



WER IST WALTER?

International Perspectives on
Resistance in Europe during
World War II

Edited by

Elma Hašimbegović, Nicolas Moll and Ivo Pejaković

Berty Albrecht and Her Role in the French Resistance: An Exceptional Case?

Robert Belot

By decree of 26 August 1943, Berty Albrecht was made a posthumous “Companion of the Liberation”, the highest honour in the system established by Charles de Gaulle in 1940 to reward individuals and groups for their role in liberating France. Albrecht was acknowledged as “a Frenchwoman of exceptional courage and unrivalled patriotic faith. She ceaselessly supported and inspired the Resistance movement from 1940 onwards, willingly sacrificing her position and her family to her ideal. [...] She has acquired an enduring right to the recognition of the nation through the example she set and the services she rendered.”¹

This early recognition seems to contradict the all-too-common belief that women were not acknowledged in the accepted narrative of the French Resistance. At the same time, of the 1.038 individuals who received this exceptional honour between 1941 and 1946, only six were women, a very small number given the role that women *de facto* played in the Resistance. This highlights the fact that in public representations resistance and heroism were initially – and for a long time – mainly associated with masculinity and armed combat, focusing less on other dimensions. However, there have also been early efforts to paint another picture. One illustration is a book written by Élisabeth Terrenoire, a member of the Resistance who had survived deportation, published in 1946 with the title *Les femmes dans la Résistance. Combattantes sans uniforme* (The women in the Resistance. Fighters without uniforms).² In this book, for example, Terrenoire asserts that “originally, the Resistance was spontaneous, instinctive, individual”

1 “Décision d’attribuer la Croix de la Libération à titre posthume”, Algiers, 26 August 1943, signed by Charles de Gaulle. (Copy of the document in possession of the author, given by Mireille Albrecht).

2 Élisabeth Terrenoire, *Les femmes dans la Résistance. Combattantes sans uniforme* (Paris: Bloud et Gay, 1946).

and that “initially, it is likely that more women were involved than men”. Berty Albrecht was also among the described women figures.

Who was Berty Albrecht? In short, she was the co-founder of and a key figure in one of the most important French resistance movements, known as *Combat* (Fight). Her engagement ended dramatically; on 30 May 1943, after being arrested and tortured by the Gestapo, she took her own life in her prison cell in order not to speak to her persecutors. This text aims to explain Berty Albrecht’s journey in the French resistance, by connecting it with her pre-war life. Indeed, we can see a continuity between her choices in the 1920s and 1930s, when she stood up for feminist, social and international causes, and her resistance against the occupation of France by Nazi Germany and the collaborating Vichy regime during World War II. In all this, she was led by her conviction that it was possible to improve humanity and her belief that Europe could one day be united and peaceful. I will also talk about the evolution of Berty Albrecht’s place in France’s collective memory, from her death until today, since this is key to understanding her historical significance and is also indicative of how women in general have been acknowledged in history. To conclude, I will discuss whether Berty Albrecht’s story can be seen as typical or exceptional regarding the role of women in the resistance in France.

Engagements and encounters in the inter-war period

Berty Albrecht’s life in the interwar period is marked by her embrace of feminist and social causes and illustrates her will to make her own choices, emancipating herself from the traditional role French society attributed to women. Her first encounter with Henri Frenay, which would prove to be of particular importance for both of them as individuals and to their journeys towards and within the resistance, also happened in this time.

London and Paris: A commitment for the feminist struggle

Berty Albrecht was born into a wealthy Protestant family in Marseille in 1893. Her parents refused to allow her to follow a musical career, so she chose to be a nurse in an early illustration of her concern for others. Social pressures led her to agree to an engagement to a German-born Dutch

businessman in London in 1914. However, as soon as war commenced, she returned to Marseille, where she worked in a hospital. She witnessed the horrific effects of war on soldiers' wounded bodies. Letters to her fiancé that we have only recently discovered reveal how her attitude changed, from bellicose anti-German patriotism to pacifism. In one letter she wrote, "this morning I saw several hundred German prisoners [...]. The wounded are a very sorrowful bunch, without legs, lame, bandaged, crippled. They are a sorry sight." She spoke of "this ignoble war".³

After her marriage in Rotterdam in 1918, Albrecht gave birth to two children, Frederic and Mireille, before the couple settled in London in 1924. But the bourgeois way of life, in which women focused on household tasks, did not suit her. Albrecht discovered the work of English feminists and made the acquaintance of Sylvia Pankhurst, a member of the Workers' Socialist Federation. She joined figures from the "birth control" movement alongside Norman Haire, the famous sociologist and author of *The Encyclopaedia of Sexual Knowledge*.

Seeking to distance herself from her husband, she returned to France in 1931. She joined the ranks of French feminists and became acquainted with the left-wing Parisian intellectuals who gravitated to the Human Rights League. She knew its president, Victor Basch, an aesthetics professor at the Sorbonne, well. She was also a friend of Gabrielle Duchêne, a feminist figure even before 1914, a pacifist during the Great War, and president of the World Committee of Women against War and Fascism, which was formed in 1934. Albrecht was a feminist and became a member of the Executive Committee of the "World League for Sexual Reform". In November 1933, she and Paul Langevin, a leading physician, created a journal, *Le Problème sexuel* (The sexual problem). Although very short-lived due to a lack of funds, it was intended for "free spirits, those enamoured with truth, seeking to make mankind less unhappy and create a better humanity".⁴ The first issue hailed the law proposed by the French Communist Party (*Parti Communiste Français* – PCF) demanding social maternity protection, the introduction of sexual education, contraceptive freedom and the right to abortion. As a member of the Secretariat of the Association for Sexology Studies, she spoke at the World League for Sexual Reform conference held in Brno (then-Czechoslovakia)

3 Marseille History Museum/Musée d'histoire de Marseille, Berty Albrecht Collection.

4 *Le Problème sexuel. Morale. Eugénique. Hygiène. Législation, Revue trimestrielle*, no. 5, (November 1933).

in 1932. In 1934, she travelled to the USSR to learn more about Soviet family policy, which appears to have appealed to her.

