9 (1942), 14-16.

In the following years, members of the Croatian women's units participated in the Battle of Sutjeska, defended Tito and the Supreme Command against *Wehrmacht* parachutists in Drvar, took part in the Battle of Belgrade, and served at the Srem Front in the final months of the war.<sup>68</sup> Altogether, more than 600 female partisans served in the VI<sup>th</sup> Proletarian Division.<sup>69</sup>

Although negative evaluations of women's performance in battle are surprisingly rare<sup>70</sup>, their military 'usefulness' must have been hampered by their lack of systematic training. Admittedly, women with a rural background sometimes knew how to handle guns, while others who had participated in the Spanish Civil War had some experience of guerilla war,<sup>71</sup> but hardly any women had undergone military training. The same was true, of course, of many male volunteers. Therefore the NLA organized "military-political courses" in which new recruits of both sexes were instructed in the handling of weapons, combat techniques and fundamental tactics, sprinkled over with the basics of communism.<sup>72</sup> Still, under conditions of war these courses were not run regularly, which meant that many women partisans took over combatant roles completely unprepared.

Ida Sabo, for example, who was originally an underground activist in occupied Ljubljana, joined the NLA to escape from being arrested for a second time. An unexpected enemy attack confused her so that she started to shoot standing upright until a more experienced partisan told her to seek cover and fire from there.<sup>73</sup> Stana Nidžović-Džakula, again, was barely able to handle a gun when she went into her first battle. Still, she conquered her fear in order to prove her worth as a warrior, especially because

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<sup>68</sup> See Stojić, *Partizanska*, 74-76 and 81-93.

<sup>69</sup> See Kovačević and Kosorić, *Borbeni*, 126.

<sup>70</sup> The only example I have found is 'Izveštaj štaba Nikšičkog NOPO, 31.5.1942' ['Report of the staff of the Nikšić National Liberation Partisan Unit of May 31, 1942'], in ZDPNOR, series 1, vol. 16, 323.

<sup>71</sup> See 'Žene u NOR', in Leksikon NOR-a, 1246.

<sup>72</sup> See 'Plan izvođenja vojne nastave, propisan od Vrhovnog komandanta početkom oktobra 1941' ['Plan for the realization of military instruction, decreed by the General Commander in early October 1941'], in ZDPNOR, series 2, vol. 2, 68-71; 'Uputstvo Aleksandra Rankovića, 10.9.1942' ['Instructions by Aleksandar Ranković of September 10, 1942'], in ZDPNOR, series 2, vol. 6, 76; see also 'Vojno-političke škole i kursevi u NOVJ' ['Military-political schools and courses in the Yugoslav National Liberation Army'], in Leksikon NOR-a, vol. 2, 1201-1202; and 'Vojnostručna obuka boraca i starešina NOVJ' ['Specialist military training of soldiers and officers of the Yugoslav National Liberation Army'], in Leksikon NOR-a, vol. 2, 1203-1204.

<sup>73</sup> See Ida Sabo, Interview; see also Jancar-Webster, *Women*, 48.

she was the only female fighter in her unit.<sup>74</sup> By and by, Nidžović-Džakula claims, she became „quite a good marksman [sic]“ and a courageous *bombaš*<sup>75</sup> respected by her comrades: “They [her male comrades] regarded me and every other [woman] as equals. [...] They even admired some [women partisans]. [...] There was no mistrust towards us.”<sup>76</sup>

Generally, however, the women veterans I interviewed hardly spoke about the bloody ‘core business’ of war and even less about their own acts of violence. Radojka Katić put it especially succinctly: “He shoots at you and you shoot as well. That’s how it is.”<sup>77</sup> Written memoirs are also largely silent on the topic of partisan violence, while the partisans’ sufferings are depicted in great detail, often rather emotionally.<sup>78</sup> One explanation for this conspicuous silence could be the notorious difficulty of verbalizing experiences of violence. Another possibility is that the women veterans involuntarily suppressed negative memories, or that they consciously attempted to portray themselves and their war in a positive light and therefore censored memories of violence which might seem unacceptable from a peacetime perspective.

