

Spanish migrant and exiled women in the French Resistance. The construction of a memory between experiences and expectations¹

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The participation of Spanish women in the French Resistance remains one of the great unresolved issues in the historiography of Republican exile and the Second World War. For decades, researchers and activists on both sides of the Pyrenees have denounced their neglect by both academia and society, an assertion that is now largely untrue. In recent years, the growing concern for gender issues and women's history has led to a greater public presence and their inclusion across the board in the most recent research. However, there are still no specific studies of this particular group of women, largely due to the problem of the limited availability and fragmentation of sources, as well as the way in which they have been constructed in memorials since 1944.

In addressing the role of Spanish women exiles and migrants in the Resistance, memory intervenes both as confirmation and negation. The memories of/about these women testifies to and militates against their triple-fold exclusion from the most hegemonic period in history. Firstly, because they were women in an environment (the Resistance) that is masculinist in its historical construction, and in which French historiography continues to struggle to include women in the narrative and achieve a more pluralistic history. A second axis of exclusion was precisely that of their condition as foreigners (emigrants or exiles) on French soil, who are often also absent in the narratives, despite the fact that, as Gaston Laroche pointed out, "It is impossible to write the history of the dark and glorious years of France's liberation struggle without mentioning the participation of the immigrant combatants (...), who were called foreigners [but also foreigners] because they offered France their freedom and their blood." Finally, these women were absent from the narrative of the Second World War in their country of origin,

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1. Stolperstein for Neus Català Palleja
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Spain, due to their migratory and exile trajectories and their anti-fascist ideology. The regime established in 1939 controlled the country and all its expressions until the late 1970s, when the manifestations of the “era of the witness” in other countries in Europe had already begun. And, likewise, as memorialist legislation from the 2000s onwards has shown, we still have difficulties in constructing a complete history of the anti-fascist and anti-Francoist struggle beyond 1939 and from a gender perspective.

How can we historicise 80 years on the participation of women of Spanish origin who took part in the Resistance? How can we combat this triple-fold exclusion from a period in history when the physical disappearance of the protagonists increases the lack of available sources? How can we construct a historical account that avoids

generalities and does not seek to fit the perspectives of female subjects into a history already written from an androcentric, nationalist and partisan point of view? How can we integrate multiple trajectories, militant experiences of varying degrees and maladjusted discourses into a univocal account of the Resistance? We must start by entering into these experiences and interpreting them in context, not only to “fill in the gaps”, but also to problematise the process of memorial simplification.

The coup d'état by conservative forces against the Second Spanish Republic marked the beginning of a civil war and accelerated the politicisation of broad sectors of society in the fight against the international fascism of the 1930s. Moreover, for women, the Republic had signified, on the one hand, access to political citizenship and, on the other, the exercise of that citizenship through politicisation, commitment and progressive presence in public spaces. Thus, the women who had played a leading role in the cultural and political avant-garde of those years were also at the forefront of Republican

resistance during the Spanish Civil War, whether as militia(wo)men in the first months of the war, on the so-called work front, or in political or humanitarian functions. Some of them continued their lives and political careers in exile and joining the Resistance did not involve a break with the actions and decisions they had taken during the war in Spain or before. This marks a difference with what historians of women's participation in the Resistance in France have called a “paradox” in the commitment of French women, who, despite not having rights as citizens (the right to vote), demonstrated their dedication as true citizens through their actions.

Published in Spanish in 1984 and later in French, the testimony of Neus Català and the 43 other Spanish women who took part in the Resistance, some of whom were also deported, remains one of the main sources for studying and understanding the experiences and role of Republican women fighters in France. Most of these women, including Neus Català, arrived in France between 1936 and 1939, when the fall of Catalonia and the





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end of the war triggered an unprecedented exodus of half a million people from almost the entire Spanish mainland to the French border. According to different sources analysed – among others, by Maëlle Maugendre and Alba Martínez – it is estimated that there were between 90,000 and 95,000 women among them at the height of the exodus. But this collection of testimonies also represents other migratory trajectories. In fact, in addition to the relationship between exile and the Resistance, there are the accounts of Spanish people from previous waves of migration, especially as labourers during and after the war of 1914-1918. The subsequent participation in Resistance networks and activities of women such as Carmen Asensi, Sabina González and Jesusa Bermejo is evidence of the importance of the construction of transnational networks and support for the Republican cause during the civil war and the attention given to the refugee population by the Spanish community in France.