Working to improve social conditions

In 1936, under the Popular Front regime, Albrecht decided to focus on improving social conditions by helping women in their everyday lives. Despite her age (43), she trained at the School of Factory Superintendents (*École des surintendantes d'usine*), run by a priest's daughter named Jeanne Sivadon. The school would become the nucleus of the developing *Combat* movement in Northern France at the beginning of the Nazi occupation. According to her close friend Henri Frenay, "she worked in a factory in the years before the war and it is with great emotion that I recall the dedication of this magnificent woman to the workers' cause, her profound generosity and her unshakeable energy, the most sensational proof of which she would soon go on to demonstrate".⁵

Albrecht discovered the concept of automated workflow when she was training as a worker in the handling department of Galeries Lafayette. She wrote a lengthy report to reveal the "truth" about the life of women in this "great machine". The report ended thus: "Although a few criticisms can be made here and there, the individuals concerned are in no way the target. Indeed, this is not a matter of individuals but rather a system, and I would consider it fundamentally wrong to say anything other than what I believe to be the truth."⁶

She would go on to work in various factories after war was declared in September 1939. War struck France in spring 1940. France's defeat was followed by the German occupation of Northern France and the establishment of the Vichy regime. First, she joined the Barbier, Benard and Turenne factory (producing optical instruments for the navy) where she created a department for social conditions. In November 1939, she was transferred to factories for arms and cycles in Saint-Étienne, where she fought to make hot soup and safety goggles compulsory for workers. Between April 1940 and January 1941, she worked at the Fulmen factories in Clichy, which

5 Henri Frenay, "Vie et mort d'une Française", *Combat*, 28 August 1943, Algiers.

6 Berty Albrecht, "Rapport de stage effectué au service Manutention des Galeries Lafayette", Paris, 1937, reproduced in Annie Fourcaut, *Femmes à l'usine en France dans l'entre-deux-guerres* (Paris: Maspero, 1982), 221-248.

produced batteries. In 1940, the factory withdrew to Vierzon, situated on the demarcation line between the German occupied Northern part of France and the so-called “free zone” in the South. There, she took escaped prisoners across the demarcation line, which can be considered as her first concrete resistance activity after the occupation.

Without sufficient resources and needing to provide for her children in the absence of her husband, who remained in England, she took a post at the Unemployment Prevention Commission created by the Vichy regime but led by a humanist, Henri Maux. Its headquarters were in Villeurbanne, near Lyon, and her task was encouraging unemployed women to work. She hired women who were involved in the Resistance, including Yvette Baumann, a factory superintendent, who would be arrested and deported in 1944. The movement that would become *Combat* began in this Vichy institution.

The partnership with Henri Frenay

In 1935, Berty Albrecht met Henri Frenay (1905-1988), a young officer, for the first time.⁷ They became partners, both romantically and later in the Resistance. They formed an unlikely duo, first because their partnership transgressed social conventions: She was married and 12 years older than him; furthermore, she was Protestant while he was Catholic, a distinction that was still very relevant in France at this time. Furthermore, they incarnated very different ideological universes: She clearly situated herself on the left while he was part of a conservative-military milieu.

In November 1935, Henri Frenay began his studies at the prestigious *École de guerre* (War College) in Paris. He saw Albrecht every day. She introduced him to a world that was very different from his familiar environment of provincial lower middle-class officers. Frenay later recounted these initial encounters: “In Berty’s sitting room, I met people who were like an alien species to me: left-wing and far left free thinkers and freemasons who introduced me to political and psychological moral possibilities that were entirely different to those I had known thus far. My life would have been very different if I had not met her.”⁸

This partnership brought Frenay in conflict with his education, his past, and his milieu. His choice can indeed be seen as a first affirmation of his

7 On Frenay see Robert Belot, *Henri Frenay, de la Résistance à l'Europe* (Paris: Seuil, 2003).

8 Henri Frenay, *La nuit finira: Mémoires de résistance 1940-1945* (Paris: R.Laffont, 1973), 44.

will for freedom, which would manifest during the war. The partnership that developed between Berty Albrecht and Henri Frenay was very close and complementary. One unifying feature was their non-conformism and that both were at odds with their family environment's dominant values. For them, resistance was already a reality, a state of mind. It was an ability to refuse to submit to what is and an acceptance of risk-taking.

Against a Nazi/Fascist Europe

Welcoming anti-fascist refugees

Berty Albrecht combined her feminist commitment with support for a humanitarian and ideological cause. Many people forced into exile from anti-democratic Europe – the anti-Nazis, anti-fascists and anti-Francoists – had become refugees in France. Albrecht decided to act on a new front and to help those fleeing Nazi Germany. Intellectuals, in particular, found themselves on the Côte d'Azur in the village of Sanary-sur-Mer, which had become the “capital of exiled German literature”. As she had a villa on the Mediterranean coast, she established a support network in the region. In Paris, Albrecht and Madeleine Braun created a Welcome Committee for anti-fascist refugees. Albrecht spoke Goethe's language fluently and welcomed the emigrants in her apartment, enabling young officer Frenay to meet key anti-Nazi figures exiled from Germany. These included the Communist novelist Gustav Regler who later left to fight Franco in Spain, the chair of the Association of Exiled German Writers, Rudolf Leonhard, who would later fight in the French Resistance, the novelist Anna Seghers and the psychologist Magnus Hirschfeld. Carl Heil, who came for lunch at her home twice a week and who taught German to her daughter and son, was also among her regular guests.⁹ Heil, a teacher and theatre actor, participated in the “battle of airwaves”, as a German speaker for French radio from 1937 to 1939 to combat the influence of Nazi propaganda in France.¹⁰

For Berty Albrecht and Henri Frenay, these Germans' fates became concrete proof of the danger of Hitler's regime. They learned to distinguish

9 Mireille Albrecht, *Berty. La grande figure de la Résistance* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1986), 86. She writes his first name incorrectly as “Karl”.

