

A Woman's Struggle: The Changing Image of Womanhood on the Republican Side of the
Spanish Civil War

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1. Abstract

In this thesis, I focus on two main identities and two main women's organizations that I considered important for the development of a feminist challenge to the patriarchal society of 1930's Spain. The two main identities and roles I focused on were the *miliciana* and the mother. Through an in-depth analysis of both roles, I explain how the war afforded women a new opportunity to challenge normative understandings of womanhood and how they performed their gender. Though seemingly at odds with each other, both the *miliciana* and the mother serve to further open society for women, allowing them to embody a new idea of what it meant to be a woman. In this thesis I also analyze two women's organizations: the Agrupación de Mujeres Antifascistas (AMA) and the Mujeres Libres organization. By understanding and analyzing the main mission of both organizations, I explain how –like with the *miliciana* and the mother— women also had options in how and with who they participated. I argue that although these two organizations differed in their ideology –one for a social revolution now and the other for a social revolution later—their praxis was very similar and indicative of a communal effort by all women to challenge normative understandings of women's involvement in politics, especially during this tumultuous time. In sum, this thesis approaches already established authors and their works in a way that explains how the image and practice of womanhood changed at the advent of the war.

2. Introduction

The beginning of the Spanish Civil War on July 17, 1936, marked the acceleration of a challenge to the status quo in Spanish society, which had been marked by strong patriarchal definitions of womanhood for centuries. It is commonly assumed that until the start of the war, women were viewed as no more than housewives and played only a supporting role to their husbands when it came for them to have any kind of public life or image. The reality is that the Second Spanish Republic afforded women the opportunity to delve further into public life than they had before. The civil war thus served as a double war for women, who found themselves at risk of losing the social advancements they had made during the Second Spanish Republic; and were at the same time at risk of losing their political and social independence. In sum, these women were faced with a war against fascism and a war against their presence in the public sphere.

For the purposes of this thesis, it is important to acknowledge that not all women sought the same thing from the war nor did they have the same kind of experiences. For this reason, it is important to create the distinction between peasant women –who came from rural regions of the country— and laboring women –who came from lower, middle, and upper-class households in the cities. This distinction is especially important when one evaluates the kind of life that women had before and during the war, as well as notable speakers and female leaders. For the purposes of this project, the point of reference will be city women most commonly being married to –or themselves holding the title of “working-class.” Middle and upper-class women will also be considered, but the main focus will be working class women.

As it will be noted later in this project, while Spanish society did experience a change in the way that women and womanhood were imagined, the effects of women’s participation in the

war differed from region to region and also across class lines. Mary Nash points out that “in rural Spain, surviving the adverse circumstances of the war, while accentuating the need for women’s labor and economic commitment to family subsistence, did not necessarily imply a questioning of traditional modes of behavior or gender structures.”¹ Instead, the lives of rural women remained relatively unchanged throughout the war as the demand for labor and products for the war would remain the same.

Working class women on the other hand, would have typically been married to men who worked in factories or had some kind of job that required them to live in the city. While it is not impossible, it is certainly rare to find a woman with a rural background who could rise to the level of popularity or influence necessary for her to be considered a female leader of the feminist or antifascist movement. One of the most notable and important women, whose background matched that of a rural, low income laborer was Dolores Ibárruri.

Born in December 1895, Ibárruri describes that she was born to a miner whose own father had also been a miner. Her entire family worked in the iron mines of the Basque Country. Of importance to her autobiography in the beginning is the fact that her mother had also worked as a miner until she was married to Ibárruri’s father. From this small mention of her mother as a miner, one can see that unlike the city life, the most rural parts of Spain demanded that all people worked to be able to survive. Thus, one can see that the division of labor based on gender was almost non-existent. Additionally, Ibárruri adds that she was one of eight children to be born to her father, confirming the rural country’s characteristic demand for bodies and the importance

¹ Nash, Mary. *Defying Male Civilization: Women in the Spanish Civil War*. Denver, Colorado: Arden Press Inc., 1995. 49.

that children had in helping the family with housework and chores. Once again, unlike life in the city where men and women lived in clear and separate spheres marked by divisions between the public and private spheres, men and women in rural areas of the country such as the Basque Country actually depended on the labor power generated by all the members of the community regardless of gender.

This distinction between city and rural life is important to consider since it highlights what both societies may consider to be the “normal” in terms of gender participation in the public and private spheres. Still, even though it may appear as if societal norms between both societies differed greatly in what a woman’s place was, Ibárruri seems to point to an established expectation in rural society that in a way matched that of the city society. While referring to her mother, Ibárruri states that she worked as a miner until she was wed to her husband, Ibárruri’s father.² From then on, there is no other mention of Ibárruri’s mother as a miner or that she held any other kind of job. With the clarification that Ibárruri was one of eight children to come from the marriage between her mother and father, the reader is left to assume that Ibárruri’s mother spent the rest of her time raising her children. Later in the chapter, I will describe how Ibárruri will add that her mother had some things to say about marriage and motherhood, but Ibárruri would not mention her father or his role in raising them at any point in her autobiography. This ability to change roles and presence in the two spheres of their society alludes to the idea that until marriage, the barrier which may seem to separate women between public and private is more fluid than strict and allows for women to have a sense of freedom in being able to hold a job and contribute to their family’s income. This changes, however, once that woman is wed,

² Ibárruri, Dolores. *El único camino*. Madrid: Editorial Castalia, 1992.

probably because the man takes on the sole role as economic contributor of the family, while the woman takes on the role of home maker. It is in this latter part of a woman's life that women of the working class found themselves in before the Spanish Civil War, since city life would have better established expectations of both sexes.

3. Women Begin to Mobilize

As previously stated, the beginning of the war did not spark a new feminist movement, because arguments for and against feminism in Spain had already existed on various levels. The commentary on the female body, her role in society, and the normalization of a patriarchal society had taken place as early as the 1880s, if not earlier. For example, in 1889, a well-known national newspaper named *La Vanguardia*, published an article titled "Of Women and Her Rights on Modern Societies" written by a Federal Republican politician named Pompeyo Gener. In his article, Gener argued that "men and women have different functions" and that "a woman's inferiority is a clear result of her lack of masculinity."³ Thus, it seems like for men such as Gener, womanhood was everything that a man was not. Supporting this particular construction of that which makes a woman different from a man, Gener argued that women spent too much time of their lives pregnant or incapacitated by menstruation to justify them being in any way equal to men and that even then, men were much bigger, intelligent, and muscular than women.⁴

Representing the men of the time and an ideology that would continue to be present over the

³ Gener, Pompeyo. "De la mujer y sus derechos en las sociedades modernas." *La Vanguardia*. February 26, 1889, 730 edition. <http://hemeroteca-paginas.lavanguardia.com/LVE07/HEM/1889/02/26/LVG18890226-001.pdf>.

⁴ Gener, Pompeyo. "De la mujer y sus derechos en las sociedades modernas."

course of the war, Gener's argument based itself in biological essentialism, forcing women into a state of subjugation due to their biological characteristics.

The war would put an enormous strain on the Republic, and having abstained from taking part in the First World War, the Republic needed to find new ways to motivate its citizens to fight the fascist rebellion led by Francisco Franco. While the war did not spark the beginning of the social liberation of women, it certainly reignited female interest in understanding what their role was in society and in challenging previously established norms of womanhood and function in Spanish society. It also signaled the high stakes for women in this war, since many of the social reforms instituted by the Second Spanish Republic –such as access to contraception, divorce being legalized, and equality under the law—would now be in danger.⁵

With this newfound interest in challenging the status quo, working class women would play a more important role in the war effort. Women were thus introduced into the war rhetoric both for actual military action and also as propaganda tools. They would also benefit from the fact that the anti-fascist rebellion had taken place within the ranks of the military and thus, the Republic had to resort to calling onto militias to defend itself. The ability for women to be able to contribute to the war effort by directly participating in the conflict would be significant and also tragic, since women would now be allowed to go to the frontlines and be expected to lay down their lives for the Republic. As it will be further explored in the following subsection, the *miliciana* would come to symbolize the reentry of women into the public sphere

⁵ Ryan, Lorraine. "A Case Apart: The Evolution of Spanish Feminism." In *Feminisms: Within and without: Papers Delivered at the Women's Studies Conference*, edited by Rebecca Pelan. Galway: National University of Ireland, 2005. 1.

3.1 The *Miliciana*: A New Role in Society

Before considering the *miliciana* and her entrance into the war front, it is important to first mention why her appearance is significant in the first place. After all, while there was no explicit rule before 1936 which prevented women from participating in armed conflicts, like Gener's assumptions about the role of women based on her biology, there were arguments against women's participation in anything outside of the home. These were a set of beliefs that grounded working class women to the private sphere and had an important role in solidifying the sociocultural and economic roles that each gender was expected to play. This set of beliefs would come to be known as the cult of domesticity. As part of the cult of domesticity, "women were to be more spiritual and pure than men, accept their subjugation to men, and accept their true social sphere as the child bearer and homemaker."⁶ These beliefs came to be socially acceptable as most of European society began to industrialize. The demands of the war, however, challenged the need for a separation of spheres when the Republic was at stake. As Mary Nash points out, "female virtues of deference and self-effacement were to fall into the background, and women's social involvement was openly demanded for the war effort."⁷ Thus, this massive effort by the Republican government to mobilize the women of the nation marked the beginning of the end to the confinement that women found themselves in before the war. The change would certainly be

⁶ Keister, Lisa A., and Darby E. Southgate. *Inequality: A Contemporary Approach to Race, Class, and Gender*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

<https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511842986>.

⁷ Nash, Mary. *Defying Male Civilization: Women in the Spanish Civil War*. Denver, Colorado: Arden Press Inc., 1995. 49.

good for them, but to be able to hold onto this newfound freedom, women would be expected to work twice as hard than any man in the Republican militias.

