



WER IST WALTER?

International Perspectives on
Resistance in Europe during
World War II

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Both Woman and Partisan: Emancipation and the Partisan Movement in Syrmia (1941-1944)

Aleksandar Horvat

It's quite simple things we want.

We don't want the men to have the right to beat us: that's the main thing.

And then we want to have some say in how things get done and to be listened to.

Unknown Partisan woman from Syrmia in a conversation with Basil Davidson¹

Before becoming a prominent writer and journalist, Basil Davidson (1914-2010), an officer in the British Special Operations Executive (SOE) intelligence service, came to Yugoslavia during World War II as part of an Allied military mission. In 1943 and 1944, he spent several months among the Partisans in the province of Syrmia,² mainly on Mount Fruška Gora, where he got to know the members and sympathisers of the resistance movement, their qualities, virtues and flaws. At a Partisan political gathering in winter 1943 in the village of Sremska Rača, near the Bosut forests, he met a certain “comrade Mara”, the local leader of the Women’s Antifascist Front (*Antifašistička fronta žena* – AFŽ). According to Davidson’s memoirs, which he wrote immediately after the war, Mara was born in eastern Syrmia and was “a broad square-jawed young woman of about twenty-five” who “clenches her fists tight against her skirt”. Also, she was “tremendously in earnest about what she has to say. She talks about the emancipation of women”, shouting in front of the assembled peasants from the Bosut forests: “We’re fighting against those bad old ideas, we’re fighting for women to have a decent place in society, so that their work’s respected: yes, friends,

1 Basil Davidson, *Partisan Picture* (Bedford: Bedford Books LTD, 1946), 235-236.

2 Syrmia (Srem) is a historical and geographical area located between the Danube and Sava rivers, in the fertile Pannonian plain. Today it is divided between the Republic of Serbia and the Republic of Croatia. In Serbia, together with Banat and Bačka, it is part of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina.

respected. So that she isn't just a drudge, a slave, a person with no rights." Observing Mara's fiery speech, Davidson wrote:

For Comrade Mara the issue is not simply to throw the Germans out of Yugoslavia. She would merely think you mad, or very misguided, if you were to try to explain that the English and the Americans and the Russians are interested primarily in that, and that only. The contrast between an English officer who wants to see trains blown into the air, and nothing else, and finds the whole thing rather a pantomime, and Mara, who sees the war as comprehending every aspect of her life – political, economic, social, artistic – is some measure of the misunderstanding which probably exists. How could outsiders understand? Still, they might try; and perhaps they will.³

How could "outsiders" understand the struggle for women's equality in the traditional village communities of Syrmia during World War II? Even today, this is a legitimate and significant question for understanding the Partisan resistance movement's various dimensions, not only in Syrmia, but across the entire Yugoslavia. Outsiders could also add questions about the Partisans' mechanisms for spreading the idea of equality between women and men, about the forms of their work and propaganda, or about the effects of emancipatory politics. To fully understand the process of emancipation, it is crucial to look firstly at the historical context that framed the relationship between the traditional village community and the Partisan movement, and then at the interrelation between these two structures, from which the main dynamics of these social changes arose. There were also important differences in the experiences of individual regions of Yugoslavia, conditioned by local specificities in terms of economic development, social status or the level of literacy. But for most geographical areas, including Syrmia, the Partisan movement mostly relied on small rural communities, which were particularly traditional and patriarchal social structures. The "new woman", or at least the idea of a new woman, arose and developed in the triangle of action and influence between the villages, the Partisans and the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (*Komunistička partija Jugoslavije* – KPJ), which in 1941 became the leader of the antifascist uprising.

3 Davidson, *Partisan Picture*, 125-126.

Traditional society and women in resistance

When the uprising in Yugoslavia began, the KPJ, in accordance with its pre-war policies on women's issues, called for women to join the fight against the occupiers. Along with the struggle for liberation and social justice, the party's goal was realising its program regarding the emancipation of women, through encouraging their direct participation in the Partisan movement and in military units. The KPJ in Syrmia, as one of the three geographical regions of today's province of Vojvodina, relied to some extent on the Vojvodina labour movement's pre-war legacy and activity. In 1934, party instructions circulated in Vojvodina, carrying a highlighted slogan: "We treat women as equals to men." In Sremska Mitrovica, the largest city in Syrmia, even before the war there were women members of both the party and the Union of Communist Youth of Yugoslavia (*Savez komunističke omladine Jugoslavije* – SKOJ), who at a meeting of workers demanded suffrage and equality with men.⁴

During the war, when Syrmia became part of the Axis-puppet state Independent State of Croatia (*Nezavisna Država Hrvatska* – NDH), the Partisans had the dual tasks of winning over women to their ideas and to the fight, while simultaneously seeking to overcome the traditional social norms and prejudices that were especially prevalent in the countryside, which served as the resistance movement's main base. Among the peasants in Syrmia, the influence of the KPJ and its emancipatory ideas before the war was very low; the prevailing opinion was that women were less valuable than men. In accordance with the traditional, patriarchal understanding of family relations, parents and husbands believed that their daughters and wives were destined to exclusively be housewives and mothers and that their place was in the house – doing household work and raising children was their main occupation.⁵ For centuries, women were in a subordinate and unequal position, with pre-assigned roles in the patriarchal village community. It was considered inappropriate for an unmarried girl to leave the house at night without an escort, go to a pub or engage in politics.

4 Radomir Prica, "Organizacija antifašističkog fronta žena u Sremskomitrovačkom srezu", in *Žene Vojvodine u ratu i revoluciji 1941-1945*, ed. Danilo Kević (Novi Sad: Institut za istoriju, 1984), 569; Dušan Popov, "Novi smisao ženskog pitanja u štampi narodnooslobodilačke borbe", in *Žene Vojvodine u ratu i revoluciji 1941-1945*, ed. Kević, 207-208.

