

CSWS

Research Matters

Women's Words of War

BY GINA HERRMANN, Assistant Professor, Romance Languages

Personal narratives of war comprise a well-known genre, even a Library of Congress subject category. In such war stories, we may expect men to relate tales of their experiences that would echo earlier generations of men, capturing the battles fought and won with ardor and heroism, as well as the hardships overcome. But what would we expect from women's stories of war?

In my research into radical leftist women's oral histories of the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939), I find women's war stories diverge considerably from the institutionally sanctioned versions of the histories of war. They redefine the categories by which war is staged, waged, and recounted. Women's Civil War stories are more digressive and complicated, incomplete and fractured than the male norm. They thereby contain a disruptive power, enabling us to see war from less familiar perspectives.

Not being the accounts of victors, oral histories of women who struggled to bring back the Spanish republic after the military coup in 1936 have largely languished untold, just as their narrators for many years faced repression and silencing in prison and exile. Furthermore, it was men's accounts that were most sought after, at least until the 1980s, even in compilations made by progressive historians.

For me, women's personal narratives of war and the home front have held a particular appeal. The Civil War, being a revolutionary struggle with a promise for emancipation and increased dignity for rural and urban workers, would seem to open up special opportunities for women. Historically, Spanish women had been exploited with impunity in agrarian pursuits, in small companies and factories, in their own households, as sex workers, and as domestic servants in private homes. Here was a chance for women to influence the discourse for change with their words and their actions.

In addition to fulfilling various roles away from the combat zones, women were encouraged to take an active role in armed militia groups. Even more daring than the famous poster of Rosie the Riveter raising her fist, the poster of the *miliciana* (militiawoman) raising a rifle became the emotive icon of the anti-fascist cause for a time.

One can only imagine what might have been the result of this mobilization of women. In other contexts women typically have not enjoyed all the benefits that revolutionary struggles seem to promise, but perhaps this one would have led to some significant egalitarian reforms if the movement had not been utterly shattered by the Franco regime.

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 CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF WOMEN IN SOCIETY
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 Eugene OR 97403-1201

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 Eugene OR
 Permit No. 63

Research Matters

Research Matters is published by the Center for the Study of Women in Society. For more information, call (541) 346-5015, or visit our website, csws.uoregon.edu.

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My research into twenty women's narratives of the Spanish Civil War has entailed a very close reading of full life interviews in search of the construction of female subjectivity in times of great political enthusiasm and risk. It follows their transition as well as coping with the new regime and raising families from the late 1930s into the 1950s. They strive to combine militancy with motherhood. But all too often, these women expose a painful disjuncture and deceleration between their ideologically committed lives of activism and the postwar stultification and betrayal that many experienced, including raising children with slight appreciation for their commitment and sacrifice. For those more successful at conveying to the next generation the heritage of militancy and ideological belief, however, their life stories are marked by a more integrated sense of self and a heightened narrative pleasure.

Women's oral histories of the Spanish Civil War are quickly passing away, yet they are poignantly relevant for those of us who seek windows onto the ways women have experienced war and revolutionary struggle with the hope of improving their own lives and paving a more hopeful future for their daughters.



Having tapped these oral histories for several articles, my book manuscript, "The Self Writing Red: Communist Memoir in Spain" (under review at the University of Illinois Press), shifts to the study of written memoirs. It explores the literary aesthetics of political memory texts as well as the defense of a psycho-historical category of political interiority through the internalization of collectively felt and lived political identities.

My next project will draw from both these prior studies by examining the written memoirs of Latin American domestic workers in Spain, most who emigrated from Ecuador. My hope is that these accounts will not only continue to advance our understanding of the ambitions and struggles of working-class women, but also highlight telling cultural adjustments they are having to make, crossing the Atlantic in the opposite direction from the colonial pattern.