Due to the sheer need for women to mobilize and become a part of the war effort, all the political parties as well as women's organizations made enormous efforts to persuade women to participate by contributing whatever they could to the war effort. In this way, the civil war had become the catalyst necessary for women to break the barrier that had kept them separate from their male counterparts for centuries. Women were now considered an imperative and essential part of the war effort and political propaganda reflected just that. Women featured as the focal point of political propaganda that targeted both men and women to participate in the war. This effort to gain support led to political organizations creating images of women that broke with the norms and established women as principal actors of their country. Numerous political posters featured women holding weapons, wearing blue overalls and overall had silhouettes that made them appear attractive to men, and strong to women.

3.2 The Visual Representation of Womanhood

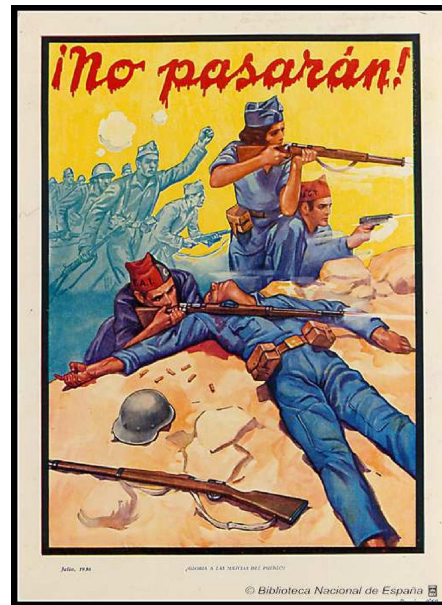
Numerous posters by various organizations emerged encouraging female participation in the war effort. Although their numbers would not reach a significant digit, their presence was nonetheless noted by their male counterparts, Republican government, and many women's organizations.

The following posters are some examples of what emerged at the beginning of the Spanish Civil War. These war posters, show the kind of attitude demonstrated by various organizations towards the *milicianas* and the general importance of female participation:



Poster 1: Arteche, Cristóbal. *Les Milicies, Us Necessiten!* 1936.

<http://www.bne.es/es/Micrositios/Exposicione>



Poster 2: Anonymous. *¡No pasarán!* 1936.

<https://blogs.elpais.com/a/6a00d8341bfb1653ef01a73d9edff5970d-pi>

Poster 1 shows a woman wearing blue overalls, characteristic of the *miliciana* movement at the time. She is holding a weapon in her left hand and is pointing at the viewer with her right hand. The action of pointing at the viewer and the message written on the poster explicitly tell the viewer to get involved in the fight against fascism, although it does not specify which gender she is speaking to. This poster is significant because it places a woman as the focal point of the poster. There are men behind her carrying various flags and are not depicted showing any kind of color. The only things in color are the woman's *mono*, the weapon, the flags, and the words. The fact that these are colorized shows an emphasis for country and pride in the laborer's background. What is questionable about this poster however, is the level of participation that this woman would have in the war since she appears to be mainly holding a weapon entice others to enlist for the war.

Poster 2 shows a woman wearing blue overalls and a matching blue hat. She is holding a weapon and unlike Poster 1, she is shown to be in the frontlines actually firing the weapon. The message in this poster is “They shall not pass” which was a saying popularized by the Communist leader of the AMA, Dolores Ibárruri, during a speech she gave that same year. This poster is significant because it actually shows a woman participating on the frontlines as a soldier and not merely holding a weapon for enlisting purposes. The woman is also shown amongst the rest of the men rather than in front or behind them. Additionally, the *miliciana* is also colorized alongside the men and is in between them wearing the same uniform as them. The poster shows that these women are actually part of the struggle and even alludes to the idea that both men and women can fight side by side in the struggle against fascism.

Both posters are important to understand the kind of woman that was being called to action during the early stages of the war. Both women are clearly young, of average build, and the only parts of their skin not covered were her arms and face. The blue overalls represent her working class background and is complemented by the brown utility belt as well as the cuffed shirt. Mary Nash adds that “for women, the wearing of trousers or *monos* acquired an even deeper significance, as women had never before adopted such masculine attire.”⁸ Thus for these women to adopt the blue overalls or trousers as their uniform not only meant challenging the traditional way that women were supposed to dress, but it also meant that for women to be able to participate in war, they had to challenge conventional clothing customs. Mary Nash also argues that this adoption of the blue *mono* “undoubtedly minimized sex differences,” since it challenged the way that women were typically expected to dress. Like both posters show, there

⁸ Nash, Mary. *Defying Male Civilization*. 52.

are barely any differences between the men and the women going to war. The blue *mono* actually served as an opportunity to take gender out of a task that had long been gendered. It is thus through the adoption of this seemingly simple uniform that not only were women shown to be equal to men in the battlefield, but also a task that had long been gendered and further supported the patriarchal society of Spain started to become neutral once again.

While the use of these posters certainly put women on a better light than they had been before, it was doing so by depicting war in a positive manner to be able to get as many enlisted people as possible. Allowing women to participate in warfare as actual soldiers is definitely a positive step in the direction of women's liberation from the subjugation of men and the patriarchal society they lived in since their admission into the ranks of the military meant another challenge to the patriarchal society that had normalized womanhood to mean staying in the home. However, it appears that this liberation would come at the cost of their lives. Never before had the Republic needed their support as much as it did at that point in 1936 and as soon as the government saw that they could tap into this previously-ignored demographic, they took full advantage. The result was that women took on an active role in the participation and defense of the Republic. These women participated not because they were being *allowed* to participate, but rather because contrary to the patriarchal belief that women had no political interest and served no value publicly, women actually wanted to fight to defend the Republic because they also had a political consciousness.

Both the depiction of *milicianas* as well as the language used, and the meaning behind their *voluntary* participation contradicts and creates a strong challenge to Pompeyo Gener's 1889 supposition that women were not equal to men. For anyone who might have believed and agreed with Gener's statements in his article, the mobilization of women and their integration into the

militias would have been a sobering experience and hopefully a turning point in the male construction of what it meant to be a woman.

3.3 Reasons For Enlisting

Women would enlist in the militias for various reasons. From political to personal justifications, it is important to note that while men were required to enlist and participate in the war, women enlisted in the militias voluntarily. Their participation in the war effort was required, but their participation in the frontlines was not. These different expectations made women's participation in the frontlines that much more important because it showed that they had strong feelings toward something within the Republic that they personally wanted to fight for. Mika Etçhebèhère, a famous *miliciana* during the civil war recounted her time when she enlisted, pointing out that she felt both protected and a protector because of her participation in the frontlines. She also added that she felt liberated because she was tying herself to a movement and cause that she had freely chosen.⁹

Etçhebèhère's point is important to consider because it shows the way in which the Spanish patriarchal society had affected women in Spain. In 1889, Emilia Pardo Bazán, a noted poet, author, and feminist activist published in the first of what would become a recurring magazine titled *La España Moderna (Modern Spain)*. In her article, "La mujer española" ("The Spanish Woman"), Pardo Bazán argued that men were leaving women farther and farther behind socially and that each new political achievement for men and their increasing social and political liberties, would further enlarge the hole in which women would find themselves in, which would

⁹ Etçhebèhère, Mika. *Mi guerra de España*.

make her role more passive and also more enigmatic.¹⁰ For Pardo Bazán, while the rest of Spanish society was evolving and changing, women seemed to be held behind, unable to change with men and with the times. Etçhebèhère's feeling of purpose is thus representative of the advancement in women's liberation from the home and the subjugated role they occupied in pre-war society.

Across all the women's militias that fought for the Republic, one is able to see various reasons for enlisting. It is clear now that all women who enlisted had a clear political consciousness and that they mainly enlisted to fight against Franco's fascist ideals. This was because unlike the men who were fighting because their participation was expected of them, women had an extra and more personal reason for fighting given that Franco's victory would bring with it a large repression of women and any rights or visibility that they would have acquired during the democratic republic or during the war.

One major reason for which many women enlisted in the militias was due to their own membership and participation of certain political and women's organizations. Political organizations such as the Communist Party of Spain (PCE) and women's organizations such as the Agrupación de Mujeres Antifascistas (Antifascist Women's Organization, AMA) promoted an antifascist rhetoric that demanded all women to participate in the war effort. These *milicianas* believed that it was their duty to do everything that they could to combat the rebellion and keep the Republic alive. Through this ideological consciousness one obtains further evidence to disprove the common patriarchal belief that women were inferior to men because they lacked or

¹⁰ Pardo Bazán, Emilia. "La mujer española." *La España moderna*, May 1890. 109.

were unable to effectively have an ideological consciousness independent of the men in their lives such as father, brothers, or husbands.

At the same time, it has also been recorded that many women enlisted in the war to fight for more personal reasons such as following a loved one into war. Paul Preston records the lives of four women who participated on both sides of the Spanish Civil War. Writing about both the nationalist and republican forces, he states that for some nationalist women, “it was about love and a chivalric notion of helping to crush the dragon of Communism” and that for some republican women, it was about helping “the Spanish people stop the rise of fascism.”¹¹

Some women even enlisted in the militias to escape the entrapment that they felt in the homefront. Due to the high demand for female participation in the war effort, women were expected to work more at home and in the backlines. The societal norms which had relegated women to working menial or demeaning jobs continued to persist in the homefront and was also reinvigorated by the claim that any effort made towards the war cause was a worthwhile effort. For this reason and due to the belief that enlisting in the militias would be a liberating change, some women would find freedom in enlistment since it would give them a weapon and most importantly, a purpose and cause they fight for.

¹¹ Preston, Paul. *Doves of War: Four Women of Spain*. London: Harper Collins Publishers, 2002.

Many women would see the war as an opportunity to leave their homes and hometowns, perhaps for the first time in their lives, and have new experiences.¹² This would especially be the case for young, unmarried women who, with the knowledge of what might await them once they got married, decided to enlist to be able to leave home. This uninformed and positive attitude towards the war would remain the case during the first few months of the war when the full gravity of the situation had not totally spread throughout the Republican forces.