10 Éveline Brès and Yvan Brès, *Carl Heil, speaker contre Hitler* (Paris: Les Éditions de Paris, 1994).

between ordinary Germans and the Nazi regime. Germans had been its first victims. Little by little, the idea grew that the cycle of endless wars could only end with European unity. After Frenay had obtained his diploma from the École de guerre, Albrecht encouraged him to study at the prestigious Strasbourg Centre for German Studies. Between 1936 and 1937, highly qualified academics such as René Capitant¹¹ revealed the reality of Nazism to him.¹² “I have read the original text of *Mein Kampf* and Rosenberg’s *Myth of the 20th Century*. I know what the cult of race and blood, the supremacy of Aryans over races of slaves, means.”¹³ Frenay learned and shared the “exact nature and importance of the danger hovering above Europe” with Albrecht, as well as how to “distinguish between Germany, where most of our professors studied and then taught, and its dreadful caricature created by Nazism.”¹⁴ This led Frenay to affirm: “I am not fighting the German people, but a diabolical ideology.”¹⁵

Even before the German occupation of France both of them were already “resisting” Nazi ideology. The stakes were not purely national. They concerned civilisation more broadly, not simply Germany and France.

When Mussolini’s Italy invaded Ethiopia in October 1935, Albrecht helped create an Aid for Ethiopia Committee to raise money and organise public meetings on this subject. When Spain subsequently fell into civil war, a victim of the same fascist wave, Albrecht was a member of the International Committee of Coordination and Information for Assistance to Republican Spain. She became also involved in the Anti-Fascist Intellectual Vigilance Committee and the Peace and Democracy movement in 1937, created by their friend, Jean Baby. Finally, Albrecht was active in the Women’s World Committee Against War and Fascism.

11 René Capitant, *Face au nazisme. Écrits 1933-1938*, ed. Olivier Beaud (Strasbourg: Presses Universitaires de Strasbourg, 2004).

12 Robert Belot, *Observer l’Allemagne hitlérienne à travers ses minorités à l’étranger. Henri Frenay au Centre d’études germaniques de Strasbourg (1937-1938)* (Lyon: Presse Fédéraliste, 2022).

13 Frenay, *La nuit finira*, 27.

14 Henri Frenay, “Hommage au Centre” (Association des anciens du Centre d’études germaniques, January 1972).

15 Testimony by Henri Frenay, in Claude Jamet, *Le rendez-vous manqué de 1944* (Paris: éditions France-Empire, 1964), 234.

In resistance, she co-founded the Combat movement and became “Victoria”

Initially after France’s military defeat in June 1940, resistance activities were very scarce against the German occupier and also the new Vichy regime, which then engaged increasingly in open oppression and collaboration with Nazi Germany. One of the factors that accelerated the development of resistance in France was Germany’s attack on the USSR on 22 June 1941. This ended the German-Soviet Pact from August 1939, which had paralysed parts of the political left. Albrecht and Frenay were sitting at the terrace of a café in Paris that day. She told her friend:

Hitler will never defeat the Red Army. It’s over for him now. It might take one, two, three or even ten years... I don’t know... but he will be beaten. I know the USSR. I’ve spent time there. That country can’t be beaten, those admirable people... But you know, Henri, I am also just so, so happy for all those Communists you met at my home [...]. For them, for the whole party, it’s all becoming clear now. They’re coming back to us!¹⁶

Berty Albrecht and Henri Frenay had not waited until that day to engage in resistance. The *Combat* movement, which became known in 1942 under the name of its newspaper, *Combat*, actually started in late 1940. Both Albrecht and Frenay began activities to counter official information and propaganda, through “bulletins” they wrote together to reveal to the French public what the press could not say because of censorship. A dozen copies were inserted into magazines (for example *Marie-Claire*) and delivered discreetly to like-minded persons who in turn produced further copies and circulated them. In this very first period, Frenay worked for several months at the Intelligence Bureau of the general staff in Vichy. He left the position in February 1941. After the establishment of the Vichy regime, Frenay had first thought that the new head of state, Philippe Pétain, would oppose Germany, but then lost his faith in him when Pétain engaged in open collaboration from late 1940. Frenay used his good contacts in Vichy military circles to gather information and to look for potential support. Berty Albrecht, on

¹⁶ Frenay, *La nuit finira*, 100.

her side, used her wide network of pre-war contacts to distribute the bulletins and to look for people who would join them in their fight.