5 Srbislava Kovačević Marija, "Antifašistički front žena u Vojvodini", in *Žene Vojvodine u ratu i revoluciji 1941-1945*, ed. Kević, 97.

Josip Hrnčević (1901-1994), a prominent fighter from Croatia and post-war communist official, wrote about the partisan-communists' encounters with villagers in Syrmia and women's position in the traditional social hierarchy in his memoirs. During 1941 and 1942, he stayed in Syrmia and on one occasion, spent the night in the village of Grabovo, with an elderly married couple, otherwise supporters of the resistance movement, who received him with suspicion yet nevertheless in a homely manner, according to the rules and customs of the time. Hrnčević testified that the host put an axe under the headboard, just in case, and the hostess cleaned his shoes. It "was embarrassing", he wrote, "that she was cleaning his – a partisan and communist's – shoes. But she answered him calmly: That is our custom."⁶

This was the kind of society to which the leadership of the Partisan movement in Syrmia addressed its messages and invitations. From the uprising's first days, Partisan documents stated that women should be included in the military units, "that young partisan women should enter the strike groups" and that "no woman comrade [*drugarica*] should be left without certain duties". In the proclamations, women were called to "join the ranks of fighters against fascism, for national freedom, for a better and happier future, side by side with their husbands, brothers and sons." During the the first two years of war, however, the results were not satisfactory, as was stated in a report on the situation in the Syrmian units in December 1942: "You did not pay enough attention to the establishment of proper relations between men and women comrades, and the consequence was that women comrades who wanted to join the military units as fighters were seen as a burden."⁷

Why were the Partisans "stingy" towards women, as Syrmia Partisan Dušanka Jovičić (1923-1998) wrote in her memoirs?⁸ Jovan Beljanski Lala's (1901-1982) memoirs provide an answer to the question of what exactly happened on the ground and what the position of women in military units looked like. Lala was a prominent Partisan commander and recipient of the highest Yugoslav award, the Order of People's Hero. During the war, he

6 Josip Hrnčević, *Svjedočanstva* (Zagreb: Globus, 1986), 72.

7 *Zbornik dokumenata i podataka o narodnooslobodilačkom ratu jugoslovenskih naroda. Borbe u Vojvodini 1941-1943*, I-6 (Beograd: Vojno delo, 1955) (Cyrillic), 22, 37, 110, 117-122.

8 Dušanka Nađ, "U Jasku i Vrdniku u Sremu 1941. godine", in *1941-1942 u svedočenjima učesnika narodnooslobodilačke borbe*, vol. 8, ed. Radomir Petković (Beograd: Vojnoizdavački zavod, 1975), 246.

became a committed fighter for the equality of women, but when he first received the directive that they should also become part of the Partisan detachments, he was not sure of the justification of such a decision. During the campaign to establish the first Partisan squads in remote villages on Fruška Gora in 1941 and 1942, he mentioned to the new Partisans the need to include young women in the units. The men did not want to accept it, telling him that “war is not a woman’s job”. He continued to insist that women be talked to and that they at least engage in combat as medical staff, which was acceptable to the men. However, in some places, not a single woman was admitted to Partisan squads. The fighters in the village of Krušedolski Prnjavor put up a particularly strong resistance and did not want to accept the possibility of women fighting together with them, guns in hand. After much persuasion, three young women were accepted into their squads, without the slightest enthusiasm from their comrades. When those units were sent to the field, as part of the Danube Partisan Detachment, all three Partisan women were left in the village. Beljanski persistently continued with his demands and faced repeated failures. When he proposed that prominent female fighters be appointed to the duties of party delegates for platoons and squads in one of the battalions’ headquarters, the fighters laughed loudly, because they could not understand why they should be commanded by women. Beljanski interpreted such phenomena as being due to the fact that the Partisan movement in Syrmia in 1941 and 1942 was almost entirely made up of local (male) peasants, who were, as he wrote, “traditionally distrustful of women as fighters. According to their understanding at that time, a woman is first and foremost a mother, a housewife and a wife who should, as in all previous wars, guard the hearth while the men fight.”⁹

Resistance to including women, not only in military units, but also in other tasks and functions in the Partisan movement, occurred in all phases of the uprising and the war. Among the men in the villages of Syrmia, it could be heard at that time that women should not interfere in men’s affairs and that politics is not for them.¹⁰ Parents said that women should not go to war because they had never done it before, and they did not want to allow their daughters to go to evening meetings of members of the Partisan movement, considering it inadmissible and risky, because mostly younger

9 Jovan Beljanski, *Sećanja* (Novi Sad: Institut za istoriju, 1982), 168-171.

10 Đorđe Momčilović, *Zlatne niti zajedništva* (Novi Sad: Institut za istoriju, 1982), 167.

men gathered in such places. Men in the village of Prhovo claimed for a long time that women with their activism were in fact leading “anti-men’s politics” and “threshing empty straw”.¹¹

However, the attitude towards women changed over time, influenced by Partisan propaganda. In the uprising’s first year, there was an intermediary between women and the movement: They cooperated with the Partisans indirectly, through their fathers or husbands,¹² and if they were allowed to attend evening meetings of underground activists (*ilegalci*),¹³ they would come accompanied by their mothers. At that time, men avoided giving their female colleagues more specific or responsible tasks. If they gained trust, they were allowed to carry secret messages between two villages as couriers, and the most trusted were given party material to read and keep.¹⁴ Even when women were directly involved in the movement, it happened that in some places they were the victims of harsh attitudes from fellow soldiers. Thus, in the village of Adaševci, a young female underground activist who had long hair and a neat hairstyle, was ordered by her superior to cut her hair.¹⁵