Regardless of what their reasons for enlisting in the militias were, an important point to revisit is that their involvement in the war was voluntary. By leaving the home and taking on this new role, women were not only challenging the construction of what it meant to be a soldier—by adopting the blue *mono* and using weapons—but they were also challenging which spaces women were “supposed to occupy” by leaving the home and becoming a part of a mass movement that led them outwards, not only alongside other women, but also alongside other men. In many ways, the *miliciana* was the epitome of what it meant to challenge the traditional patriarchal Spanish society because it took on the challenge of calling into question not only physical spaces and tasks, but it also called into question the ideological basis that had constructed and constrained what it meant to be a woman in Spain in the early 20th century.

3.4 The Decline of The *Miliciana*

While the reasons for their enlistment are important, given that being in the militias afforded women with paid work equal to the labor that they were putting, the number of

¹² Anonymous. “Diario de una miliciana en el desembarco de Bayo.” *Tejiendo Historia* (blog), November 2, 2014. <https://manuelaguilerapovedano.wordpress.com/2014/11/02/diario-de-una-enfermera-en-el-desembarco-de-bayo/>.

milicianas during the war never reached a significant amount comparable to the female population in Republican Spain. Instead, true *milicianas* were few and far between and most of the time, militia women would have to enlist and serve alongside other men, who viewed them as no more than traveling maids, mothers, wives, or sisters and as such, tried recreating and reinforcing the environment they had learned back home. This mentality is not uncommon at all for the time period since there is evidence of other armed conflicts in which countries or polities go into war thinking that the same rules of their patriarchal and normative society will stay intact throughout their conflict. An example is the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920), in which women would serve the dual role of following men around the various battlefields and fulfilling the home making tasks such as cooking food, cleaning around the camp, and doing the laundry; while at the same time occasionally being part of the armed conflicts as well.¹³

One significant difference about the Spanish Civil War, however, is that although the same kind of treatment of women was starting to happen as it did during the Mexican Revolution, there are various accounts of women who recorded in diaries that they refused to do the work men expected them to do solely because of their gender. It was not that women *or* men should do the chores of the camp, but rather, that there should not be an expectation for any specific gender to do it solely because it had been their job before. Women who refused to do these chores were thus not challenging these normative standards to have men do these

¹³ Macías, Anna. *Against All Odds: The Feminist Movement in Mexico to 1940*. Contributions in Women's Studies. Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1982. 41.

<http://RE5QY4SB7X.search.serialssolutions.com/?V=1.0&L=RE5QY4SB7X&S=JCs&C=TC0000083764&T=marc>.

themselves, but rather, like the adoption of the blue *mono* as their uniform during the war, women throughout Spain carried out this defiance to the normative society they had known their whole lives, by rejecting and challenging the conventional expectation that women were supposed to do the chores around camp and the home.

In her diaries about her life during the war, Mika Etçhebèhère recounts that the sergeant from her militia came to her “to tell me that the men refused to sweep the floor and make their beds because that was a woman’s job and that they had four *milicianas* for that.”¹⁴ Clearly, many of the same men whom these *milicianas* shared political beliefs with, still believed that because of their gender, women were inferior to men and their presence in the frontlines was to serve the men that had come to fight in the war. This kind of mentality was clearly indicative of an internal struggle to reconcile the changing times that war had brought on them, with their own rooted patriarchal beliefs about gender roles and female involvement in the war as *milicianas*.

By September of 1936, just a few months after the civil war had started, the efforts made by political organizations depicting *milicianas* as heroines of the Republic had diminished. Political posters no longer depicted them as important revolutionary figures and by late December, those posters would cease to be printed. With the disappearing propaganda came the changing perception of the *miliciiana* from the heroine that she had been depicted as at the beginning of the war, to just another obstacle to carrying out a proper resistance to the fascist movement.

¹⁴ Etçhebèhère, Mika. *Mi guerra de España*. Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires: EUDEBA, 2014. 35.

The Republican government of Francisco Largo Caballero found many reasons to defund and discourage direct female participation in the war. Only one, however, can seriously be considered valid: the creation of a standing army mitigated any need for separate militias. As it has been discussed at length throughout this *miliciana* chapter, the rebellion by Franco's nationalist forces began at the military level, meaning that the republic was left without a standing army to defend itself. It was for this reason that the government allowed the formation of militias in the early stages of the war. As the months passed, the government was better able to reorganize itself and create a standing army with a centralized ranking system. This meant that the militias would either be disbanded or absorbed into the army.

While the reasoning behind the decline of the militias as a whole makes sense, there is no reason why women would not have been able to form a part of this army once it had been established. A few women had already proven themselves on the battlefield, earning themselves praise and honors beyond what other men would have hoped to achieve. Notable women were Rosario *La Dinamitera* (the Dynamiter), Lina Odena, Caridad Mercader, and Mika Etçhebèhère, to name a few.¹⁵ These women would have battalions named after them as well as ranks and places in the militias earned because of their courage and work in the battlefield. At the formation of a standing army, the Republican government should have allowed the integration of women into the army because they had earned it. Leaving them out of the formation of an organized defense force not only contradicted the government's own stance on female participation's importance, but it also signaled the reestablishment of patriarchal and normative roles.

¹⁵ Nash, Mary. *Defying Male Civilization*. 50.

It is important to note that women were not being told that their efforts and presence were no longer needed, but instead that they would be much better suited to help with the war effort in the backlines with the injured men and the children. This forced removal from the frontlines not only reinforced many men's preconceived notions that women were better suited for housework and chores than war, but it also shows the government's motivations to force women back into the state of submission that had been the accepted norm prior to the beginning of the war. It also highlights the way in which womanhood was manipulated and controlled to fit the agenda of political organizations, which sought their support.

To further push women out of the armed conflict and back into the homefront, the government began an aggressive campaign against sex workers, which led to the further stereotyping of sex work as a deplorable form of work as well as the generalization of most frontlines women as sex workers. Like with the *milicianas* at the beginning of the war, numerous

posters were produced bringing awareness to the venereal diseases, but also painting women in a bad light.



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Poster 3: Rivero, Gil. *¡Atención!*

Las enfermedades venéreas amenazan tu salud: ¡prevente contra ellas! 1937.

<https://mdc.csuc.cat/digital/collectio/pavellorepu/id/477>.



© Cópia digital Biblioteca Pavelló de la República

Poster 4: *Una baja por mal venéreo es una deserción*. 1937.

<https://mdc.csuc.cat/digital/collection/pave/lorepu/id/550>.



© Cópia digital Biblioteca Pavelló de la República

Poster 5: Carmona. *Evita las enfermedades venéreas, tan peligrosas como las balas enemigas*. 1936.

<https://mdc.csuc.cat/digital/collection/pavellorepu/id/476/>.

Poster 3 says “Attention! These venereal diseases endanger your health, be careful with them!” The poster depicts a soldier barely being able to hold himself up and being helped up by the figure of a woman with her hand around his back. The woman’s right hand, pictured as just bones, is holding up the soldier. This poster is important because it is depicting women as the main reason for men dying of this disease. The poster not only alludes to the disease as debilitating, but it also alludes to death through the skeleton imagery used to depict the woman’s hand.

Poster 4 says “An injury due to a venereal disease is the same as desertion.” In this poster, the soldier is seen afraid of a snake that appears to be wrapped around a naked woman. The snake alludes to the poison that has gotten control over the woman’s body and that is now targeting the soldier. In this instance, the woman is depicted as a victim, but still as the source of disease.

Poster 5 says “Avoid these venereal diseases, which are just as dangerous as enemy bullets.” The poster depicts a soldier and woman in an embrace while in the background one can see the same soldier, but dropping his weapon and not being able to hold himself up. This poster depicts the woman in bright, vibrant colors while the rest of the images are muted and of one color. This choice by the artist makes the woman the focal point of the poster making her the reason for the soldier’s disease.

All three posters are about sexually transmitted diseases and all three posters contain women in them as the source of these diseases. It is important to note that these women are not depicted as soldiers either, but rather, are either naked or wearing an outfit that would make them appear to be flirty. In all three instances the women are also depicted as sensual whether by the way they look or their implied actions, it is clear that the posters seek to make women appear as tempting and the men appears as blameless victims.

Even if it was true that the sexually transmitted diseases were coming because sex workers were bringing them to the frontlines, the posters place too much of the blame on the women and not enough on the men. For all the masculinity and virility that this society seeks to place on its men, it very easily implies that men can be tempted or submitted into sexual relations. It also implies that women were in the frontlines solely to be sex workers. Even if there were sex workers in the frontlines, it should be considered that the number of sex workers who

went to the frontlines to actually fight was larger than the number of sex workers who actually went to the frontlines solely to continue their work. Still, the generalization that most, if not all women, were taking part in some kind of sexual work in the frontlines was very pervasive. To this point, Mary Nash makes a valid and interesting comparison to prove that once again, the motivations behind this claim were sexist: many men who had previously been incarcerated or who had some kind of criminal past were also allowed to enlist in the Republic's militias. This small percentage of men and their actions, however, did not deter the government from encouraging their enlistment, nor did it create a negative image of all men in the militias.

3.5 Rejecting This Model of Womanhood

With beginning of the decline of the *miliciana*, many reasons for their retirement were provided by political and women's organizations alike. The challenges that the *miliciana* presented to the normative society of Spain had forced many to reevaluate the female presence in the frontlines and whether or not it was worth the loss of the patriarchal society they had known before the war. Since there were already men who were going to combat every day, many believed that women would better serve the war effort by returning home and working in factories, essentially contributing in different ways other than by being enlisted. If anything, many *milicianas'* commitment to doing both the chores of the camp and be in armed combat showed their versatility and commitment to the war effort.