Little by little, this initial cell around Frenay and Albrecht grew and became organised, under the name of the National Liberation Movement (*Mouvement de Libération Nationale*). In May 1941, the initial “bulletin” became a newspaper, first with the title *Les Petites Ailes de France* (The little wings of France), then *Verités* (Truths), and from December 1941 under the name of *Combat*, with a print run of tens of thousands of copies. In 1941/2, the *Combat* movement became a clearly structured organisation, divided into three main sections: political, military and what was known as the “general services” department for which Albrecht was responsible. This department covered false documents, social conditions, accommodation, contacts and finances. These services were key for organising the work of the movement, whose members often lived underground with false identities and under very difficult circumstances. One of her original contributions was a social service she created in 1942 after the first members of *Combat* had been arrested. Its task was helping the families of those who had been imprisoned. It also directly helped the interned by facilitating their escape, thanks to relations established between social assistants and some prison personnel. Albrecht was also crucial for developing contacts and enlarging the basis of *Combat*. Her friendship with Jeanne Sivadon, the director of the *École des surintendantes d’usine* in Paris where she had studied before the war, was particularly important. The school became the centre of *Combat* in the Northern zone of France. Also thanks to Albrecht, a printing company was founded in Lyon-Villeurbanne in June 1941 in order to clandestinely print the movement’s newspaper.

Furthermore, Albrecht replaced Frenay as head of *Combat* during his absences. Her role can also be seen in the establishment of the movement’s “doctrine”. I found evidence of her writing in one of the first manifestos I discovered, from November 1941, proving that she played a part in its conception. The manifesto began thus: “Liberating the country from the enemy is good, but it is not enough”. Conditions needed to be created to “establish a politically, economically and spiritually united Europe, a step towards world unity”. They sought to eradicate from Europe “the myth of the superiority of one race, a negation of human dignity [...] [and] mortal enemy of our humanist and Christian civilisation”. However, they also sought to reduce inequalities. She wanted to incorporate a social dimension into the

manifesto: “The same inequalities essentially separate our country into two groups: the exploiters and the exploited. While the first only have rights, the second only have duties. The same causes have resulted in the same effects: internationally, war; within France, the class struggle.”¹⁷

Frenay later acknowledged Albrecht’s importance in the development of their resistance group: “It was mainly thanks to her dedication and courage that the Movement grew at a time when everything seemed lost, when only a few crazy, reckless people were continuing the hopeless fight.”¹⁸ Claude Bourdet, a member of the Resistance and a close friend of Frenay, confirmed her importance for Frenay personally: “Above all, his close friend Bertie Albrecht contributed to enlightening him politically, eliminating his class prejudices and opening his eyes to the left, to socialism and communism. Having joined him in Lyon at the end of 1940, she continued to expand his horizons and became the movement’s second kingpin.”¹⁹

Death at journey’s end

Berty Albrecht was aware that fighting both the Vichy regime and the occupier exposed her and her friends to the worst, yet she was ready to do whatever it took for her cause. In January 1942, she was arrested following a denunciation, along with other members of *Combat*. Frenay ensured her release, but a judicial procedure was initiated. She was arrested for the second time in May 1942 and confined in Vals-les-Bains where she was the only woman among 22 detainees and 30 gendarmes. Her daughter was worried about what would happen to her, but Albrecht replied stoically, having read La Fayette’s memoirs: “These small problems must be borne philosophically. One must be able to accept anything for the great Ideal being served. For those who have failed in neither their duty nor their honour, imprisonment is just a nuisance, like breaking a leg. The most important thing is to be able to hold one’s head up high before everyone.”²⁰

17 Preamble of the *Mouvement de Libération Française*, November 1941, private fonds of Mireille Albrecht.

18 Henri Frenay, “Vie et mort d’une Française”, *Combat*, 28 August 1943, Algiers.

19 Claude Bourdet, *L’aventure incertaine* (Paris: Stock, 1975), 67.

20 Letter from Berty Albrecht to Mireille Albrecht reprinted in *Berthie Albrecht. Une maman de 2 enfants, une courageuse française* (Paris: Éditions de l’Union des Femmes Françaises, coll. “Héroïnes d’hier et d’aujourd’hui”, 1949), 15.

Such an ideal can require taking maximum risks. As she wrote to Frenay, "... as for me, I have decided to see it through to the end. In losing life, I would gain a peace that seems indescribable... This time, my life is in the hands of God."²¹

During her imprisonment, she began a hunger strike in which she lost 12 kg, resulting in a hospital stay and then a transfer to Saint-Joseph Prison in Lyon. On 30 October 1942, she learned that she had been sentenced to six months in prison. The charges were: "distribution of foreign-inspired tracts; publication of information or statements likely to exert an unfortunate influence on the minds of the French army or population; membership of a clandestine organisation whose aims and means of action are clearly subversive"²² She decided to escape and pretended to be insane, leading to her transfer to the Vinatier psychiatric hospital, which was not guarded like a prison. On 23 December 1942, a commando unit of *Combat* organised her liberation.

She was not of a cautious nature and she decided to return to the fight. Frenay thought that for her safety, it would be best for her to go to London, but she did not agree. Her husband also tried to dissuade her from continuing her dangerous activities. She replied to him on 15 May 1943: "Life is of little value, dying is nothing serious. The most important thing is to live honourably and in line with the ideal one has chosen."²³

Since she had been tried and had escaped, Berty Albrecht could not lead a double life anymore. She lived a fully clandestine life under the pseudonym Victoria. But she was arrested again on 28 May 1943 in Mâcon, near the place in which she was secretly living with Frenay, and again following a denunciation. She was transferred to Montluc Fort in Lyon and then to the Fresnes Prison near Paris. We do not have much information about her final moments. On 31 May 1943, the Germans informed the Mâcon Préfecture and the Dutch Ambassador in London (the Netherlands being her husband's country of birth) of the death of Berty Albrecht, without any specifications. Her body was buried in the prison cemetery where it was found and exhumed in May 1945. Soon after her death, different speculations circulated about her death, mainly that she had been executed by the

21 Cited by Mireille Albrecht, *Berty*, 226.

22 Extrait des minutes du Greffe du Tribunal de Première instance de Lyon, département du Rhône. 30 October 1942. Jugement Ministère Public C/ FRENAY et autres. (Copy of the document in possession of the author). The arrest warrant for Berty Albrecht is dated for 27 June 1942.