Wartime propaganda was less diffident when it came to describing what women fighters in the partisan army actually did. Since the NLA saw its struggle as a just war, concealing its bloody reality behind euphemistic language seemed hardly necessary. On the battlefield, women were expected to display the same martial behavior as men:

“Impatiently the partisans await the moment when they will attack the fascist arsonist, but the women partisans are even more impatient. [...] The comrades jump on the tanks. The female comrades do not stay behind. In Petrovo selo they compete with the most courageous [male] partisans. They catch live *Ustaše*.”<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> See Stana Nidžović-Džakula, Interview by BW, November 2003.

<sup>75</sup> *Bombaši* initiated attacks by disabling tanks and destroying enemy dugouts with hand grenades, which was a very dangerous task.

<sup>76</sup> Nidžović-Džakula, Interview .

<sup>77</sup> Radojka Katić, Interview by BW, January 2004.

<sup>78</sup> An illustrative example are the memoirs of Saša Božinović, MD, which were widely read in the former Yugoslavia. See Saša Božinović, *Tebi, moja Dolores* [*For you, my Dolores*], 2nd edn (Belgrade: 4. jul, 1981).

<sup>79</sup> ‘Kako se bore ličke partizanke. Dopis jedne partizanke’ [‘How the Lika’s Women Partisans Fight. Report by a Woman-Partisan’], (*Lička*) *Žena u borbi*, 9 (1942), 13-14. See also ‘Partizanka priča’ [‘A Woman Partisan Speaks’], (*Lička*) *Žena u borbi*, 7-8 (1942), 19-21; ‘Junačke ličke partizanke jurišaju na tenk i roveve’ [‘The Heroic Women-Partisans of the Lika Attack a Tank and Trenches’], *Primorka*, 1 (1942), 14-15.

In partisan propaganda, women fighters judge, destroy, mow down or tear apart their enemies, who are often referred to as dogs, beasts, or monsters and thus dehumanized.<sup>80</sup> Generally, NLA propaganda normalized women's violence and negated the popularly perceived contrariety between a female gender identity and the use of violence, all with an eye to legitimizing and furthering the mobilization of women for resistance. Only rarely is the protagonist's gender contrasted with her actions, and if that is the case, her 'unusual' behavior is instantly justified by references to the enemy's viciousness:

"[...] during a battle [...] a duel develops between her and a bandit who carries a machine gun which Dragica craves passionately. Her tender girlish hands are cruel towards the dogs who have committed so much evil. With the butt of her gun Dragica overpowers the enemy and seizes the *šarac* [a machine gun]. On that day, her company received a beautiful gift, captured by the hands of a girl-hero."<sup>81</sup>

Although women's military prowess was generally evaluated positively in partisan propaganda as well as in internal NLA documents, only three women – Milka Kerin, Milka Kljajić and Danica Milosavljević – held leading positions outside of the medical service.<sup>82</sup>

Also, the year 1944 already saw the widespread demobilization of women combatants.<sup>83</sup> Concurrently, new female volunteers were deployed automatically for medical service, just as had been the case at the beginning