Mary Nash points out that this sexist way of dividing work based on gender was justified even by some *milicianas* themselves which understood their relegation to chores and housework in the frontlines as a result of their lack of proper military training rather than their actual ability

to be in the frontlines.¹⁶ This mentality shows that even *milicianas*, those women who so openly challenged gender conventions also internalized some of the patriarchal comments made about their gender. It was true that women were not trained nearly well enough to be a part of the militia. In her diaries Mika Etçhebèhère points out numerous instances in which she struggled to even be given an opportunity to hold a weapon. What is important to remember, however, is that the fascist rebellion had been so sudden and left the Republic so unguarded that these militias were composed not only of men who had experience in combat, but also many men whose participation in this war would be the first time that they would even hold a gun or be so far away from home. Women were thus not the only people poorly trained in the frontlines and is why their lack of training is not a valid enough reason to remove women from combat.

3.6 Women's Organizations at the Retirement of the *Miliciana*

To assume that all women agreed with this new model of womanhood would mean to grossly misrepresent female motivations during the war. Although the *miliciana* opened the door for women to imagine womanhood differently, their imagined emancipation from the patriarchy fell short of motivating older, upper class women to support this new movement. Antiquated ideas of what a woman should look and act like resurfaced during the latter months of 1936, questioning what womanhood should mean and look like. Greatly represented by women's

¹⁶ Nash, Mary. "La miliciana: otra opción de combatividad femenina antifascista." In *Las mujeres y la Guerra Civil Española*, 97–108. Salamanca: Ministerio de Asuntos Sociales: Instituto de la Mujer, 1989. 103.

organizations such as the AMA, older more established women would make an effort to redirect women towards tradition and what they perceived to be traditional female values.

At the beginning of the rebellion, war posters depicted women in new ways, with their blue *mono* and in the battlefield, the perception of what it meant to be a soldier was being challenged by the inclusion of women into service. While these posters helped challenge the gender divisions of labor, it is important to note that these posters also helped advance a misogynistic rhetoric from which the government depended on to have men enlist in the militias. Thus, the posters served to both challenge and reinforce the patriarchal society in Spain. These posters reinforced the patriarchy by shaming men into the armed service, since it showed women carrying weapons and fighting in the frontlines. While these posters encouraged the enlistment of anyone into the armed forces, the implied message from these was that if women could enlist, then so should the men. This process of emasculation worked because the *miliciiana* “represented a woman who had impact, who provoked because she took on what was considered to be a male role and thus obliged men to fulfill what was at times described as their ‘virile’ role as soldiers.”¹⁷

This emasculation process is thus interesting to consider because it flips the argument on the men, who fall prey to their own constructions of manhood just as they had done in imagining and dictating what womanhood should be. It also shows how uncomfortable this society was with antinormativity since it not only dictated what womanhood should look like but also what manhood should represent.

¹⁷ Nash, Mary. *Defying Male Civilization*. 53.

4. Another Model of Womanhood

As the idea of the *miliciana* began to be challenged by more traditional conceptualizations of what the social roles of women should be, propaganda posters began to be printed depicting women in more “tame” roles reinforcing previous gender roles and implying a return to the division of labor prior to the war.



Poster 6: Penagos Zalabardo, Rafael de. *Tu Que Distes La Vida al Niño, Salva de La Muerte al Hombre*. 1937.
<https://collections.nlm.nih.gov/catalog/nlm:nlmuid-101453483-img>.



Poster 7: Lozano, Jesus. *¡¡Mujeres!! Trabajad En La Retaguardia*. 1937.
<https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O100830/mujeres-trabajad-en-la-retaguardia-poster-lozano-jesus/mujeres-trabajad-en-la-retaguardia-poster-lozano-jesus/>.

Poster 6 says “You who gave him life as a child, save his life now as an adult. It shows a woman donating blood to a soldier who is lying unconscious in bed. In the background is another woman caring for her baby. This poster is important because it builds on the common notion that

women are inherently mothers first. The placing of the mother and her child in the background of the nurse and the soldier serves to suggest that women's maternal love can be channeled to help the sons the nation. The poster suggests that women can play a bigger role in society by harnessing their inherent maternal inclinations.

Poster 7 says "Women! Work in the rearguard." It depicts three different women working as seamstresses, nurses, and typing down messages or orders. This poster is important because all three women are shown to be working in the backlines, fulfilling the jobs commonly advertised to women: nursing, sewing, and typing. What is also significant about this poster is that none of these women appear particularly independent nor individual. They do not have any kind of facial expressions and at the same time appear to all be the same person. This artistic choice perhaps served to show that any woman could be a part of this movement. At the same time, the effect of this artistic choice to deprive these women any facial expressions, and by extension their individuality—shows the artist's interest in focusing women on the job and their collective efforts rather than their individuality and personal contributions to the war effort.

Both of these posters challenge the idea of the *miliciana* or at the very least, depict alternatives to the *miliciana* role by proposing an alternative to her supposedly flirty attire. All of the women in the posters are wearing a dress and are also wearing muted colors. This is in stark contrast to the posters about *milicianas*, which feature sharp colors on the poster as well as the women depicted in them. The lack of facial expressions are also significant as it is different from both the *miliciana* and venereal disease posters. The choice in clothing as well as the lack of facial expressions show that these women are not unique and have therefore lost their individuality. Becoming a part of this rearguard movement has thus stripped women from their

sense of individual womanhood and replaced it with group womanhood. This shows an effort to again redefine what it means to be a woman and also to highlight traditional female gender roles.

The focus on motherhood would also grow and expand as the rearguard campaign gained momentum at the end of 1936. It would eventually replace the *miliciana* as the primary role that all women should involve themselves with and its argument would rest on a return to the biological essentialism with which Pompeyo Gener argued in 1889. Women's organizations viewed the challenging of gender norms and anti-normative and counterintuitive to the war effort would thus promote motherhood as a viable solution to this problem. Those organizations also used the argument of motherhood as a biological duty to justify why women were much better suited for being in the backlines rather than in the frontlines. From these efforts to justify a united women's front against fascism, two important symbols would be created: the Homefront Heroine and the Combative Motherhood.

Motherhood during the war had changed significantly. The war afforded women of the working class the opportunity to be visible within that male-dominated society. Women did not have much to aspire to outside of marriage and child-bearing prior to the war. Dolores Ibárruri, famously known as "La Pasionaria," wrote an autobiography depicting her life during the war and her involvement in the Communist Party in Spain. In the early chapters of her autobiography, Ibárruri describes life for women prior to the war, allowing the reader to see different life was for women and especially mothers during the civil war.

Dolores Ibárruri, wrote in her autobiography that she had married at the age of twenty and had done so out of the need to be able to afford herself a better life than just being another family's maid, given that because she was a woman, she was poorly fed and poorly paid. At that age, she was married to a miner she had met in one of her jobs. With that, she reflected on her

marriage and stated that, “my mission in life was ‘fulfilled.’ I could not, ought not, aspire to more. Woman’s goal, her only aspiration had to be matrimony and the continuation of the joyless, dismal, pain-ridden thralldom that was our mothers’ lot; we were supposed to dedicate ourselves wholly to giving birth, to raising our children and to serving our husbands who, for the most part, treated us with complete disregard.”¹⁸

Ibárruri clarifies that not all marriages were as bleak as hers and adds that her mother had equated finding a good husband, to hitting a bullseye or winning the lottery. Ibárruri continued: “May the happy wives forgive me; but each of us judges the market by the good values we find there.”¹⁹ Still, prior to the war, it seems like matrimony was one of the only ways for women to have some kind of purpose. At the same time, it is clear that marriage was also a life sentence for many women like Ibárruri.

Even as marriage had become an escape from the financial and social hardships that their womanhood afforded them, marriage for many women would also become a prison from which they would not be able to escape from. With the goal of marriage having been surpassed, their next one, and perhaps their last goal, was to have children. During the war, the self-defining notions of nothingness that pervaded the lives of women such as young Dolores Ibárruri would change, giving their womanhood and motherhood a new status within the changing social order.

¹⁸ Ibárruri, Dolores. *They Shall Not Pass*. New York: International Publishers, 1984.

<https://archive.org/details/theyshallnotpass00ibar/mode/1up>. 59

¹⁹ Ibárruri. *They Shall Not Pass*. 59.

4.1 Homefront Heroines

As opposed to the image and symbolism of the *miliciana*, as described in the previous chapter, the so-called “homefront heroines” was a new category and tactic employed by various women’s organizations to emphasize the importance of traditional womanly values. According to many women’s organizations, the idea of the *miliciana* had been too radical, her clothing too different, and her message too subversive to the core values of a traditional woman. Instead, what many of these organizations did was try to appeal to a woman’s “inherent” sense of motherhood and care.

One of the largest women organizations and coalitions during the war, the Agrupación de Mujeres Antifascistas (AMA), spread the message that “the characteristic of woman is her constructive spirit and her maternal love; and war and fascism imply destruction and hate. War destroys the home which she created with such tenderness; it murders her husband and her son” and thus mothers need to support not just the fight against fascism, but also their husbands’ and sons’ involvement in that war. Mary Nash adds that the “predominant slogan of the time was ‘Men to the Front. Women to the Homefront.’”²⁰ Both the message by the AMA and the slogan reinforced traditional gender divisions of labor by arguing that women’s inherent sense of motherhood was antithetical to men’s implied sense of brutality and warmongering. Both the slogan and message thus place men and women at opposite ends of a spectrum and further reinforcing the idea of separating the genders based on assumed gender practices. As opposed to the instrumentalization of women that occurred during the creation and support of the image of

²⁰ Nash, Mary. *Defying Male Civilization: Women in the Spanish Civil War*. Denver, Colorado:

Arden Press Inc., 1995. 54

the *miliciana*, what occurred with this “homefront heroines” movement was the instrumentalization and justification of the inferior roles that working class women filled in Republican Spanish society.