The fact that emancipation took place gradually – often in accordance with the title of Lenin’s book *One Step Forward, Two Steps Back* – is evidenced in the case of the local People’s Liberation Committee (*Narodnooslobodilački odbori* – NOO) in Ledinci at the beginning of 1943.¹⁶ Partisan authorities in Sylvania analysed the board members’ attitudes and actions, concluding that “individuals cannot break with backward ideas about the position of women in society”. Their “sectarian attitude towards the inclusion of women and female youth in the NOO” was sharply criticised, and it was concluded that “because of those mistakes, the NOO must dissolve and a new one be elected.”¹⁷

11 Vasilije Petković and Živko Vasić, *Visovi ravnice: Prhovo u ratu i revoluciji* (Novi Sad: Institut za istoriju, 1988), 100.

12 Milorad Babić, *Hronika Starih Banovaca* (Sremska Mitrovica: Sremske novine, 1989), 179.

13 In Partisan terminology, the term *ilegalac* was used for members of the Partisan movement acting mainly in occupied cities and territories.

14 Kovačević, “Antifašistički front žena u Vojvodini”, 95.

15 Svetislav Nenadović, *Adaševački ustanak* (Šid: Opštinski Savez udruženja boraca, 1989) (Cyrillic), 185.

16 The NOO were authorities formed and organised by the KPJ in the liberated or partially liberated territories.

17 Miloš Lukić, *Ledinačke vatre* (Novi Sad: Institut za istoriju, 1982) (Cyrillic), 286.



Fig. 1: Three generations of women from the Matić family in the Partisan movement, Irig (1944); from left to right: Gina Matić, paramedic of the Sremska Mitrovica command; Danica Matić, member of the County Board of AFŽ for Irig; Živka Matić, associate of the Partisan movement since 1942; granddaughter of Živka Matić, name unknown. In the middle is Petar Matić Dule, one of the leading figures of the Partisan movement in Syrmia, who received the Yugoslav People's Hero award in 1951. (Museum of Vojvodina, Photo Collection)

However, striking changes began to take place from 1943. At the beginning of that year, the first armed woman was accepted into the ranks of the Danube Partisan Detachment, and in the second Syrmia unit, the Fruška Gora Partisan Detachment, some women already carried weapons. In March 1943, it was noted that several young women held high military-political positions in the units. One such example was Partisan Janja Bogičević, who was appointed as a corporal, causing astonishment among the men. Bogičević quickly advanced and became a battalion commander in the Third Vojvodina Brigade. The traditional understanding that women had no place in combat units lost its foothold, as more and more female Partisans showed courage and ability, a key argument for breaking the pre-war systems of thought and entrenched prejudices.¹⁸

18 Beljanski, *Sećanja*, 237.

From the traditional to the emancipated woman

Women's direct participation in the resistance movement and Partisan units was the main means of emancipation for two reasons: first, women's contributions as warriors, nurses, underground activists or couriers became obvious to the men, and second, women gained self-confidence and awareness of their own worth. Understandings, ambitions, attitudes toward men and relations between women were gradually changing. In certain situations, the air of emancipation and a new self-perception among women fighters was noticeable, as was female Partisans' insistence that Partisan leadership treat men and women equally, and that their commanders and comrades did not discriminate against them on the basis of gender.

In this context, the Partisans' instructions for the territory of Syrmia from November 1943 are particularly indicative. They ordered that only women who really wanted to be nurses be sent to the hospital courses, as there were many cases of those who completed the course refusing to work as nurses and demanding to go to the units as fighters. The same document noted that "some women comrades even take a backpack with the necessary things and then irresponsibly leave it somewhere" and added that "the belief should be dispelled that nurses are less valuable than soldiers and that they are supposedly looked down upon."¹⁹

Over time, disobedience and resistance to certain decisions by superiors appeared among the female fighters. Such attitudes were quite unusual at the beginning of the uprising and to that point, had been exclusively associated with men. Dušanka Jovičić, a female Partisan from Syrmia, recalls in her memoirs a discussion between men and women in the detachment in which the men claimed that only women could be paramedics and that this task suited them best. In the discussion that followed, she said that women could be fighters and asked why men shouldn't be paramedics, much to the astonishment of all the men in the detachment. A more dramatic situation occurred when Dušanka's company decided to disarm all the women due to the lack of weapons and give the confiscated rifles to the male soldiers who had just finished their military training. The women fighters protested, calling for equality, saying that they had captured the rifles in battle at a time when the comrades who were to be armed were not even Partisans,

¹⁹ *Zbornik dokumenata*, 462.

but in the end, in tears, they still had to obey the order. At the same time, the resistance in the second company of the same battalion had an effect, because the commander decided that the rifles should be taken only from the armed nurses, and not from all the women in the unit.²⁰

The rise of the idea of male-female equality is indirectly evidenced by the case of a soldier from the town of Irig who fell ill, and during his absence from the detachment, entered into a romantic relationship with a nurse and then did not return to his unit. In the village of Dobrinči alone, the couple was chased out of five houses in which they were hiding, because of their consistent repetition of sexual relations, which were generally forbidden in the Partisan movement and seen as “immoral behaviour”. A consultation was held among the fighters in the detachment to discuss this issue. There were divided opinions: the men thought that only the nurse should be shot, but the women came forward with a common opinion that both of them should be punished, explaining that “there can’t be only a female whore, without male”.²¹