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<sup>80</sup> For text examples see 'Žene-borci' ['Women-Combatants'], *Žena u borbi*, 8 (1944), 6; Desa Miljenović, 'Žene junakinje' ['Women heroines'], *Žena u borbi*, 16-17 (1945), 10; Vladimir Bakarić, 'Partizanka sudi' ['Judgement by a Woman-Partisan'], *Žena u borbi*, 1 (1943), 18; Branko Vukelić, 'Prva Goranka partizanka – komesar bataljona' ['The First Woman-Partisan from Gorski kotar – commissar of a Battalion'], *Rodoljupka*, 2 (1944) 6-7; 'Tri godine herojske borbe, žrtava i uspeha' ['Three Years of Heroic Struggle, Sacrifices and Successes'], *Žena u borbi*, 9 (1944), 12; 'Osam puta ranjena' ['Wounded Eight Times'], quoted in Ana Konjović, *Žena-vojnica [The woman-soldier]* (Zagreb: Glavni odbor AFŽ Hrvatske, 1945), 8; 'Za našu decu' ['For Our Children'], *Žena danas*, 32 (1943) 17; Slavonka, 'One su dale svoje živote' ['They Gave Their Lives'], *Žena u borbi*, 3-4 (1943) 23; Jaroslav, 'Ubijte, ne znam ništa' ['Kill Me, I Don't Know Anything'], *Vojvodanka u borbi*, 4 (1944), 9.

<sup>81</sup> 'Žene-borci Prokuplja i Turopolja' ['The Women Fighters of Prokuplje and Turopolje'], *Žena u borbi*, 11 (1944) 14.

<sup>82</sup> See *Institut za savremenu istoriju, Narodni heroji Jugoslavije [National Heroes of Yugoslavia]* (Belgrade: Institut za savremenu istoriju, 1982), 376-77, 385-86, 547-48. See also Jancar-Webster, *Women*, 90, 93-94.

<sup>83</sup> See 'Primerbe CK KPJ PK KP Crne Gore i Boke, 8.2.1944' ['Critical remarks by the Central Committee of the CPY to the Regional Committee of the CP of Montenegro and Boka of February 8, 1944'], in ZDPNOR, series 2, vol. 12, 80; also Božinović, 'Studentkinje', 119.

of the war.<sup>84</sup> This policy reflects the changed position of the NLA. In the summer and autumn of 1944, Tito's partisans gained control over large parts of Yugoslavia, where they could conscript male soldiers. Offers of amnesty enticed members of opposing armed groups to join the rising NLA, where they could replace women fighters. Female partisans, who had been mobilized during the critical years of 1942 and 1943, were sent to the rear in growing numbers. In the liberated territories, they worked in hospitals, took care of war orphans, agitated for the CPY and the resistance movement, organized literacy programs, built new administrative structures, and participated in the reconstruction of homes, infrastructure, and the economy.<sup>85</sup> After the end of the war, all women partisans except those on medical or administrative duty were demobilized. Apparently, the communist regime was not so 'revolutionary' as to enable, let alone encourage, women's military engagement, especially as combatants, except in situations of dire need.

### Women partisans in cultural memory

So far, there are no systematic studies of the representations of women partisans in socialist Yugoslavia's cultural memory.<sup>86</sup> Still, it is obvious that after 1945, neither politics nor society, neither academic nor cultural circles paid much attention to women's participation in armed resistance during World War II. Admittedly, every Yugoslav republic published a volume on women in the resistance<sup>87</sup>, but 'general' historiography on the

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<sup>84</sup> See for example 'Pismo Glavnog NOO Vojvodine, 23.4.1944' ['Letter of the National Liberation Council of the Vojvodina, April 23, 1944'], in ZDPNOR, series 1, vol. 8, 173-174; 'Naredenje štaba 21. NOU divizije, 16.8.1944' ['Command by the staff of the 21st National Liberation Shock Division of August 16, 1944'], in ZDPNOR, series 1, vol. 9, 331.

<sup>85</sup> Katić, Interview.

<sup>86</sup> See, however, Renata Jambrešić Kirin, 'Heroine ili egzekutorice: partizanke u 1990-ima' ['Heroines or Executioners: Women Partisans in the 1990s'], in Renata Jambrešić Kirin and Tea Škokić, eds., *Između roda i naroda. Etnološke i folklorističke studije [Between Gender and Nation. Ethnological and Folkloristic Studies]* (Zagreb: Centar za ženske studije, 2004).