While motherhood became the role that all women should look forward to fulfill during this new female-oriented campaign, it is important to remember that not all women at that time were mothers and, of course, motherhood would also not apply to young women or even children. In an effort to make the idea of motherhood and their involvement in the war cause more inclusive, actual motherhood was not a requirement to be called a “homefront heroine.” Instead, the role of motherhood was expanded to encompass women throughout Spain regardless of their familial or marital status. This is significant because, as Ibárruri recalled in her autobiography, motherhood was not something that most women looked forward to, but rather, it was the only role available to them. Now, motherhood was being “marketed” as a desirable position and even expanded so that any woman could be considered a mother. An example that illustrates the expanded role of motherhood is that of La Pasionaria. Mary Nash describes Dolores Ibárruri as “the epitome of the brave, courageous, but exacting Spanish mother who enfolded all Spanish men in her maternal embrace.”²¹ The phrase “maternal embrace” is important to understanding the kind of motherhood that women organizations sought to promote. As previously mentioned, organizations such as the AMA believed that women had an inherent sense of motherhood which separated them from men. This connected all women, and as such, was an expectation that all women should take part in the antifascist movement by promoting the participation of everyone in the war effort.

²¹ Nash. *Defying Male Civilization*. 57.

While the expansion of the role of motherhood was certainly important to change attitudes towards practical application of the role and also to change the way that women contributed to the war effort, it is also important to consider the expansion of the ideological role of motherhood. One of the biggest ideological changes that the role of motherhood underwent during this campaign was that it no longer limited women to the private sphere as it had done so in the past. With real motherhood no longer being a requirement to be considered a mother, women could be considered “mothers of the country” like La Pasionaria was. A mother’s maternal love and focus could thus shift from her children to the nation. This shift would thus challenge the traditional position of women in the working class society. Considering that traditional women and women’s organizations were advocating for this kind of take on motherhood, it is clear that they were also making concessions for the sake of the war effort, namely that women could continue to have a presence and major role in the public sphere through the argument of motherhood as a collective, rather than personal and individualistic effort.

4.2 Combative Motherhood

With the ideological expansion of motherhood into the public sphere, combative motherhood would emerge as a viable option for women to take an active and present role in public society. The most important thing that women’s organizations sought to promote was the active involvement in the war cause through the participation of women and the men in their life. Combative motherhood was a way for women to be able to take an active role in the war efforts by feeling like they were making significant contributions to the antifascist movement. It required of them to make the necessary sacrifices in the fight against fascism. In this way,

motherhood became synonymous with sacrifice, not only self-sacrifice, but also collective sacrifice.

While self-sacrifice had been the norm with motherhood, collective sacrifice became a new development through continued campaigns to promote female interest in the war effort. Most of the time, combative motherhood created the idea that women who were committed to the antifascist movement were willing to sacrifice even their own sons and husbands in the fight for the republic, since “the pain and sacrifice of motherhood mark revolutionary women’s lives as deeply as any political event.”²² The societal acknowledgement of the sacrifice mothers, daughters, and sisters experienced through the loss of the men in their lives also served to justify their place in the public sphere. Mary Nash also explains that combative motherhood “gave them moral authority and even compulsion to oblige their sons to fight.”²³ Thus, through the changing of motherhood from the private to the public sphere, women’s many losses and pain were available for all to see, motivating not only the men to continue the fight in the front, but also motivating other women to contribute more to the war effort.

To be able to combat any possible dissent against this new message of motherhood, women’s organizations, but especially the communist ones, developed the idea that victory lay in the attitudes and efforts of the mothers in the homefront. A common popular communist view stated that:

²² Byron, Kristine. “Writing the Female Revolutionary Self: Dolores Ibárruri and the Spanish Civil War.” *Journal of Modern Literature* 28, no. 1 (2004): 138–65. 147.

²³ Nash. *Defying Male Civilization*. 56.

Victory... will be forged by the sacrifice of those sons whom you had such difficulty bearing, and for whom you have so much hope. This blood which flows so generously is yours; it is the blood of the most generous of our women... To you, to your blood, to your flesh, we will owe victory.²⁴

The need to justify the deaths of so many women's husbands and children is clear from this excerpt. Mothers were now required to sacrifice not only their lives for the raising of their children, but also were required to sacrifice their own children in the pursuit of victory.

Additionally, these organizations also used another theme commonly tied to that of motherhood and especially exploited during times of war: futurity. There are many ways to secure one's future—either through photographs or in one's memory—war always makes people question how they will be remembered and who they are fighting for. Almost as common the nation as a motivator to continue the war struggle is the idea of the Child as the symbol of a better and achievable future. Exploring the significance of the symbol of the Child, Lee Edelman explains that the “Child remains in perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics, the fantasmatic beneficiary of every political intervention.”²⁵ Through this, Edelman argues that the Child is both the reason and the receiver of the actions taken by both people and governments regardless of their political inclinations. In the context of the civil war, both the Nationalists and the Republicans were fighting to be able to shape the country for the future, for the children. The

²⁴ Nash. *Defying Male Civilization*. 56.

²⁵ Edelman, Lee. *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2004. 3.

following poster exemplifies the imagery the Republican side wished to promote through the use of children.



Poster 8: *Socorro Rojo Internacional. La Bestia Fascista, Asesina, Destruye. El S.R.I. Ampara, Ayuda.* 1936.

<https://library.ucsd.edu/speccoll/visfront/socorrorojopost.html>.

Poster 8 says “International Red Aid. The fascist beast murders and destroys. The International Red Aid brings hope and assistance.” The poster depicts two scared children and above them, a large red hand –which represents the *International Red Aid*—is shown to be protecting the children from the bombing of a plane flying above them. This poster is important because it makes the case that children are the target of Franco’s fascist rebellion, but that the International Red Aid is willing to help protect the children. The fact that the International Red Aid is named and its acronym also appears on the posters shows their interest in highlighting the internationality of the aid. It sends the message that the world is with the Republic’s effort to protect the children of Spain.

Thinking about the heteropatriarchal society in which many of these women lived in prior to the war, the Child was the reason that jobs and society as a whole were so gendered. I argue that that Spanish society valued children so much that it justified them having women solely focus on raising the children rather than have them be integrated into society. This is because children played a pivotal role in not only learning their own traditional normative values, but also reproducing them for the future. In that sense, women were thus charged with what was perhaps the most important job in Spain. The civil war tore through the fantasy that the Republic and its values could have future and so, in an effort to protect the Child and the future of Republican Spain, people went to war.

Thus, the use of motherhood as a motivator for war is not all that surprising given the importance that this society placed on children and the future. The expansion of motherhood into the public sphere and it encompassing women who were not yet mothers also worked to entice many to participate in the war because it forced them to question their position in the continuance of the Child and tradition. The creation of motherhood as synonymous with womanhood and citizenship thus left women with no option other than to take on this role of motherhood or look as if they stood against the Child and the future of Republican Spain.

4.3 The Problem With Instrumentalizing Motherhood

The use of motherhood in all its aspects, as explained in this chapter, focused on getting women to *want* to be involved in the war effort by contributing not only their time and resources, but also the lives of all the men in their lives. At the same time, if voluntary interest in participation through supposed maternal feelings was not enough, as Edelman has described in the importance of the Child for modern societies, the new construction of motherhood during the

war would have forced many more women to fall in line lest they be seen as challenging the symbol of the Child.

Thus while motherhood was constantly described as a collective effort for women to be more involved in the war effort, it became another way through which women's organizations and larger national organizations reached their main target audience: men. Although on the surface, it appears that women's organizations were targeting women with their messages about motherhood and their contributions to the war effort, the reality is that all of those efforts that they made for women to be more involved in the war still focused on men being sent to the frontlines while women stayed in the homefront. Combative motherhood was the most pervasive in these efforts to continue to place men in the spotlight. Due to the nature belief in the maternal nature of women, motherhood was instrumentalized to manipulate women into thinking that the blood sacrifice they were providing, in the form of their children being sent to war, was a worthy sacrifice for the good of the nation. In this way, women ceased to be individuals and instead became part of a collective, stripping them of their individuality and reinforcing the same discriminatory and diminutive rhetoric that existed in society before the war: that women's sole identity as an individual originated from their ability to produce and raise children.

While motherhood was initially used as an argument to contribute to the defense of the cities and the people who were fighting in the frontlines, the shift towards combative motherhood and the normalization of familial sacrifice marked the clear efforts by male political propaganda and women's organizations to justify the casualties by forging a collective identity and diminishing the losses that each woman was feeling individually and apart from the losses that the Republic was facing. Thus, the losses were not "allowed" to be felt, but rather should be quickly dismissed in the efforts to get more people to go to the frontlines. This in turn created a

contradiction between the implied message that many women's organizations had and the actual message that they were sending. By promoting motherhood as a universal maternal feeling that all women inherently had, these organizations were reinforcing and promoting deeply rooted connections amongst women and the men in their lives. At the same time, however, these same organizations were asking women not to feel the losses that they were experiencing when their children or husbands died in the frontlines. It is this way that while women's organizations were promoting familial ties and communal involvement in the war effort, they were also encouraging detachment from individual emotions and diminishing the losses that women were experiencing.

Another problem with the instrumentalization of motherhood was that because there was an extreme focus on getting young men to fight in the frontlines, daughters, and especially little girls would be neglected and serve almost no role in the war effort. Mothers would be encouraged to focus more on their male children, showing them the values of a good citizen, how they can participate, and the importance of self-sacrifice for the Republic, whereas girls were left in a state of limbo. Mary Nash argues that "mothers' concerns are directed toward their sons and not their daughters, [they] remain quite invisible in this imagery of motherhood" and as a result, "their contribution to the war effort does not figure visibly and is not outlined."²⁶ Thus, one can also argue that in an effort to promote family values and emphasize maternal love, women's organizations were also serving a detrimental role in the upbringing of girls all over the Republic since "sons constituted the main concern and were the main thrust within the symbolization of motherhood dedicated to the war effort."²⁷

²⁶ Nash. *Defying Male Civilization*. 57.