Obviously, the policy of emancipation, despite all the obstacles, led to more and more tangible results in a very short period of time. The degree of women’s militancy and open rebellion against the male dominated order grew, as did the number of women fighters. At the end of 1942, there were no more than 150 women in the Syrmia Partisan detachments. In 1943, there were already 1.220, and in 1944, there were 2.123. There are estimates that women in military units made up between 5,5% and 12,5% of combatants.²²

At the same time, in parallel with the process of building the idea of gender equality through the participation of women in military units, emancipation took place through mass involvement in the Antifascist Women’s Front (AFŽ). This organisation, crucial in the fight for women’s equality in Yugoslavia, was founded in Bosanski Petrovac in 1942. A network of local committees quickly spread throughout Syrmia. Membership existed in almost every village and was divided into groups, with at least three members

20 Nad, *Sremci*, 84.

21 Museum of Vojvodina/*Muzej Vojvodine* (MV), Collection of Documents, 22.987. *Stenografske beleške razgovora sa Jovanom Beljanskim Lalom*, 18. 9. 1965.

22 Nikola Božić, “Vojvođanke u partizanskoj uniformi”, in *Žene Vojvodine u ratu i revoluciji 1941-1945*, ed. Kecić, 642-643. For women in Partisan military units in Yugoslavia more generally, see: Jelena Batinić, *Women and Yugoslav Partisans. A History of World War II Resistance* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), specifically the chapter “The Heroic and the Mundane. Women in the Units”.



Fig. 2: AFŽ members from Syrmia sew clothes in a Partisans workshop. (Museum of Vojvodina, Photo Collection)

in each street, who met several times a week.²³ In the third year of the war, nearly 20.000 women from Syrmia were members of the AFŽ. They performed various tasks: from cooking food for fighters, sewing clothes and collecting contributions, to hiding illegals in houses and participating in Partisan guards in villages.

For women who joined the AFŽ, the term used to describe them in communications between members of the Partisan movement, was “organised”. This term was defined in one instruction to local AFŽ organisations in Syrmia, as being “every [female] comrade who reads our press, comes to meetings and contributes to the army”, even when she is temporarily prevented from coming “but tries to come when she can”.²⁴

AFŽ organised courses for their members in which participants learned about the development of society, women in history, the peasant question, the role of women in World War II, and concepts such as slavery, feudalism, capitalism, fascism and socialism. At the end of the course, they were expected to answer, based on Marxist literature, questions such as: What characterised a woman’s life before patriarchy? Is patriarchy a social

23 Petar Vukelić, “NOP u Staropazovačkom srežu 1942. godine”, in *1941-1942 u svedočenjima učesnika narodnooslobodilačke borbe*, knj. 24, ed. Radomir Petković (Beograd: Vojnoizdavački zavod, 1975), 409.

24 MV, 11.923, *Dopis Sreskog odbora za Sremsku Mitrovicu svim mesnim odborima AFŽ*, 7. 3. 1944.

arrangement in which women experience complete enslavement? Has capitalism opened the way to freedom for women? Have women achieved their centuries-long dream in socialism and what does that system provide a woman throughout their lives? What are the achievements of women in today's struggle? What are the forms of women's struggle in this war?²⁵

Most of the course participants in Syrmia were peasant women, mostly without prior theoretical knowledge and reading experience. This is why there were proposals to simplify the programs. Otherwise, as written in a report from February 1944, "the material would be inaccessible and difficult for the majority". The same report stated that all the participants of the course showed effort, willingness and interest, and that in their moments of rest they recounted the contents of Soviet films and sang revolutionary songs.²⁶

What characterised those women who attended the courses and then became heads of the Partisans' movement in the places they lived? We can begin to understand how their virtues, flaws and human weaknesses were perceived by the courses' organisers, when reading the thoroughly written reports about individual participants. Among them is comrade Sejka, who is "very loyal to the fight, but quite dead and non-authoritative and still somewhat biased when it comes to family, but she is trying to improve". Then, comrade Milka, who is "loyal, but does not show much agility in work or personal initiative"; comrade Dobrila who "seems rather quiet at first glance"; comrade Biljana was "agile, active, shows a great desire to learn, receives corrections and advice without complaint". Comrade Stojanka is described as "penetrating, active, bright, but a little vain and doesn't interpret criticism correctly".²⁷ And so the series of names and character analyses continued: "quickly gets to the heart of things", "expresses herself well and easily", "has difficulties in expressing herself", "has difficulty understanding", "unfocussed in class", "emotionally close to her comrades", "combative", "serious", "affectionate", "modest", "obedient"...²⁸

25 MV, 670, *Kontrolna pitanja na završnoj konferenciji kursa AFŽ*, August 1944.

26 MV, 2.338, *Izveštaj o kursu AFŽ u rumskom srezu*, 4. 2. 1944.

27 MV, 11.926. *Izveštaj o radu AFŽ za srez sremskomitrovački za mesec mart 1944*, April 1944.

28 MV, 2.338. The courses were usually organised by women and the reports were written by the organisers and the lecturers, for example the report MV, 11.926, by Ana, regional president of AFŽ in district Sremska Mitrovica, or document MV, 2.338, by the women lecturers Lela and Vida. Only first names were mentioned in such documents, probably for security reasons.

