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Partizanke: Their dangerous legacy in the post-Yugoslav space

Chiara Bonfiglioli

The contribution of *partizanke*, or female partisan fighters, to the Yugoslav liberation war was unprecedented in occupied Europe: official statistics of the socialist period report 100,000 women fighting as partisans, and two million participating in various ways to the support of the National Liberation Movement. Approximately 25,000 women died in battle, 40,000 were wounded, and 2,000 of them acquired the officer's rank, while 92 women were designated as national heroes.

Women of all nationalities and ages performed a variety of tasks, particularly as fighters and nurses in the army, but also as couriers, cooks and typists. Women also played a very important role away from the front, working in agriculture, bringing supplies to the troops and taking care of the wounded and the orphans, especially within the framework of the Antifascist Women's Front (AFŽ). [1]

The Antifascist Women's Front was founded in an attempt to mobilise large masses of women in the struggle against the occupation. Since the majority of the population lived at the time in rural areas, the National Liberation Movement strived to gain consensus among peasant women, which were the majority at the time in Yugoslavia. The support of the female population in the villages became crucial for partisans' victory. [2]

The first generation of AFŽ leaders – who were also former partisans and communist party members – included many outstanding women from all over Yugoslavia, generally highly educated and from families with a tradition of leftist engagement. They took part in illegal revolutionary activities in the interwar Kingdom of Yugoslavia, after the banning of the communist party in 1921. They often joined legal women's and youth organizations, spreading socialist and antifascist ideas.

Women in the communist leadership embodied a radically different femininity than the majority of peasant women living in Yugoslavia at the time, as made evident by this photograph of Judita Alargić, Mitra Mitrović and Vera Zogović, resting between battles in summer 1944 on the Adriatic island of Vis, where the headquarters of the Yugoslav Army had been located after the capitulation of Italy.

During World War II, partisan women were dangerous first of all for their enemies, namely Nazi and Fascist troops and local collaborationist forces, whom they fought with incredible courage and sacrifice, incurring in torture, deportation to concentration camps, losses of loved ones and death. They were portrayed as ugly, dirty and promiscuous by enemy propaganda, which saw women's participation in the liberation struggle as something that went against the natural gender order. Partisan women were indeed dangerous for existing patriarchal gender norms. Their participation in the struggle carved new subjectivities for women, whose political, social and economic rights were recognized for the first time in the Yugoslav constitution of 1946.

Through the local and national activities of the Antifascist Women's Front, moreover, antifascist leaders reached out to the most underdeveloped territories of the Federation, promoting women's alphabetization and education, healthcare for mothers and children, as well as women's equal engagement in the processes of postwar reconstruction and industrialisation. Their activities on the ground met the frequent opposition of men and local authorities, including party members, as well as women's reticence to abandon their traditional customs. [3]

At times, prominent female partisans became dangerous for the socialist system they had contributed to create, especially in the aftermath of the Soviet-Yugoslav split of 1948, when alleged pro-Stalin supporters, including women, were subjected to political repression, prison camps and political ousting. [4] Of the women portrayed in the picture, only Judita Alargić continued to have a relevant political career in socialist institutions, while translator Vera Zogović suffered the consequences of political repression together with her husband, poet Radovan Zogović. Mitra Mitrović was also ousted from politics because of her closeness to Yugoslavia's most famous dissident, her ex-husband Milovan Đilas.

Cold War times were complex and dangerous, as exemplified by Želimir Žilnik's recent documentary, *One Woman One Century* (2010). Dragica Vitolović Srzentić (1912-2015), former partisan, first Yugoslav BBC speaker and diplomat at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, was the one who brought Tito's letter of insubordination to Stalin in 1948, only to be incarcerated for Stalinism together with her husband three years later. As the movie shows, however, she never regretted her leftist choice nor denied

socialism's progressive tenets.

And here is a dangerous element of the *partizanke's* legacy: the complexity of their engagement and of their life trajectories, or, in other words, their irreductible *agency* during World War II and in its aftermath. While many scholars are keen to study women's participation in the antifascist resistance, very few are ready to recognise women's agency in socialist Europe, or the importance of women's state socialist organisations such as the Antifascist Women's Front. These organisations and their leaders, in fact, are often seen as too dependent from party politics or the socialist state.

The very idea of *women's agency during socialism* seems indeed dangerous for some feminist scholars, since it challenges their engrained representation of state socialism as inherently totalitarian and patriarchal, as well as the liberal equation between feminism and women's autonomy from the state. [5] As other feminist scholars have shown, however, it is time to question pre-existing historical interpretations influenced by long-standing Cold War paradigms, which risk reducing women to the mere victims of state socialism, without understanding their actual political contribution in such complex and dangerous times. [6]

To silence the legacy of women's participation to the antifascist Resistance, and their engagements in socialist times, would mean to undermine the struggles against patriarchy that were waged through state socialist women's organisations, as well as the progressive legacy of such struggles in the contemporary post-Yugoslav space. As Lydia Sklevicky wrote in her pioneering study of the Antifascist Women's Front, "Listening today to the voices of women from the past, one sees not only the mistaken choices which should not to be repeated, but also the unspent reserves of utopian energy." And then she added, quoting Walter Benjamin's Fifth thesis on the concept of history, 'For it is an irretrievable picture of the past, which threatens to disappear with every present, which does not recognize itself as meant in it'. [7]

In the contemporary post-Yugoslav space, young activist women recognize themselves in antifascist women's struggles for women's rights and emancipation, particularly now that many of the social and economic rights gained during socialist times have been deteriorating due to the Yugoslav wars and the post-socialist privatization process, which led to widespread deindustrialisation and unemployment. [8]