23 Quoted by Annie Fourcaut, "Berty Albrecht", in *Femmes extraordinaires*, eds. Christine de Pisan and Elisa Lemonnier (Paris, éditions de la Courtille, 1979), 246.

Germans, by gunfire or by axe. After the exhumation in May 1945, Frenay ordered an autopsy which revealed an injury at her neck: this led to the belief that she had committed suicide by hanging, an assumption which was later confirmed by a German report. The assumption that she took her own life is also faithful to her constant desire to be in control of her own destiny and not simply to endure.

How Berty Albrecht's fate came to be included in French collective memory

In the public memory in France, Berty Albrecht has become one of the major symbols of women's contribution to the French resistance. Very early on, her memory became institutionalised by governmental structures, though the French Communist Party also tried to appropriate her name. In later decades, her feminist commitment from the prewar period also received more attention.

Early recognition within the institutional martyrology of the Resistance

Already during the war, Berty Albrecht was celebrated as a heroine and a martyr of the Resistance. As mentioned at the beginning of this article, a few months after her death, in August 1943, she was made a posthumous "Companion of the Liberation" by de Gaulle, becoming one of the very rare women to receive this honour. At the same time, Frenay wrote a vibrant tribute to her, which was published on the front page of *Combat* under the title "Vie et mort d'une française" (Life and death of a Frenchwoman), and the subtitle "Madame Albrecht".²⁴ Beyond being nominated for the "Companion of the Liberation" order, she also received other prestigious awards posthumously: the *Médaille Militaire*, the *Croix de Guerre avec palme*, and the *Médaille de la Résistance*. Shortly after the end of the war, memory of Albrecht also became institutionalised through commemorative rituals. Her public recognition was mainly due to Frenay and his influential role in the French Resistance, which also led him to join General de Gaulle's

24 *Combat*, 28 August 1943, Algiers.

Government at a very young age, serving as his Minister for Prisoners, the Deported and Refugees in 1944-1945. On 12 May 1945, Frenay requested that the second anniversary of Albrecht's death be marked with a ceremony in "every region, every *département*, every area". He specified that "speeches to mark the occasion should extol the memory of all the women in our movement who gave their lives for their country".²⁵

Some months later, de Gaulle asked Frenay to organise the events to be held on 11 November 1945 commemorating the "victory" of 1918 and honouring the memory of the heroes who died under the Occupation. Frenay proposed establishing a place of remembrance at Mont-Valérien near Paris "in honour of the French men and women of mainland France and the overseas territories who died for France during the recent war". The German army had executed many members of the Resistance and hostages – approximately one thousand – in the fortress of Mont-Valérien. The ceremony took place over the course of three days. On 10 November, 15 bodies that had been chosen to be laid to rest in the Mont-Valérien vault were transferred to Les Invalides. They included two women: Berty Albrecht and Renée Lévy, a Jewish French teacher who had been deported and guillotined in 1943 in Cologne for her acts of resistance. All 15 people had been chosen to represent different parts of society and of the resistance, as part of an effort to reconcile France with itself.

The following day, the coffins were taken to Place de l'Étoile, where de Gaulle, as head of the government, gave a short speech paying tribute to those who had died for France whether "they fell in the light or in the shadows" and who "recall our pain but also our victory".²⁶ After cannon fire and the sounding of the *sonnerie aux morts* bugle call, the bells of Notre Dame and all the churches of France rang out. Henri Frenay thought of his comrades killed in action, but also of Berty: "It was indeed for France to live that you fell on our path – you, Berty, whose coffin is here in front of me; you, the tortured of Cologne; and you, Jacques Renouvin, Marcel Peck, Jean-Guy Bernard and Claudius Billon. All of you from *Combat*, friends known and unknown... And here we are, we, the survivors, who have made it to the final destination we had set ourselves."²⁷

25 Henri Frenay, "Célébrons la mémoire de nos morts", *MLN. Bulletin intérieur du Mouvement de libération nationale* 12 May 1945.

26 Quoted in Frenay, *La nuit finira*, 557.

27 *Ibid.*

The first book to pay homage to Berty Albrecht was published in 1945 in Switzerland: *Le Sacrifice du matin* (The morning's sacrifice), a wonderful volume of memories written by Guillaïn de Bénouville, one of Frenay's closest friends during the Resistance. He provided us with a compelling character study of Albrecht:

She had been suffocating inside the overly narrow circle of a claustrophobic world. She was a prisoner of material assets, all with a specific name marking out the space reserved to those believed to be the favoured ones. She wanted something else, something more than human happiness, something she could not name but that required the transformation of everything around her that revolted her and that seemed unbearable – beginning with the poverty and destitution of the men over whom injustice reigned.²⁸

In 1947, the Ministry for Youth, Arts and Literature produced a small pamphlet in homage to the “heroes of the Resistance”. It began with Berty Albrecht, who was hailed as “the great Frenchwoman”, “the patriot”, “the heroine”.²⁹

Communist glorification and exploitation

Berty Albrecht quickly became a figure of legend, even beyond official government structures. Her death was immediately perceived as a scandal. The poet Louis Aragon, for example, wrote in *Le crime contre l'esprit* (The crime against spirit), his underground pamphlet published in autumn 1943: “They will ask in astonishment what could have caused this distinguished and intelligent woman to become a victim of the executioner, a first martyr of the axe, as if that barbaric instrument sought to make her a symbol of our culture that it wanted to behead.”³⁰ It was therefore Aragon who played a role in spreading the myth that Albrecht had been executed with an axe, when it was still not clear that she had committed suicide.