Women gained new knowledge about life and the world at the meetings, reading groups and courses held by the AFŽ's local committees. Previously, they could not access this information in their homes, that is, in the traditional community from which they came. Changes in their attitudes are evidenced by a letter from the activist Drinka, in which she writes about a Slovak woman, a villager from Stara Pazova, and her understanding of literature and her attitude towards other women in the town:

A young, bright woman. Her husband has been in the detachment for more than a year. She is a member of AFŽ. She is interested in theoretical material. She tells how she got married early and did not understand her husband when he left home. Then he invited her too, he taught her and she no longer listened to gossip but became his partner in work. She is happy that she will be able to build herself up and make her husband happy, because she continued his work. "I went out into the street," she says, "among women who are not organised. I can't get close to them yet because they are timid, but I had to go into the yard right away. They talk about such small things that I feel sorry for wasting time. I entered the room and took the book. I read how the first people lived. I came to feudalism and then I stopped because I don't know what it is." I explained feudalism to her. When I finished, she said, like a child, with joy: "Now I will continue reading, and if I don't know, I will ask again."²⁹

Based on the recommendations of the leadership of the Partisan movement in Syrmia, women like the Slovak woman from Drinka's letter became mandatory speakers at assemblies, and an equal part of both the local authorities and people's courts that were formed in the territories liberated and controlled by the Partisans. AFŽ members spoke at meetings in the villages about the struggle for emancipation and equality with men, about women's rights to make decisions in politics, to be able to vote and to get elected, to which the peasant women of Syrmia listened to "breathlessly", because they "liked each word", as it was written in one description of a rally in Ledinci in 1943.³⁰ Also, the reports from such gatherings say that at the beginning, some members of the AFŽ were reserved, confused or excited

29 MV, 18.665, *Drinka Mariji. Pismo o Slovačkinji*, without date.

30 Lukić, "Ledinačke", 285.



Fig. 3: The front pages of *Vojvođanka u borbi* (Vojvodina women in battle) visually presented the idea of equality between women and men. The author of the drawing is Vojislav Nanović (1922-1983), an illustrator in the Partisan printing house in Syrmia, and after the war a director and one of the pioneers of Yugoslav cinema. (Museum of Vojvodina, Collection of newspapers)

and that it was necessary to persuade them to take initiative and to actively participate.³¹ Their insecurity, insufficient self-confidence and shyness were noticeable, because they were not used to being truly equal.³²

The spread of ideas about women's equality was called “ideological-political elevation” (*ideološko-političko uzdizanje*) in party vocabulary. Partisan newspapers played an important role in this process, in which the authors of the texts addressed women as subjects equal to men, encouraging them to join the resistance movement while highlighting examples of heroines who defiantly opposed the occupier, sacrificing their lives for higher goals. In the AFŽ's newsletter, *Vojvođanka u borbi* (Vojvodina women in battle), numerous letters from peasant women from Syrmia were published, among others from Zora O., who stated that “women also hate fascism”. One mother wrote: “Fascists killed what is dearest to me, my only son. And I am proud to be the mother of a daughter who went to avenge

31 *Istina*, no. 40, 15. 11. 1943.

32 *Vojvođanka u borbi* (Cyrillic), no. 4, June-July 1944.

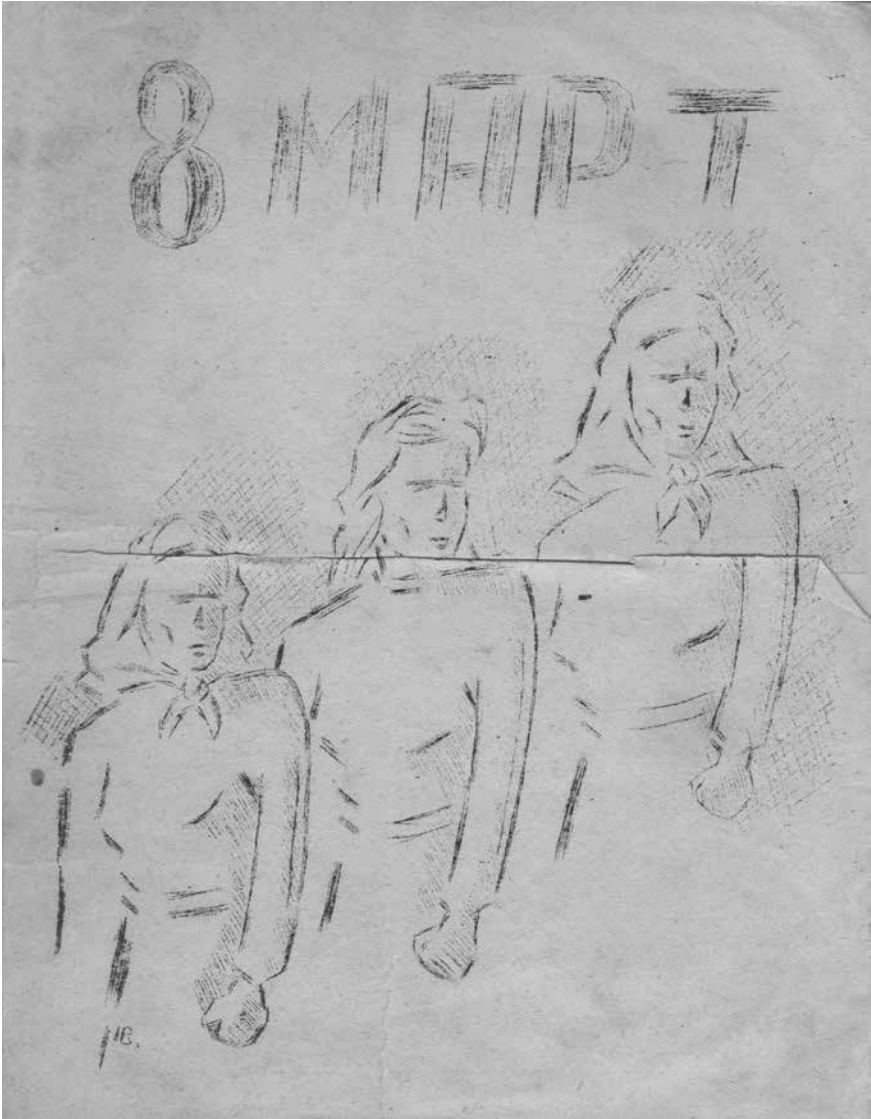


Fig. 4: “8 March” brochure, printed on the territory of Syrmia in 1944. (Museum of Vojvodina, Collection of brochures)

her brother.” Another mother sent the lyrics “I constantly think of revenge / Of the victory of the partisans.”³³