²⁷ *Ibid.* 56.

Even though the role of women during the war evolved to encompass more of their personal life and less of an idealized version of their lives, as it had been done with the creation of the *miliciana*, the way in which motherly values and motherhood as a category were promoted failed to healthily promote a movement for women in which their roles as citizens of the Republic were emphasized. Instead, motherhood was expanded to cover more areas of life and to encompass the entire female population of the Republic. This in turn had a negative effect on the creation of a female identity that lay outside of the role of motherhood. It instead reinforced previously held notions that a woman's biological ability to bear children was her only saving grace and at the same time, that women naturally had maternal feelings. It was this emphasizing and reinforcement of those two notions that did not advance women's struggle to change their roles from before the war.

5. Women's Organizations during the War

During the Spanish Civil War, the mobilization of women on both the frontlines and the homefront was facilitated by women's organizations, which reflected their political as well as social beliefs. These organizations depended on the participation of those same women to continue to operate and oftentimes also depended on the aid of larger, male-dominated organizations for funds and other kinds of aid. Because of the societal norms of the time, many political organizations had been largely closed off or critical of female involvement in their organizations, as such, branch organizations were created to accommodate those women who expressed interest in the party or organization, but whose contributions to them were expected to be different than the expectations and responsibilities that men had within their larger party or organization. One example of an organization and its branch partner is the Partido Comunista

Español (Spanish Communist Party, PCE) and the Asociación de Mujeres Antifascistas (Antifascist Women's Organization, AMA).

Although the PCE was a large organization in Spain, it was not the only one and certainly did not reflect the political or social interests of all the women in the Republic. As Mary Nash points out, “although political pragmatism and, even more important, the pressure generated by war needs may have blurred these distinctions and resulted in apparent commonality of policy, the theory, goals, and resistance strategies on both social and gender issues differed enormously among the major women's organizations.”²⁸ Still, when studying the women's organizations in Spain during the civil war, one can observe the clear divisions formed between different organizations, mainly focused on war politics and how many changes should come from this war as it progressed in 1936.

The two main divisions that came about at the onset of the war were about the purpose of the war and what the results of the war should be. On one side of the spectrum, anarchist and dissident Marxist organizations promoted a strong antifascist rhetoric matched by their devotion to a revolutionary fight that would result in changing what had been the *status quo* for many laborers—female and male—in Spain. On the other side of the spectrum, communist and socialist organizations matched their opponents' enthusiasm on the war against fascism, but rejected any kind of revolutionary changes that would result from this particular war. They believed that the primary focus of the war should be creating an antifascist front that would repel Franco's advances in Spain and that a Revolution could wait. The two biggest organizations in

²⁸ Nash, Mary. *Defying Male Civilization*. 64.

Spain which reflected these two differing points of view were the Mujeres Libres and the Agrupación de Mujeres Antifascistas (AMA).

5.1 Mujeres Libres

The Mujeres Libres (Free Women) organization in Spain was a major mass movement organization that began as a magazine publication and which later became a full-fledged organization shortly before the civil war in 1936. During its years as an active organization, it was responsible for mobilizing over 30,000 women throughout the country.²⁹ Its main objective during the wartime years was the “emancipation of women and their involvement in the liberation movement in Spain.”³⁰ The Mujeres Libres’ main objective was clearly feminist and woman-centered. It considered women to be enslaved within Spain and that their liberation from their triple enslavement was necessary for them and society as a whole to advance. Citing directly from the Mujeres Libres membership records, Mary Nash states that the triple enslavement which the organization referred to numerous times throughout their time as an active organization was the following: “the triple enslavement to which [women] have been subject: enslavement to ignorance, enslavement as women, and enslavement as workers.”³¹ Thus,

²⁹ Kaplan, Temma E. “Spanish Anarchism and Women’s Liberation.” *Journal of Contemporary History* 6, no. 2 (1971): 101–10. 105.

³⁰ “Creación y desarrollo de la organización ‘Mujeres Libres’ (1936-1939).” In *Las mujeres y la Guerra Civil Española*, 31–34. Salamanca: Ministerio de Asuntos Sociales: Instituto de la Mujer, 1989. 32.

³¹ Nash, Mary. *Defying Male Civilization*. 78.

Mujeres Libres sought to use the war to promote an antifascist rhetoric, but also promote the establishment of new gender norms anchored in equality between the two sexes.

The movement was open for all women, but it mainly targeted women workers whose experiences in the labor force had shaped an anarchist mindset in them. Mujeres Libres thus brought back to the forefront two main issues which would surely be in the backs of these women's minds in their everyday life: the social and political standing of the working class and the oppression that women faced.³² It is for this reason that Mary Nash rightly points out that “for the Spanish anarchists, the events of July 1936 signified the beginning of a revolutionary moment which would end with the total transformation of the social and economic structures” of the country.³³ In other words, the anarchists saw the war as an opportunity to carry out a Revolution for the laborers of Spain and that through working to empower them and grow their influence, so too would women be empowered and gain influence in the country. Women were thus a focal point in as much as their interests aligned with those of the working class, which explains Mujeres Libres' interest in the working woman rather than the general population of women. Although they would work to benefit all, they would depend on the working woman and her experiences to lead the vanguard of change.

The Mujeres Libres movement made their points based on the duality of men fighting for emancipation and freedom from fascism.³⁴ The members believed that just as men ardently fight for what they believe in and just like the government expects women to participate in the war effort, so too should men and the government support a movement that seeks to liberate women

³² “Creación y desarrollo de la organización ‘Mujeres Libres’ (1936-1939).” 33.

³³ Nash, Mary. *Mujer y movimiento obrero en España*. Barcelona: Editorial Fontamara, 1981. 91.

³⁴ Nash, Mary. *Defying Male Civilization*. 79.

from the three kinds of enslavement they outlined. This is important because *Mujeres Libres* sought to make women equal to men, not better; and their approach sought to empower the working class as well. The *Mujeres Libres* organization thus “rejected both feminism (by which they meant treating men as the enemy and striving for equality for women within an existing system of privileges) and the relegation of women to a secondary position” in Spanish society.³⁵

As a part of their efforts to reach broader audiences, the *Mujeres Libres* published a magazine under the same name as their organization: *Mujeres Libres*. The following magazine covers show their approach to the war and understanding of their role as a women’s liberating movement.



Magazine 1: *Mujeres Libres*. *Mujeres Libres: con el trabajo y con las armas*. 1937.
http://www.mcu.es/ccbae/es/catalogo_imagenes/grupo.cmd?path=32563



Magazine 2: *Mujeres Libres*. *Mujeres Libres: Gracias, hermanos!*. 1937.
http://www.mcu.es/ccbae/es/catalogo_imagenes/grupo.cmd?path=32629



Magazine 3: *Mujeres Libres*. *Mujeres Libres: la unidad de los trabajadores es la victoria*. 1937.
http://www.mcu.es/ccbae/es/catalogo_imagenes/grupo.cmd?path=32655

³⁵ Ackelsberg, Martha. *Free Women of Spain: Anarchism and the Struggle for the Emancipation of Women*. Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2005. 148.

Magazine 1 shows women as soldiers, holding weapons and flags in their hands while at the same time wearing dresses. The choice to have the women wear dresses shows the challenge that *Mujeres Libres* presents not only to the patriarchal society which had determined what a soldier should look like, but they are also challenging the blue *mono* that had become so popular with the *milicianas*. In doing so, the *Mujeres Libres* are showing that there is no one way of participating in the war. The women and their reasons for enlisting are just as heterogeneous as their political inclinations. The number of women shown in the cover is also interesting given that the way that they were printed one can only guess how many women there actually are on the picture. The *Mujeres Libres* probably choose this approach because they wanted to highlight the number of women devoted to their cause. Magazine 1 also has a caption which reads: “with our work and our weapons, we women will defend freedom of the people.” Again, like the mass of women depicted on the cover, the caption alludes to a women-only movement capable of making great change

Magazine 2 shows three soldiers marching, with one individual soldier in the forefront whose face the viewer can see. The rest of the soldiers’ faces are not visible and their presence is only noticeable due to a green outline of their bodies. Superimposed on the image is a small message to the men fighting on the frontlines. The message’s title is “Thank you, brothers.” The message explains that the organization wanted to recognize the way in which women had not been recognizing the men for their efforts in the frontlines. It calls the men heroes and states that while women continue to be oppressed in Spanish society, it is their duty to recognize that the men are fighting for both men and women to be able to live free from fascist control. This cover is thus important because it is published almost a year after the war began. It recognizes the men

for their efforts, whilst also maintaining their own female liberation objective. This cover serves as a great example of uncompromising loyalty to both their mission and the war effort.

Magazine 3 says “unity amongst the workers will lead to victory.” In the background there are two women whose faces have been drawn but whose eyes are missing. Given that the faces do not have any specific features one can assume that these were drawn in for the purpose of distinguishing between the male-female binary. Due to this then, the eyes could have been what identified specific people. Omitting the eyes thus serves as a way to have women picture themselves in the image. The message also superimposed on the image says that the war that they are fighting is not a “capitalist war, nor a war to defend a territory, nor a crown” and that instead it is a war to defend freedom from dictatorship.

The three magazine cover pages are important because they represent the Mujeres Libres’ program perfectly. The covers continue to show a liberating framework, emphasizing women’s contribution to the war effort, but also not antagonizing nor misrepresenting men. As stated previously, the Mujeres Libres did not seek to subject men to the same kind of oppression that men had done to women, but rather, create an equal and fair society free from the normative societal norms which had relegated to only serving gendered roles.