28 Guillaïn de Bénouville, *Le Sacrifice du matin* (Geneva: La Palatine, 1945), 408.

29 “Heros de la Resistance”, *La Documentation française illustrée*, no. 5, (february-march 1947).

30 Louis Aragon, *Le crime contre l'esprit (les martyrs) publié pendant l'illégalité par le témoin des martyrs* (Paris: Comité national des écrivains, 1944), 3.

Aragon was a member of the PCF and it is indeed in communist circles that we can also see efforts during and after the war to promote the memory of Berty Albrecht. An important role was played by the Union of French Women (*Union des femmes françaises* – UFF), which gathered several French Resistance women’s committees that had developed since 1941 with the support of the PCF and that published underground newspapers, especially *Femmes françaises* since January 1944. Already in the first issue, before the war had ended, the newspaper referred to Berty Albrecht: “May her name remain in your memories. Let us remember her example, like that of all our martyrs. On dark days and in times of anxiety, let them give us the courage to be worthy of them.”³¹

After UFF was established as an official association in November 1944, its first congress was held in June 1945 in Paris. It paid tribute to three women who had paid their commitment to the Resistance with their lives: Danielle Casanova, Berty Albrecht and Suzanne Buisson.³² Four years later, the UFF published pamphlets as part of a project called to celebrate “Heroines of Yesterday and Today”. One issue concentrated on Berty Albrecht. The front cover focused on her motherhood as well as on her courage: “A mother of two, a courageous Frenchwoman.” The cover also included the following information, to emphasise her role as a martyr: “Beheaded by axe on 9 June 1943.” The brochure’s content was well-researched. It included a letter Berty sent to the secretary general of the French police (René Bousquet) on 19 June 1942 explaining why she was going on hunger strike while being imprisoned. Mireille Elbaz-Albrecht, Berty Albrecht’s daughter, had given this letter to the UFF so that it could be included in the commemorative book to be given to Joseph Stalin for his 70th birthday in December 1948.³³

It is clear that the PCF sought to annex Berty Albrecht’s legacy even though she had never claimed to be a communist herself, despite having communist friends. The political context is important in this respect. The PCF had set itself against Frenay, who had engaged in politics after the war as a humanist socialist and European federalist. It moreover sought to present itself as the party that had done the most for the Resistance cause, declaring (wrongly) that “75.000 of its members had been shot”. Like this, it

31 *Femmes françaises*, no. 1 (January 1944).

32 Danielle Casanova was a communist resistant who was deported to Auschwitz in 1943, where she died of typhus. Suzanne Buisson was a socialist resistant and was murdered in Auschwitz in 1944.

33 *Berthie Albrecht. Une maman de 2 enfants* (see footnote 20 above).

wanted to appropriate the martyrology of patriotic sacrifice, to conceal its organic ties with the USSR and position itself as a legitimate political force. In this context, it was a purportedly Soviet-supporting French patriot who was honoured. This attempt to “nationalise” the resistance struggle also explains why the Communist Daniele Casanova, who died during deportation, was compared to Joan of Arc.³⁴

The UFF described Berty Albrecht as follows: “Berthie (sic) Albrecht was good, intrepid and a courageous patriot.” The UFF’s narrative sought to show that, although she was from a “privileged” background, “she was sympathetic to the destitution of the lives of others and the injustice of the human condition. She wanted her need for action, her unused youthful strength and her knowledge to serve the disadvantaged.”³⁵

Emphasising the traditional female gender role when talking about Berty Albrecht aligned with the UFF’s general focus on promoting maternal values.³⁶ “A good wife and mother, and an unrivalled mistress of the house”, she and her husband (his profession as a banker is not mentioned and he is presented as a “parasite”) played their part in society life in London. However, this did not quell “the impetuous and passionately generous woman” within her. She therefore left London for Paris to “improve the lives of others”, first and foremost the situation of women and children. According to this story, that is why she visited the Soviet Union. She returned “full of enthusiasm” and decided to focus on “the life of workers and their needs”, joining the School for Factory Superintendents. The Resistance period in this version of her story is incomprehensible because it is not made clear to which movement she committed or with whom. The reason for such obfuscation is that Frenay had been a sworn and public enemy of the Communists since 1944. An attempt to politically exploit Albrecht’s memory therefore laid behind this tribute of the UFF, which was close to the PCF.

34 See Dominique Loiseau, “L’Union des femmes françaises pendant les Trente Glorieuses: entre “maternalisme”, droit des femmes et communisme”, *Le Mouvement Social* 265, no. 4 (2018), 38.

35 *Berthie Albrecht. Une maman de 2 enfants*, 5-6.

36 Loiseau, “L’Union des femmes”; see also Dominique Loiseau, “Mères ou combattantes, les aléas de l’héroïsation”, in *Le panthéon des femmes, figures et représentations des héroïnes*, eds. Geneviève Dermenjian, Jacques Guilhaumou and Martine Lapied (Paris: Publisud, 2004), 185-198.

Since the 1980s: Emphasising Berty Albrecht's role as feminist besides the resistance

In the 1950s and 1960s, the memory of Berty Albrecht received less public attention. This changed again gradually in the following decades, during which several books were published about her.

A first step first was marked in 1973 by the publication of Henri Frenay's memoirs, *La Nuit finira*.³⁷ In this important book, he addressed his differences with Jean Moulin – an iconic figure in the French Resistance who had been de Gaulle's delegate to unify the resistance movements within France – but also told his story of Berty Albrecht, from before the war to the Resistance. He was not afraid of revealing how she influenced his life and awakened in him a new political awareness of the dangers of fascism and Nazism in Europe. Albrecht appears in this book in the role of Pygmalion to Frenay, hero of the Resistance and herald of a federal Europe.