In Partisan propaganda, the Soviet woman was shown as a role model and was presented to the public as the sister of the Yugoslav woman. Readers were informed that in the USSR, pregnant women received 56 days of

³³ Ibid., no. 1, January 1944.

paid leave before and after giving birth, which enabled Soviet women to build a new society and be good mothers.³⁴ The massive celebrations of 8 March were of great importance for the Partisans, both as a specific women's holiday and a day of "fighting for solidarity of women of the whole world".³⁵

As an integral part of the widely organised process of emancipation of women in the countryside, the Partisan movement paid particular attention to organising mass literacy courses for women, even those of an older age. Thanks to this program, and motivated by the desire to write to their family members among the Partisans or in captivity and camps, many women wrote their own letters for the first time. They also wrote their first "essays", one of which began with the words: "I am a fifty-year-old woman, so I am struggling, I am studying first grade."³⁶

However, the men did not surrender so easily. In Partisan newspapers, there are reports about gatherings where Partisans refused to listen to women's speeches.³⁷ At youth meetings, while the girls were reading the news aloud, the boys argued, talking frantically, humming, shouting, teasing them and not paying attention to what they were saying.³⁸

Basil Davidson also attended one such meeting in the village of Vizić, near the town of Ilok. As he writes in his memoirs, the AFŽ committee convened a public gathering to discuss "politics". The term "politics" could mean anything, from sewing shirts for Partisans to the attitude to be taken towards their husbands' drinking. When the meeting started, one of the women pounded her hand on the table and appealed for silence, while the men "listened in resentful silence, belching every now and then to emphasise their independence and their perfect right to interrupt a woman's conference if they had a mind to." The discussion was about the sunflower harvest, and Davidson remarked about one older man: "Yovan [sic] has held his peace for long enough. Never before, probably, has he seen such a thing as a woman's meeting. His contempt for it curls round every word that he utters." At the same time, "several old gaffers murmur their approval and belch more loudly than ever". Observing this, for him, very unusual event, the Briton concluded:

34 Ibid., no. 4, June-July 1944; no. 1, January 1944.

35 8. mart (1944, no specific month).

36 Kovačević, "Antifašistički front žena u Vojvodini", 112.

37 *Plamen: džepne novine Starih Banovaca*, no. 1, 26 December 1943.

38 *Posavski osvjetnik*, no. 6, 10 September 1943.

The Pankhursts³⁹ would have rejoiced for this embryo of a woman's movement was a good deal more promising than it seemed on the surface. The men... whom these young women, still embarrassed and unsure of their freedom, would one day marry, were growing daily used to the notion that women might be individual and independent beings – they had women, intensely individual and independent, fighting in their own ranks.⁴⁰

New privacy and a new woman

Numerous obstacles appeared in the fight for women's equality. However, although the structures of the old traditional society were not easily surrendered, the process of emancipation continued. Encompassing different social spheres, the process finally began encroaching on privacy and family relations. In its depth, the social structure rested on the patriarchal model and the idea of male superiority. This was the way families functioned, with women's status and roles assigned in a strict family hierarchy. Therefore, a particularly important dimension of the emancipation process related to freedom in the sphere of privacy, by creating new family relationships, a new awareness and view of one's own rights and marriage, including the free choice of a marriage partner and protection from the arbitrariness of men – that is, husbands and parents.

When Basil Davidson spoke about the motives behind women's mass involvement in the fight with a Partisan in the village of Vizić, she immediately highlighted physical abuse as the main reason: "It's quite simple things we want. We don't want the men to have the right to beat us: that's the main thing. And then we want to have some say in how things get done and to be listened to."⁴¹ Violence in the family was a frequent phenomenon, and some commanders of units and political commissars, aware of the scale of the problem, condemned the abusers, explaining to the fighters that this was not in accordance with the moral character of the Partisans. Since 1941, it was a principled position that fighters and underground activists who

39 Emmeline Pankhurst (1858-1928) and her daughters were British suffragettes who advocated a militant approach in the fight for women's rights.

40 Davidson, *Partisan*, 232-236.

41 *Ibid.*, 235-236.

repeated violent behaviour were excluded from the movement, deemed “unworthy to be a Partisan”.⁴²

A typical case with a family abuser happened in the village of Krušed-ol. A Partisan named Slavko stood out as a brave fighter and even volunteered for difficult tasks, but at home he beat his wife sadistically every day. When the corporal admonished him, he replied that it was an “old Syrmian custom..., a woman should be beaten as often as possible”, because, as he believed, “the more you beat her, the more she loves you”. After admonitions and threats to kick him out of his squad did not have any effect, the already well-known defender of women, Jovan Beljanski Lala, was involved in solving the problem. He came to the violent fighter’s house and found him beating his wife with his fists and feet in the middle of the yard, holding her by the hair, while the children were crying helplessly. When he saw the visitor, Slavko kicked the woman once more and, as if nothing unusual had happened, went to meet Beljanski. The commander was very angry and in the name of the Partisan movement ordered his fighter to stop beating and harassing his wife, telling him that the Partisans should not behave like that and that if he did not obey the order, he would be expelled from the unit. Beljanski wrote in his memoirs that the bully “watched him not believing his ears. He could not believe that Lala had come to lecture him on how to behave in his house.” However, the intervention was completely successful: Slavko no longer beat his wife, because he was very anxious not to be excluded from the Partisan movement.⁴³

Apart from a violent husband, women also often needed protection from his parents who lived in the same household. Representatives of the Partisan government in liberated villages were often called upon to judge in such cases. Private problems stemmed from her position at the bottom of the traditional family hierarchy. In one such case, there was a conflict between the mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law, between whom there had already previously been tensions because the son had married without the mother’s permission. When he joined the Partisans, the mother-in-law immediately started insulting, slapping and beating her daughter-in-law. However, she was an activist in the AFŽ, so after the intervention of the

42 Jovan Beljanski, “U istočnom delu Iriškog sreza 1941. godine”, in *1941-1942 u svedočenjima učesnika narodnooslobodilačke borbe*, volume 3, ed. Radomir Petković (Beograd: Vojnoizdavački zavod, 1975), 319.