Thus, the involvement of Spanish people in the Resistance can only be studied from the general perspective of the social and political movements of the 1930s and 1940s, and on a transnational scale. Even across the border, the exiled community in France never ceased to view the Spanish Republic as the ultimate objective: the memory of a stolen dream and the desire to return to Spain to re-establish it. But in the meantime, their lives were marked by the urgency of everyday life, the challenges of adjusting to life in France, the challenges of reuniting separated families, the desire to get out of refugee camps or concentration camps, the need to find work, dealing with health problems and maternity issues in exile. The most recent works on Spanish Republican exile from a gender perspective have highlighted the importance of this everyday dimension, its implications in research and, in this case, also its relationship with other issues of political history, such as the Resistance. The account

by Nieves Castro, a member of the Resistance in Toulouse, published in Spanish in 1981, gives us an idea of how central these experiences were in her life:

We were in the concentration camps until, for the convenience of the French state, they made us leave (...) In the Argeles camp myself, as I could see no way out of that city of boards and sand, I signed up for the companies that went out to work in the fields or in factories, but in the latter it was not possible: because of the young age of the girl they did not want me; so I chose to go as a peasant. I didn't understand a leaf about the countryside, what I wanted was to go out and work in the fields.

As part of these trajectories, participation in the Resistance was preceded in France by the development of the first political work, solidarity networks and the reconstruction of structures in internment camps. After the German occupation in June 1940 – extended to the whole of metropolitan France in November 1942 – the first acts of disobedience and resistance to the occupiers also

involved the foreign population, including the Spanish migrant and exiled community. According to one of the first researchers on Spanish women in the Resistance, Maria Fernanda Mancebo, Neus Català estimated 400 Spanish women, but it is feared that there were many more. However, especially in the early stages, the definition of what has been called “Resistance” poses problems. As has been argued in the history of women and gender, the silences of a history told in masculine terms have erased the number of women from the accounts. As resistance fighter Josefa Ramos recalls: “There were many women whose names I don't remember. Because I also moved around and wasn't always at home, so I didn't know them all. But they were all the liaisons of the different maquis”.

In recent years, research on women's participation in the Resistance has highlighted the fact that, for the most part, they were confined to roles considered to be auxiliary tasks and, when describing their activities, spoke of the ‘feminine skills’ mobilised. For this reason, one of the avenues of research currently open – such as the 187 records of homologation of Spanish-born women worked on by Marina Hurtado – is also incomplete: activity and recognition do not always go hand in hand. Diego Gaspar Celaya has called this imbalance a “mutilated recognition” for women, due to the difficulties in having a large part of their activities recognised as part of the Resistance networks.

Yet, despite the categorisation as auxiliaries in unrecognised tasks, we can distinguish a set of missions that were crucial in the realisation of Resistance activities. Among them, the role of liaison agent or courier was better and more often performed by women, as they were usually checked less frequently. This differentiation of tasks not only explains the sexist character of the Resistance, but also that of the repression. In Catherine Lacour-Astol's study of the Resistance in northern France, accusations of “aiding the enemy” and “concealment” can be found among the main reasons for the arrest of women. In other words, although they were less visible, they were no less dangerous. Neus Català, in her testimony, echoes the

gendered distribution of tasks within the Resistance, while underlining the importance of all the activities that enabled the structural functioning. That is why “we were not only auxiliaries, we were active fighters”, but “As women, we were generally used as liaison officers of the vast information network, crossing mountains and borders, meeting points, supplies, solidarity with prisoners and in prisons, where we were in charge of emergency care”.

But, as mentioned above, these resistance activities had to be balanced with the concerns and challenges of everyday life. Several women carried out espionage or sabotage work in their workplaces for the occupying forces, while others disguised their courier or liaison activities with prams or baskets containing handicrafts and other items. For example, Soledad Alcón, Celia Llana or Rosa Laviña carried out espionage or sabotage work at their workplaces for the occupation forces. Others disguised their actions as messengers or liaison officers with prams or baskets containing handicrafts and sewing tools, such as Anita Díaz, as well as by cycling, such as Teresa Gebelli. Regina Arrieta, who had to leave her son with her sister to devote herself entirely to the Resistance, was worried: “I had to work, to raise my son, to be part of the Resistance”. Her account, one of the most vindictive in the collection of testimonies collected by Neus Català, ended as follows: “At the end of the day, we are auxiliaries. For them, honours; for us, oblivion”.

The anti-fascist struggle of these women did not stop there. The duty of memory of those who had lived through the horrors of the war – including deportation – led them to continue on the front line of transmitting it to the new generations. Conchita Grangé, who came from an emigrant family in France, had joined the Resistance at the age of 17 and was deported to Ravensbrück in 1944. On her return, she became involved in the Resistance and Deportation memorial movements in the city of Toulouse. Regina Arrieta, Nieves Castro and Neus Català combined their political militancy in the anti-Franco movement in France with the work of transmission and, in the case of the latter, the collection of testimonies.



4. Conchita Grangé. Prison Saint Michel | Picture by Rocío Negrete. Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International.