Frenay also encouraged Berty Albrecht's daughter Mireille, who had lived through the drama of the resistance struggle as an adolescent, to write about her mother's experiences. She wrote a biography published by Frenay's publisher in 1986. It is a personal but well-researched account, revealing not only more of the story behind the heroine of the Resistance, but also her previous causes and particularly her feminist commitment. The book was republished in 2001 under the title: *Vivre au lieu d'exister: La vie exceptionnelle de Berty Albrecht, Compagnon de la Libération* (Living instead of existing: The exceptional life of Berty Albrecht, Companion of the Liberation).³⁸

Two years after that book's first publication, in 1988, François Mitterrand, the then-president of France, inaugurated a statue dedicated to Berty Albrecht in the new district of Bercy in Paris, opposite the new Finance Ministry. The statue by the artist Michèle Forgeois consists of a two-metre-tall oblong white marble flame and a lower part that includes small reliefs of Albrecht's face.³⁹ The statue was intended to increase the visibility of

37 An English translation was published some years later: Henri Frenay, *The Night Will End: Memoirs of the Resistance* (New York: Abelard-Schuman, 1976).

38 Mireille Albrecht, *Vivre au lieu d'exister: La vie exceptionnelle de Berty Albrecht, Compagnon de la Libération* (Monaco: Éditions du Rocher, 2001).

39 For photos of the statue, see: Rédaction, "Paris: Hommage à Berty Albrecht, une oeuvre de Michèle Forgeois, monument hommage à une militante féministe, à une grande résistante – XIIème", *Paris la Douce*, 8 October 2021, <https://www.parisladouce.com/2021/10/hommage-berty-albrecht.html>.

the women of the Resistance, who thus far had been poorly represented in the public arena.⁴⁰

The same year, on 15 March 1988, Mitterrand presented Frenay with the Grand Cross of the Legion of Honour in the courtyard of Les Invalides. This was the ultimate honour for Berty Albrecht's companion and a pioneer of the Resistance in France, who died a few months later. Mitterrand had always had a close relationship with Frenay, who had had underground connections with the family of his wife, Danielle Gouze; they had hidden Frenay and Albrecht in 1942. It was also not altogether displeasing to Mitterrand, the socialist president, that the Resistance might not be reduced to de Gaulle's contribution alone and to make clear that other people and groups also played a crucial role.

There are different reasons for the new attention received by Albrecht and more generally women in the Resistance from the 1970s on. One of them is the development of the feminist movement and stronger attention French society and political culture placed on equality between men and women. Another one lies in the evolution of historiography, which is itself connected to social sensibilities seeking to push back a kind of *résistancialisme* that focused on men bearing arms and military confrontation. Such a focus meant that it neglected civilian resistance such as demonstrations, strikes, propaganda activities or the rescue of Jews which had been less visible actions.⁴¹

All together, Berty Albrecht's role as a feminist has been brought more to the fore in the last decades. In 2005, the historian Dominique Missika published a biography on Berty Albrecht, which was republished in 2014, with the subtitle *Féministe et résistante* (Feminist and resistant).⁴² In Marseille, the city where she was born and grew up, different efforts were made to promote her memory, emphasising her role as a feminist beyond her role as resistant, and also foregrounding her local identity. A square overlooking the old port of Marseille, next to her family home, was inaugurated on 27

40 Catherine Lacour-Astol, "Résistantes et résistance féminine: une mémoire chaotique" in *Images des comportements sous l'Occupation: Mémoires, transmission, idées reçues*, eds. Jacqueline Sainclivier, Pierre Laborie and Jean-Marie Guillon (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2016); Michèle Cointet-Labrousse, "Gender ou politique: le déficit d'image des femmes de la Résistance", in *Images militantes, images de propagande*, ed. Christian Amalvi (Paris: éditions du CTHS, 2010), 305-313.

41 Jacques Semelin, *Sans armes face à Hitler. La résistance civile en Europe, 1939-1949* (Paris: Payot & Rivages, 1989-1998), 44-45.

42 Dominique Missika, *Berty Albrecht* (Paris: Perrin, 2005/2014)

September 1991. A marble plaque reads: “Berthie⁴³ Albrecht. Woman from Marseille (*Marseillaise*). 1893-1943. Companion of the Liberation. National Resistance Heroine. Co-founder of the *Combat* movement. Women’s rights activist.” Opposite is another plaque dedicated to Henri Frenay, who had been the head of the military garrison in the city during some months in 1940. Later on, a space in the Marseille History Museum was created for her, with different artefacts linked to her life in Marseille, her feminist commitment and her resistance activities. With the museum’s support, a new biography of Berty Albrecht was also published in 2022, written by the Marseille-based historian Robert Mencherini, involving new sources especially about the first decades of her life and her activities in the interwar period. The subtitle brings together her commitments before and during the war: “A feminist *in* the resistance”.⁴⁴

Mencherini’s book also includes an inventory of the plaques and monuments in France bearing the name of Berty Albrecht: There are over 80 of them, mainly in towns where she lived. One of the latest inaugurations of a street with her name occurred in Lyon in January 2006. Thanks to the efforts of Lily Eigeldinger, a member of the Resistance, the local authorities renamed *rue Alexis Carrel* (an extreme right-wing Vichy-supporting eugenics doctor) as *rue Berty Albrecht*.⁴⁵ Besides more traditional commemorative forms, Berty Albrecht has also inspired street artists such as C 215 (Christian Guémy) who painted a living and moving portrait of her in a street near the Pantheon, as part of his 2019 “Illustres” collection that aimed to give a face to famous names.⁴⁶ She has also become a character of graphic novels: The publishing house Casterman launched the “Femmes en Résistance” (*Women in resistance*) series in the 2010s. Of the four volumes in the series, one is dedicated to Berty Albrecht.⁴⁷

43 Her first name is written in two ways: Bertie and Berty. I have used Mireille’s preferred spelling, with whom I have had a number of conversations.