43 Beljanski, *Sećanja*, 175-176.

organisation and the threat that she would be shot, the mother-in-law got scared and stopped the abuse.⁴⁴

The Partisan authorities tried also to protect women in divorce cases, or in cases where (as per the vocabulary of the time) the husband would “chase away” (*oterati*) the wife from the home. In the village of Buđanovci, for example, a conflict took place in 1942 between married partners, both aged 35, because the wife allegedly could not give birth to a child. The husband wanted an heir and started living with another woman, but his original wife demanded to be accepted back into the household. When the husband refused, arguing that his new wife was pregnant, she asked for the return of the dowry she had brought with her when she got married. In the end, it was only after the intervention of the Partisan authorities and their support for the woman that he accepted the agreement and compensated his ex-wife.⁴⁵

A similar situation happened with a member of a Partisan squad who got married, but “chased away” his wife from the house after only two days. His actions became a topic of discussion in his squad and were judged immoral, the main argument being that “he thinks he can change women like gypsies change horses”, for which he was punished by expulsion from the unit.⁴⁶

The change in the understanding of their own position, including matters involving family, private and future married life, appeared in the reflections of young women engaged in the resistance movement. Partisan member Dušanka Jovičić testified about this in her memoirs, writing that she could hear in intimate conversations that, unlike before the war, women no longer thought about marriage, but that now their main preoccupation was reading party material and activism in the villages. In the village of Jankovac, a young woman, 19 years old, made a series of statements demonstrating the changes in perceiving the authority of parents and the institution of marriage: “They say that we will no longer marry those we do not love. That’s good. They say that even dowry will not play any role in love. Good!” This young woman was also looking forward to a new time, when their fathers would no longer choose their husbands, but she also feared that girls in the villages would remain unmarried, because fighters would only marry Partisan women.⁴⁷

44 MV, 21.693. *Memoarska grada: Jefta Jeremić.*

45 Ibid.

46 MV, 22.987.

47 Nad, *Sremci*, 52, 204-205.

Jovičić also mentions an interesting, and at the time unpleasant, episode in her memoirs, about a request that female Partisans in the unit in which she was a commissar undergo a gynaecological examination. This request was linked to the fear among the unit's commanders of the spread of syphilis within the fighters. But Jovičić understood this problem not only as a medical issue, but also as a matter of insulting the personal dignity of female fighters. Explaining that this type of examination for young girls in the detachment is an unknown and taboo topic, she wrote in her memoirs that she answered as follows to the Partisan doctor who had requested the examination:

Who will force them to undergo an examination? I don't believe that any of them has ever been to such an examination. Many of them have certainly never even heard of such a disease. These are all young girls... from our villages. And as for newcomers, they went through our medical commissions in Fruška Gora. I can guarantee for all of them, comrade doctor, if this is enough. I do not agree with such an examination. It is an insult to personality.⁴⁸

Highlighting the insults against members of the Partisan movement in the private and intimate sphere was an important part of the report written by the AFŽ in March 1944 about its work in the villages of Syrmia. This report summarises the results of two years of work and the state of the organisation just a few months before the liberation of Syrmia, and illustrates how different aspects of the AFŽ's work were connected and that the private life of women was also one of the key factors for the movement's functioning.

The report shows that in some places, the organisation functioned flawlessly, but there were also places where there were problems. In the village of Šuljam, the AFŽ leadership was replaced due to a lack of discipline. In Grgurevci, some male fighters "conspired" and spread rumours about the "unexemplary life of some women", which "had a very unfavourable effect on the growth and development of the organisation". In Šišatovac, the president of the local AFŽ resigned due to rumours that she was in a relationship with a comrade from the shoe workshop who was staying with her. She completely lost her authority in the village and could no longer be engaged

48 Dušanka Nađ, *Cvet nikao iz smrti* (Novi Sad: Savez udruženja boraca, 1967) (Cyrillic), 44-45.



Fig. 5: Dušanka Jovičić with comrade Steva Žutić (Bogatić, 1944); after the war, she married the general and future People's Hero, Kosta Nađ. (Museum of Vojvodina, Photo Collection)

in even less important jobs in the organisation. In the same place, it was noted that the men from the NOO:

[...] do not take the local AFŽ seriously. During the celebration of 8 March, one member of the NOO interrupted the woman comrade while she was reading out the brochure, saying that it was enough. Also, a comrade from NOO who was supposed to take part in a theatrical performance, was made fun of by other comrades from the place and left the celebration... All this started to strongly demoralise the women comrades. [Male] Comrades should support them.