In 2010, for instance, architect and curator Ana Džokić revisited the story of her grandparents, Rajka and Vukašin Borojević, two former partisans and social entrepreneurs who founded a juice factory in Banja Luka, as well as a cooperative of women weavers in the village of Donji Dubac. The project was significantly titled *Taking Common Matters into Your Own Hands*, as an homage to the socialist legacy of collective solidarity and workers' self-management. [9]

The figure of Rajka Borojević is exemplary of the idealist spirit carried by partisan women well into the Cold War. A teacher and partisan from Herzegovina, she took shelter with her two children in rural Serbia during the war and felt indebted to the

local peasant population. She moved to the village in the early 1950s and started her first workshops with peasant women in 1954, teaching basic hygiene, nutrition, housekeeping and sex education, and overcoming many difficulties, including the mistrust of male villagers. [10] Later, she founded the Dragačevo weavers' cooperative, which employed 420 women in the early 1960s. Women's position in the village gradually improved, and in 1967, the newly founded House of Culture even hosted the finals of the 'best husband' competition. The building itself had been funded with self-organised 'best husband' parties in the surrounding villages. [11]

Young activists, archivists and scholars are putting renewed efforts in preserving the dangerous legacy of partisan women across the former Yugoslavia. The legacy of workers' self-management, inter-ethnic solidarity and women's struggles for emancipation has been taken up as a form of counter-memory by local activists in different post-Yugoslav states, against new hegemonic national narratives centered on ethnic homogeneity and based on the rehabilitation of anti-communist collaborationist forces. Such counter-memories are also serving as a repertoire against the post-socialist retraditionalisation of gender relations and workers' gradual loss of social rights. [12]

The reaffirmation of antifascist values happens through archiving, exhibitions and activist initiatives. Two recent examples of such efforts are the digitalisation of the existing archive of the Antifascist Women's Front located in Sarajevo by a collective of women artists, [13] and an exhibition on the AFŽ recently organized in Banja Luka, which featured former partisan Branka Bjelajac as a guest. [14]

Another example is the Zagreb Antifascist Network (Mreža antifašistkinja Zagreb, MAZ) founded in 2007, which organises antifascist parties, commemorations and solidarity marches. [15] The subversive legacy of workers' solidarity, women's struggles and antifascism is also revived by a number of antifascist, feminist and queer choirs across the region, such as Kombinat in Slovenia, Horkestar in Serbia, Le Zbor and Zbor Praksa in Croatia. [16]

Such choirs have been performing different local partisan songs, together with other international protest songs (The Internationale, Bella Ciao, Bread and Roses), as a way of protest against current neo-liberal and neo-conservative politics, for instance in support of workers of bankrupted factories, or as part of pride marches for LGBT rights.

The 'unspent reserves of utopian energy' contained in the antifascist heritage are thus re-appropriated and re-signified, in multiple dangerous ways, by the nieces and nephews of *partizanke*, seventy years after the end of World War II.

Notes

1. Barbara Jancar-Webster. *Women & Revolution in Yugoslavia, 1941-1945* (Denver: Arden Press, 1990) ↩
2. Jelena Batinić. *Women and Yugoslav Partisans: A History of World War II Resistance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015) ↩
3. Chiara Bonfiglioli, 'Women's Political and Social Activism in the Early Cold War Era: The Case of Yugoslavia', *Aspasia, The International Yearbook of Central, Eastern, and Southeastern European Women's and Gender History*, 8 (2014): 1-25. ↩
4. Renata Jambrešić-Kirin, 'Yugoslav Women Intellectuals: From a Party Cell to a Prison Cell', *History of Communism in Europe* 5 (2014): 36-53. ↩
5. Nanette Funk, 'A very tangled knot: Official state socialist women's organizations, women's agency and feminism in Eastern European state socialism', *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 21, no. 4 (2014): 344-360. ↩
6. On this discussion, see the two Forums published on the journal *Aspasia, The International Yearbook of Central, Eastern, and Southeastern European Women's and Gender History*: Is 'Communist Feminism' a Contradictio in Terminis? 1 (2007); Ten Years After: Communism and Feminism Revisited, 10 (forthcoming 2016). ↩
7. Lydia Sklevicky, *Konji, Žene, Ratovi* (Zagreb: Ženska Infoteka, 1996), 69. ↩
8. Igor Štiks and Srećko Horvat (eds.), *Welcome to the Desert of Post-Socialism: Radical Politics After Yugoslavia* (London: Verso, 2014). ↩
9. See the documentation of the STEALTH research archive (last accessed 18.3.2016). ↩
10. Rajka Borojević, *Iz Dubca u svet* (Beograd: Etnografski muzej, 2006), first edition 1964. See also Natalja Herbst, 'Women in Socialist Yugoslavia in the 1950s. The Example of Rajka Borojević and the Dragačevo Women's Cooperative', in Roswita Kersten-Pejanić, Simone Rajilić, and Christian Voß, (eds.), *Doing Gender-Doing the Balkans* (München, Berlin, Washington D.C.: Verlag Otto Sagner, 2012) ↩
11. STEALTH documentation. ↩
12. Chiara Bonfiglioli, 'Gender, labour and precarity in the South East European periphery: the case of textile workers in Štip', *Contemporary Southeastern Europe*, 1 no. 2 (2014): 7-23. ↩
13. Link. ↩
14. "Uspostavljanje izgubljenje veze: AFŽ u Bosanskoj krajini", Narodna i Univerzitetska Biblioteka Republike Srpske, Banja Luka, Bosnia Herzegovina. ↩
15. Link. ↩
16. Ana Hofman, *Glasba, politika, afekt. Novo življenje partizanskih pesmi v Sloveniji* (Ljubljana: Založba ZRC, 2015) ↩