44 Robert Mencherini, *Berty Albrecht. De Marseille au Mont Valérien. Une féministe dans la Résistance* (Marseille: Gaussen, 2022). Emphasis in the title on “in” by me.

45 Robert Belot, “Géographie de la vie clandestine à Lyon du fondateur du mouvement Combat, Henri Frenay”, at Actes du colloque Les Compagnons de la Libération du Rhône, Préfecture de Lyon (Musée de l’Ordre de la Libération, 2019), 51. https://www.ordredelaliberation.fr/sites/default/files/media/fichers/Actes%20du%20Colloque%20de%20Lyon%20-%20DEF%281%29_0.pdf.

46 For more information see Ruby Comet, *Street Art Paris*, 26 August 2018, <https://streetart-paris.fr/documentary-illustres-c215-autour-pantheon-series-artworks-artist-christian-gue-my-street-art-paris>.

47 Benoît Cassel, *Femmes en Résistance. Berty Albrecht* (Bruxelles: Casterman, 2015). The other volumes are dedicated to Sophie Scholl, Amy Johnson and Mila Racine. For more information see: <https://www.casterman.com/Bande-dessinee/Catalogue/femmes-en-resistance-integrale/9782203224834>.

Conclusion

In the last decades, numerous historiographic studies have allowed us to get much deeper insights into the place and the role of women within the French resistance. There were not many resistance activities in 1940. However, among the first groups that developed in these early times, women often played crucial roles. Yet when the resistance movements became more institutionalised, especially from 1942 on, women were only rarely part of the highest deciding structures. Nevertheless, until the end of the war, they continued to fulfil numerous often less visible but crucial roles within the resistance.⁴⁸

Berty Albrecht largely reflects this reality. Similar to other women, she began to develop resistance activities early and was pivotal in creating and developing first resistance networks.⁴⁹ She was among the few women in leading roles; other examples were Lucie Aubrac, who co-founded the movement *Libération-Sud* and Geneviève de Gaulle, the niece of the General, who was member of the directing committee of another resistance group, *Défense de la France*.⁵⁰ More women were active in social and logistical functions, which were essential for the day-to-day life of the resistance, for example as liaison agents. This more social dimension and tasks such as organising a support system for interned resistance members and their families, was also an important part of Albrecht's clandestine work.

All in all, Berty Albrecht can be seen simultaneously as exceptional and representative regarding the role of women in French resistance. This can also be said regarding her memorialisation. We have seen that she was one of very few women who were officially honoured, and this from a very early stage on. We also see that her memorialisation continued in different ways and phases until today. Fortunately, the public recognition of women and their part in the resistance became stronger in the last decades. At the same time, there has also been a certain tradition of downplaying her role by

48 For a good overview on the current state of research, see: Fabrice Grenard, "La place des femmes dans le phénomène résistant", *La Lettre de la Fondation de la Résistance*, no. 101 (June 2020), online: <https://www.fondationresistance.org/documents/lettre/LettreResistance101.pdf>. In English language, see: Robert Gildea, *Fighters in the shadow. A New History of the French Resistance* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), chapter 5: Une affaire de femmes.

49 Another example is the "réseau du Musée de l'Homme" in Paris, which was initiated in July 1940 by the librarian Yvonne Oddon, who recruited first members. Before it was dismantled in spring 1941, the group counted 11 women from 32 members in total. Grenard, *La place des femmes*, III.

50 Ibid.

calling her “the secretary of Henri Frenay”. Her daughter Mireille mentions this for example in her biography and how much this description irritated her to the point that it was one of her motivations for writing her book.

The role of secretary is definitely not accurate for describing the relationship between Berty Albrecht and Henri Frenay. Their complementary partnership played a decisive role in both lives and in the development of the resistance movement *Combat*; at the same time, both had their own existence before and during the war. Frenay also saw Berty Albrecht as a person on her own, for example when he wrote that she “gave everything to the Resistance and to France: her comfort, her liberty, her family and now her life”.⁵¹ From her early adulthood on, Berty Albrecht chose to not be limited by social conventions and to live a life to improve humanity. We can see her entry in the resistance as a logical step in continuity with her previous beliefs and commitments. It is rare for someone’s fate to be sealed by such consistency between their action and the ideal for which they are prepared to risk their life and cut themselves off from comfort and conformity.

51 Frenay, *La nuit finira*, 344.

WER IST WALTER?

Resistance against Nazism, fascism, occupation and collaboration occurred throughout Europe during World War II. But how much do we know about this history in other European countries? Gathering 32 contributions and case studies on the history of this resistance, as well as on its transmission after 1945, especially in museums, the present book is an invitation to look at resistance in Europe in an interdisciplinary, international, transnational and comparative perspective. It is the result of the international research project “Wer ist Walter? Resistance against Nazism in Europe” which gathered historians, curators and other researchers mainly from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, France and Germany.



HISTORIJSKI MUZEJ
BOSNE I HERCEGOVINE

crossborder
factory



cife

SPOMEN PODRUČJE **jasenovac** MEMORIAL SITE

Funded by:



Federal Ministry
of Finance



Foundation
evz Remembrance
Responsibility
Future

on the basis of a decision
of the Bundestag



9 789958 956980