The report also noted that the members of the Partisan movement from the shoe workshop in the village “do not behave nicely” and that “obscene expressions and ambiguous jokes rain down on women at every step”. In the village of Laćarak, the president of AFŽ was dismissed “because she acted in a dictatorial manner and did not want to improve”. In Kuzmin, the organisation’s growth was disturbed by the behaviour of two NOO members, who at the same time maintained intimate relationships with several women. Also, the report stated that it was necessary to take certain measures to strengthen the organisation, and, for example, to criticise not only women, but also men in cases of “unexemplary behaviour”; that many women were not included in the organisation even though they were antifascist; that there was low “political awareness” among certain women leaders and members of AFŽ, which is why they were prone to demoralisation and wavering, and that “hesitant and ineffective women who have not improved should be replaced”.⁴⁹

* * *

The strength of this continuous process of emancipation, despite all the problems and obstacles, is convincingly evidenced by the fact that in 1944, the Partisan leadership stated that the AFŽ in Syrmia tended towards separating into a completely independent organisation and that some AFŽ members openly resented when other party leaders would interfere in their work.⁵⁰

49 MV, 11.926.

50 Ljubica Vasilić, *Pokrajinski komitet KPJ za Vojvodinu: 1941-1945* (Sremski Karlovci: Arhiv Vojvodine; Novi Sad: Institut za izučavanje istorije Vojvodine; Istorijski arhiv PK SK za Vojvodinu, 1971) (Cyrillic), 323.

Many women remained outside this process of emancipation during the war, or accepted only much later the idea of equality with men, but many of them went from traditional to emancipated women precisely through the Partisan movement. A particularly striking illustration is the conversation between Basil Davidson and a Partisan woman known as Baba, a field worker who was in charge of transferring volunteers from the nearby province of Bačka to Sylvania.

In his book, Davidson paints a portrait of Baba as a strong-willed, capable, tough and optimistic person. She was a 23-year-old widow, and her late husband had been a village merchant who died a Partisan. When she joined the Partisan movement, furious and desperate because of her husband's death, Baba was just a frightened girl, with no knowledge of politics and war, except that as a wife it was necessary to accompany her husband. As Davidson notes, "for her the movement had a personal significance that was far more than political: she had found in it the materials of a new and larger life and she cleaved to it as if she had conceived it and created it herself. She saw that she had become through it a changed individual, larger and better and stronger than before." Over time, she adopted the slogans about equality and spoke them with conviction in discussions with her comrades:

We don't help the men. We fight alongside them, equal with them... We're fighting for women's dignity... We're in the movement because the whole of society's changing, and it can't change without the women being there too. It's a new society we want – new right through, men and women too... You think women are inferior to men, only good for sleeping with you and having babies. But women are individuals, too, and they have their part in our revolution just as much as the men.

Impressed by Baba's personality and attitudes, Davidson recorded her words, paradigmatic for interpreting the role of the Partisan movement in the process of women's emancipation:

I was a fat-headed peasant girl two years ago with no more idea of the world than the price of bacon and the best way to get the better of tax-collectors... But I didn't read books or do any more writing

than to reckon up the shop accounts; and my husband was about the same... The movement's like a university for me. The movement's done everything for me. Or perhaps I've done everything for the movement. I don't know. But I see things differently now. I'll never be a simple shopkeeper again. I'll see more in life than that. Perhaps I'll marry again: but not yet – I loved my husband. And then only if I find a man who'll share his life with me, and not expect me to bend myself always to him. I want to live. I want to make something in the world. There's so much we've got to do.⁵¹

Conclusion

The Yugoslav women's antifascist struggle in World War II had two main motives and goals: 1) liberation from the occupier; 2) emancipation in relation to men and traditional society. Overcoming the norms, morals and rules of that social environment from which the majority of Syrmian Partisans came was the primary goal of the emancipatory policy held by the KPJ and the Partisan movement, with its military, ideological and political dimension.

As we have seen, it was a painstaking process, with a series of obstacles and problems on the ground. There was a constant need to explain the politics of emancipation again and again to the Partisan movement's fighters and supporters. By participating in the struggle and being a member of AFŽ, through mass engagement, women gained new knowledge, self-confidence and conviction in their own worth. To a certain extent, the changes affected the sphere of private life, the attitude towards marriage, the man as a spouse, the parents and domestic violence. The idea of women's equality gradually changed the traditional understandings, deeply rooted among the population of Yugoslavia, Vojvodina and Syrmia, including new consideration for the areas of privacy and the personal emotions of the individual.

At the end, let's return to the question: how should "outsiders" understand the struggle for women's equality in the traditional village communities of Syrmia during World War II? There is no doubt that in such a short period of time it was not possible to erase the traditional understandings

51 Davidson, *Partisan*, 255-264.

that had existed for centuries, but at the same time, space was created for the largest and fastest step that had ever been taken, with concrete results and consequences, not only in public speech and propaganda, but also in the consciousness of many individuals, both men and women. Physical and verbal violence was not eradicated, but it was marked as unacceptable from a new angle – ideological, political and military. A good Partisan could not be a bully and could not underestimate and insult his female comrades and other members of the liberation movement. Viewed by the standards of that time, this was a new dimension, important as a foothold for changing the firmly-established traditional structures. It goes without saying that the process of emancipation did not end with the end of the war, but the position of women was redefined, and space was opened for their broader political and social activism, including gaining the right to vote in the 1945 elections.⁵² At the same time, during the war, numerous women, with their antifascist orientation and combativeness, conquered new areas of freedom by themselves and for themselves.

52 On the position of women in Vojvodina and Serbia in the post-war years see Ivana Pantelić, *Partizanke kao građanke. Društvena emancipacija partizanski u Srbiji 1945.-1953.* (Beograd: Institut za savremenu istoriju i Evoluta, 2011); Gordana Stojakovic, *Rodna perspektiva u novinama Antifašističkog fronta žena (1945-1953)* (Novi Sad: Zavod za ravnopravnost polova, 2012)

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.



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