5.1.1 Programs for Liberation

Addressing the three forms of enslavement that the organization outlined, Mujeres Libres sought to free women by implementing practical programs which sometimes did not have anything to do with the war, but rather focused more on helping women in their everyday lives. This kind of programming on the part of the Mujeres Libres and its members made the organizations stand apart from others which sought to focus all of their members’ efforts solely on the war and the antifascist resistance. Lola Iturbe, co-founder of the Mujeres Libres, outlined

that the organization sought to create trade schools in which women could learn practical skills for everyday life, they would also create a childcare system for those women with children, and would also create public kitchens with the hope of allowing women to focus on more than just domestic work.³⁶ Perhaps their most important work outside of their contributions to the war effort, however, was their focus on education for women both in general education and also sexual education.

For their general education purposes, and as a vehicle to reach a broader international audience, the *Mujeres Libres* used their magazine *Mujeres Libres* to publish both intellectual and philosophical issues as well as make their interests known to the women of the world and gain their support. In terms of their sexual education programs, *Mujeres Libres* believed that only through proper sexual education could women truly be free. Although they focused on women's issues, their sexual liberation arguments and praxis were meant to help both sexes.³⁷

In sum, while the war definitely demanded that both men and women focus all of their efforts on helping the Republic stand against fascism, women's organizations such as *Mujeres Libres* saw the war as an opportunity to bring about a change that could affect not only women, but also all laborers in Spain. Their main goal was to liberate women from the subjugation to which they had been subjected to their entire lives and through that liberation, bring equality to both sexes. Both their theory and their praxis "represented a breakthrough not only because of its sharpened feminists consciousness but also because it presented a collective, organized

³⁶ Iturbe, Lola. *La mujer en la lucha social y en la Guerra Civil de España*. Mexico D.F.: Editores Mexicanos Unidos, 1974. 131-132.

³⁷ "Creación y desarrollo de la organización 'Mujeres Libres' (1936-1939)." 31.

contestation to women's subordination."³⁸ This movement would gain a lot of support from many women around the country. Most importantly however, it would gain support from men who recognized the hypocrisy and duality of their own struggles perfectly described by an article published in *Mujeres Libres* which note that men had always been "ready to struggle heroically for their emancipation" but were "far from thinking the same about the opposite sex."³⁹

Mujeres Libres would remain an active organization throughout the war but would cease activities after Franco's victory over Barcelona in February 1939. As Martha Ackelsberg noted however, "the women of Mujeres Libres had a special commitment to the creation of a society that recognized and valued diversity" and their contributions not only to the social demands of the time, but also to the theory of anarcho-feminism would continue to "have a dramatic and long-lasting impact on the lives of the women active in the organization."⁴⁰

5.2 Agrupación de Mujeres Antifascistas

Unlike the Mujeres Libres movement, the Agrupación de Mujeres Antifascistas (AMA) was born out of the need for the Communist Party of Spain to have a branch organization that would speak more directly to the needs of the women of the country. Most important for the organization was having influence on women and be able to mobilize them should the Republic need their support. As Mary Nash points out, the AMA was a "cluster of the most important women's organizations" which came together to form a united front against fascism.⁴¹ One of its

³⁸ Nash, Mary. *Defying Male Civilization*. 81.

³⁹ *Ibid.* 81.

⁴⁰ Ackelsberg, Martha. *Free Women of Spain*. 199.

⁴¹ Nash, Mary. *Defying Male Civilization*. 65.

first missions upon its founding was not too different from the Mujeres Libres' mission which was to uplift the Spanish woman from ignorance, which the patriarchal Spanish society had submitted her to for centuries.⁴² With the beginning of the war, however, the AMA's mission changed and adapted to the needs of the war. The AMA continued to work for the betterment of women, but its new purpose, anchored in the need to address the immediate needs of the Republic, was "to integrate Spanish women to the antifascist cause and to promote the predominance of the Spanish Communist Party (PCE) among women."⁴³ It is clear here that women were still the focus of the organization, but one can surmise that their goals, theories, and methods would have changed along with its mission.

Given the heterogeneity of women's social and political interests, for the AMA to achieve their goal of uniting all women under the same banner of antifascism, the PCE claimed that the AMA would be an organization open to all women regardless of their political or religious beliefs. Encarnación Fuyola, a prominent Communist activist during the war, published a pamphlet in 1936 in which she wrote that:

All women who identify as antifascist, regardless of her political interest, and even if she is not a member of any one political party, can be a member of the Agrupación, and those Catholic women who recognize fascism as the worst

⁴² Alcalde, Carmen. *La Mujer en la Guerra Civil Española*. Madrid: Editorial Cambio 16, 1976. 141.

⁴³ Nash, Mary. *Defying Male Civilization*. 65.

enemy to their beliefs and rights as women, can also work with us against this common enemy.⁴⁴

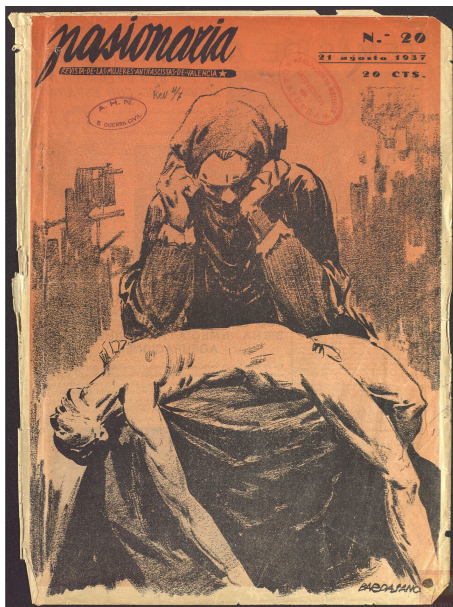
Through their efforts to create a heterogenous mobilizing organization, the AMA came to have over 50,000 members by July 1936.⁴⁵ According to Mary Nash, the “AMA’s constituency encompassed communist, socialist, and republican women as well as the Catholic Basque republicans.”⁴⁶ This large mobilization of women signified the PCE’s growing level of influence over the social and political landscape during the war since, although most members were in fact women of various political orientations, the leadership of the AMA was composed of Communist women with strong ties to the PCE, with the most notable woman being Dolores Ibárruri.

⁴⁴ Fuyola, Encarnación. “Mujeres Antifascistas: su trabajo y su organización.” *La Guerra Civil Española: Spanish Civil War Collection*, 1936. 10.

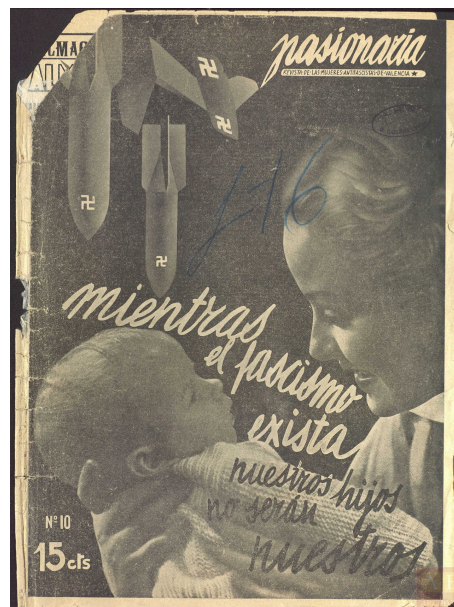
⁴⁵ Fuyola, Encarnación. “Mujeres Antifascistas: su trabajo y su organización.” 6.

⁴⁶ Nash, Mary. *Defying Male Civilization*. 66.

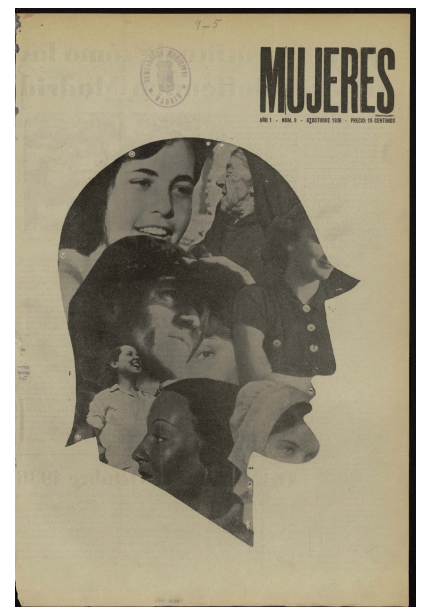
Under the banner of antifascism, the AMA, like Mujeres Libres, enacted several programs aimed at helping women, but with the intention of mobilizing women towards the war effort. The following images are examples of magazine covers published in the late 1930s. These magazines were many since the AMA itself was a conglomeration of various other organizations. As such, the magazines would be local to the region rather than one centralized magazine like Mujeres Libres. Still, all of these magazines disseminated the same message of domesticity and the value of the homefront. All three magazine covers focus on those key messages of domesticity and homefront.



Magazine 4: Agrupación de Mujeres Antifascistas. *Pasionaria: Revista de Las Mujeres Antifascistas de Valencia*. 1937.
http://www.mcu.es/ccbae/es/catalogo_imagenes/grupo.cmd?path=38110.



Magazine 5: Agrupación de Mujeres Antifascistas. *Pasionaria: Revista de Las Mujeres Antifascistas de Valencia*. 1937.
http://www.mcu.es/ccbae/es/catalogo_imagenes/grupo.cmd?path=38108.



Magazine 6: Agrupación de Mujeres Antifascistas. *Pasionaria: Revista de Las Mujeres Antifascistas de Valencia*. 1937.
https://www.museoreinasofia.es/sites/default/files/coleccion/mujeres-guerra-civil/bloque-iv/mujeres_madrid_9.pdf

Magazine 4 is the cover of the magazine titled *Pasionaria*, named after Dolores Ibárruri's nickname. It shows an older woman, perhaps a mother, with her son lying dead on her lap. This image is perhaps trying to mirror a younger woman happily staring at her young child playing on her lap. There are no words on this cover other than the title and other identifying information. This cover's intention is to recognize the losses that women were experiencing and this is contrasted by the rest of the magazine which will continue to justify these losses.