<sup>87</sup> In addition to the titles already quoted Kovačević and Kosorić, *Borbeni*, see Šoljan, *Žene Hrvatske*; Gerk et al., *Slovenke*; Bojović et al., *Žene*; Cvetić, *Žene Srbije*; see Alija Velić, ed., *Žene Bosne i Hercegovine u narodnooslobodilačkoj borbi 1941-1945. Sjećanja učesnika [The Women of Bosnia-Herzegovina in the National Liberation Struggle 1941-1945. Memories of Veterans]* (Sarajevo: Svjetlost, 1977); Bosa Đurović, ed., *Žene Crne Gore u revolucionarnom pokretu 1919-1945 [The Women of Montenegro in the Revolutionary Movement 1919-1945]* (Titograd: Glavni Odbor Saveza ženskih društava Crne Gore, 1960); Drago Zdunić, ed., *Heroine Jugoslavije [Heroines of Yugoslavia]* (Zagreb: Naša

National Liberation Struggle only mentioned them in passing, if at all. Women partisans were also under-represented in popular media of remembrance such as partisan films. Official commemorations of the National Liberation Struggle paid no specific attention to women partisans. Significantly, plans for a “Memorial for the Woman Fighter” were also never realized.<sup>88</sup>

While the names of fallen women fighters and nurses appeared alongside those of their male comrades in books or on commemorative plaques and monuments, the specificity of their war experience remained ignored. After all, detailed research about the engagement of women in the resistance would unfailingly have brought to light the differences between historical reality and the official narrative of partisan equality.

If women’s armed resistance was discussed at all during the socialist period, then only within the limits of official interpretations, according to which the participation of women in the National Liberation Struggle was an effect of mass support for the CPY and its revolutionary project as well as a result of the party’s purported emancipatory politics. A common interpretation was that by participating in the National Liberation Struggle, Yugoslavia’s women had collectively proved their maturity as citizens<sup>89</sup> and thus ‘earned’ the equal rights codified in the laws of socialist Yugoslavia:

“Buried alive in pits, drowned in rivers, hanged on trees, massacred on [their] doorsteps, burned in their parents’ house, with eyes cut out and limbs cut off, with their youth, their slaughtered children and their martyred husbands, with grenades, guns, mines and their own blood they earned their rights.”<sup>90</sup>

It is no coincidence that this rather drastic quote mentions active resisters in the same breath as victims of war. References to women’s participation in the National Liberation Struggle often mixed activists and victims, the latter of which are thus engrossed as purported supporters of the National Liberation Struggle, and thus implicitly as advocates of communist rule.

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djeca, 1980); Vera Veskovik-Vangeli and Jovanovik, Marija, ed., *Zbornik na dokumenti za učestvoto na ženite od Makedonija vo narodnoosvoboditelnata vojna i revolucijata 1941-1945* [Collection of Documents on the Participation of Women from Macedonia in the National Liberation War and Revolution of 1941-1945] (Skopje: Institut za nacionalna istorija, 1976); Danilo Kecić, ed., *Žene Vojvodine u ratu i revoluciji 1941-1945* [The Women of Vojvodina in War and Revolution, 1941-1945] (Novi Sad: Institut za istoriju, 1984).

<sup>88</sup> See Karge, *Steinerne Erinnerung*, 94, 98-99.

<sup>89</sup> Among the many examples, see ‘Novo priznanje’ [‘New Recognition’], *Zora*, 1 (1945), 13.

<sup>90</sup> Andro Gabelić, ‘Zajedno u borbi – zajedno u pobjedi’ [‘Together in Struggle – Together in Victory’], *Žena danas*, 35 (1945), 5.

Against this background, women's armed resistance was reduced to mere clichés. Supposedly, between 1941 and 1945 tens of thousands of selfless nurses, courageous fighters, and determined party activists had fought shoulder to shoulder with their male comrades, happily risking their lives for a better future. This stereotypical idealization of women's (armed) resistance covered up the real conflicts about their participation in the National Liberation Struggle, especially as combatants. It also silenced the personal motives and experiences of the women veterans themselves, which have been the focus of this article.