Magazine 5's cover is from the same magazine and has the same message, but arrives to it from a different angle. Relying what Edelman has pointed out to be the common trope of the Child, in this cover a woman holds her baby while missiles seem to be falling on the baby's head. Separating the mother from her child is the message: "As long as fascism exists, our children will never be just ours." The intentionality of this cover could not be clearer. Justifying the death and war efforts, the magazine tells the reader that their cause is the right one and that their efforts are for their children, for the future of Republican Spain.

Magazine 6's cover is from another local magazine that AMA supported. This one is from *Mujeres*, a magazine widely circulated in Valencia and its surrounding cities. This cover features various images of women's faces from all age ranges. All of their faces are fitted inside of the frame of an unknown soldier's face. This cover's intention is clearly to show that while women are not directly involved in the war effort through military service, they still play a key role in supporting those who are in frontlines. At the same time, another message that this cover sends is that military service is not a requirement to fulfill one's duty to the republic and that instead, any contribution to the war effort is just as effective and necessary as that of a soldier's in the frontlines.

All three magazine covers show the intentionality with which the AMA demonstrated the duty that women owed the nation and the men in the frontlines. These magazines accentuate how important it was for the AMA to reach a broader audience and the fact that they had different magazines for different areas of Spain shows how important it was for the AMA to maintain a sense of individuality between similar organizations, allowing them to be independent to a certain extent, but keep their message uniform to the AMA's main struggle against fascism.

Like *Mujeres Libres*, the AMA also created places throughout Spain to help in childcare as well as public kitchens and homeless shelters for children.⁴⁷ Although it is important to note that these places were created not to ease the burden that women had to carry and which society had imposed on them as women, but rather, it was so that these women could focus all of their attention and efforts on the war. This is unlike the *Mujeres Libres*' programs which were primarily aimed at bettering the life of women by lowering the amount of work that she had to do *because she was a woman*.

5.2.1 Programs To Battle Fascism

Programs geared towards easing the work that women had to do in the home freed them not to focus on themselves more, but rather, as the AMA hoped, it freed women to think more about men and the war effort. It is for this reason that while they now had more time away from the chores expected of her, the AMA's programs encouraged that women visit the nearby hospitals, served as messengers between men and their families, and even went to the frontlines

⁴⁷ González Martínez, Carmen. "‘Mujeres antifascistas españolas’: trayectoria histórica de una organización femenina de lucha." In *Las mujeres y la Guerra Civil Española*, 54–59. Salamanca: Ministerio de Asuntos Sociales: Instituto de la Mujer, 1989. 56.

to tend to men injured in combat.⁴⁸ Essentially, the AMA's programs freed women to serve the role of nurses and caretakers, not much different than the role they already served prior to the war, although in the eyes of the AMA's leadership, it was an essential role and one they were proud to fulfill. La Pasionaria would often make speeches about the important work that women and mothers were carrying out, further emboldening women to continue to serve in the homefront like men were doing in the warfront.

Working to help the government during its time of need, the AMA submitted some demands to the government in return for the services that women all around the country were providing with the guidance of the AMA. The organization demanded that women be allowed to: take up the positions of women in the labor force and be allowed to work wherever they desired; be allowed to teach and be taught technical skills that would help them advance in the industries that they were entering in place of men; that women be paid the same salaries as men in the same positions; that mothers be protected and benefited if they were in the labor force; and that women be allowed to gain larger influence in local governments throughout Spain.⁴⁹

The demands that the AMA made to the Spanish government in October 1937 certainly mark a milestone achievement in the feminist movement in Spain. For an organization such as the AMA, with the backing of the PCE and the influence of female leaders such as Dolores Ibárruri and Encarnación Fuyola, women were able to make large advancements during the war that facilitated their integration into society when it needed them most. It is important to note,

⁴⁸ González Martínez, Carmen. “‘Mujeres antifascistas españolas’: trayectoria histórica de una organización femenina de lucha.” 56.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* 56.

however, that these advancements came not because women were believed to have earned them or deserve them, but rather because the Republic needed female support if it wanted to survive. Every one of the demands by the AMA referred to men in some kind of form and most often it was justifying the women's presence by arguing that men were not there to carry out those tasks so then women should be the ones to be allowed to do them. This kind of argument, although it worked to benefit women, was also not a feminist movement that placed women as the focal point of the war effort. Women were seen more like replacements for men while they were away rather than actual contributing members to society.

The AMA's efforts to form a cohesive female front against fascism succeeded for the most part, mobilizing a great number of women throughout the nation both in the frontlines and the backlines as *milicianas*, homefront heroines and motherhood. Their efforts, however, fell short in living up to their initial feminist message of uplifting women from the ignorance that the Spanish society had placed upon them. As Mary Nash points out, although there were moments where gender-specific issues were addressed, they were no more than "lip service" and "were peripheral and became even more ancillary as the pressures of the war grew."⁵⁰ This is not to say that the AMA completely betrayed the women's feminist movement, but rather that "the AMA never questioned its assignment to an auxiliary support role" and thus promoted the same for women throughout the country.⁵¹

Following Franco's victory in 1939, the AMA leadership would flee Spain or be persecuted, forcing the restructuring of the organization to once again meet the needs of the

⁵⁰ Nash, Mary. *Defying Male Civilization*. 73.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* 72.

Republic and the people of Spain. While in exile, mostly in France, the Agrupación de Mujeres Antifascistas would rename itself as the Unión de Mujeres Españolas (Spanish Women's Union, UME) and would continue to work for the unification of all women around the world under the banner of antifascism.⁵²

Both Mujeres Libres and the Agrupación de Mujeres Antifascistas had similar goals, but differed in their methods and praxis. While the Mujeres Libres saw the war as an imminent threat to society, it also understood that it could serve as an opportunity for a revolution to change Spanish society. Their goal of equality between the sexes could thus be achieved if Spain stood not only against antifascism, but also for women's liberation and uplifting from their submissive roles. On the other hand, the AMA focused primarily on creating a united female front against fascism and in carrying out the interest of the Communist party in Spain. As opposed to Mujeres Libres, the AMA would promote an ideology rooted in a woman's "primary role" as mother and nurturer, rather than a woman's individuality and struggle for liberation.

Both organizations would thus recognize that a woman's role in the war was important not only for the survival of the Republic, but also for the future battles of emancipation that women would have to face. While their disagreements did not hinder the mobilization of women to the war cause, they did serve in dividing the demographic between those who believed in an immediate revolution for women and those who believed in a fight against fascism before anything else.

⁵² González Martínez, Carmen. "Mujeres antifascistas españolas': trayectoria histórica de una organización femenina de lucha." 57.

6. Conclusion

The Spanish Civil War ended with a Nationalist victory and a subsequent major repression of political and women's organizations alike. Many major activists would exile themselves in other countries, while organizations would restructure themselves to address this defeat and the ongoing world problems of the 1940s. Despite this eventual defeat in 1939, the challenges and changes made to the patriarchal society in Spain during the war should not be overlooked.

The *miliciana* redefined not only women's position in society during the war, but it also changed the way that the role of soldier and military was thought about. She challenged normative conventions of masculinity in the military battling fascism on one front and misogyny on the other. While her presence in the military challenged patriarchal notions of womanhood and active service, she also openly challenged traditional women's attire both adopting clothing that made her a part of a collective, such as the blue *mono* and its representation of the working class; and also by wearing dresses, disproving the idea that one needed to look like a man to be a soldier. The following images highlight how *milicianas* defined femininity on their own terms

and that a role such as soldier or militia person would not define their attire nor the value of their efforts to the war cause.



Photograph 1: Santos Yubero, Martín. *Dos mujeres, disparando contra la ermita de an Antonio de la Florida, en Madrid.* 1936. https://www.abc.es/fotos-archivo/20131204/mujeres-guerra-civil-1511557900534_amp.html.



Photograph 2: Díaz Casariego, José. *Un grupo de mujeres del batallón de “Francos Rodríguez” que, en julio del 36, salían para Somosierra (Madrid).* 1936. https://www.abc.es/fotos-archivo/20131204/mujeres-guerra-civil-1511557900534_amp.html.

While the *miliciana* symbolized a shift and deviation from normative patriarchal traditions prior to the war, not all women identified themselves with the image of the *miliciana*. Rooted in more traditional values, older women of more established families as well as higher ranking women within women's organizations advocated for female contributions to the war effort from the backlines. Noting that women could still contribute to the war effort without giving up their traditional values of femininity and maternity, these women nonetheless continued to challenge normative notions of womanhood that sought to sequester them in the home. Recognizing the unbearable pain of losing their loved ones, but continuously encouraging their loved ones to enlist in the militias, many working class women sought to band together, taking on the losses they were experiencing as a collective rather than as individuals. The following photograph reads: "It is better to be the widow of a hero than the wife of a coward."



Photograph 3: Vidal, Luis. *Un Grupo de Jóvenes Comunistas, Portando Una Pancarta En Una de Las Manifestaciones Femeninas Que Se Celebraron En Valencia, En Septiembre de 1936*. 1936.

https://www.abc.es/fotos-archivo/20131204/mujeres-guerra-civil-1511557900534_amp.html.

As this project stated in the introduction, this rejection of what had been the norm for centuries, and which challenged Republican Spain to see past what it understood as normal began long before the war. What women did during the Spanish Civil War was question their role in Spanish society and put into practice what many thinkers had been writing about since before the turn of the century. Regardless of which route these women took, whether they were radical or traditional in their praxis, these women: *milicianas*, mothers, activists, and more, asked themselves how they could best embody what they felt inside of them and showed Spain that womanhood could mean more than what their patriarchal society believed about them.

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