



ISRG PUBLISHERS

Abbreviated Key Title: ISRG J Arts Humanit Soc Sci

ISSN: 2583-7672 (Online)

Journal homepage: <https://isrgpublishers.com/isrgjahss>

Volume – II Issue-II (March – April) 2024

Frequency: Bimonthly



The unseen journey of women from 1923 until Greek dictatorship: Gender violence and state power

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| **Received:** 21.02.2024 | **Accepted:** 26.02.2024 | **Published:** 02.03.2024

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to highlight the political, social, and personal struggle of women in a broad time frame, from 1923 to 1974. For the research we used qualitative method, and ten interviews took place with women who developed various forms of actions in this period of historical time. In the light of women's personal testimonies as lived experiences and the study from existing archival material, we aimed to identify the 'myths' and 'silences', both in the testimonies and in aspects of public history and life concerning the impact on all levels of their lives, given the subjective element in the narratives. The aim of the study was to examine the historical time, based on the action that women developed through the diverse and highly demanding roles they took on, in the light of gender violence as a form of exercising power and control by the state or the authority in question.

Keywords: civil war, gender violence, state violence, tortures.

Introduction

The oral testimonies were treated as reflecting the women's experiences, which were retrieved from memory, but "looking backwards" carries methodological dangers. Sufficient time, serious social, economic and political changes are needed for the traumas to heal and become manageable for narrative. On this basis, the individual and collective memory stock is formed and interpreted differently, but the subjects are ready to express their experiences and lived experience within a framework of neutrality and security. According to Verveniotis (2021), in her book "The Civilian Civil War in Greece", the research interviews were conducted at the end of the 20th century and not in the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s or 1980s, because the wounds of the civil war were closed and a serious trauma for the Greek society.

Women were active participants throughout this historical, social, and political course of the country, as (co-)fighters, mothers,

comrades, sisters, friends, widows, and many accompanied by the tragic loss of their children, as has already become apparent from the theoretical treatment of the subject. Their role, their action, their contribution, and the consequences they suffered remain unseen and invisible, in danger of being lost in the oblivion of time. This is what the present research effort aims at, seeking in addition to highlight the impact of violence, and especially of social and state power and crimes, on all aspects of their individual and collective lives. The multifaceted action and presence of women throughout the struggles that took place during the occupation, the resistance and the subsequent march towards the seven-year period and the dictatorship in Greece is important to highlight in order to make women visible and to move from the term "his story" to the term "her story" (Avdela, Psarra, 1997). Considering women's personal testimonies as lived experiences and the study from existing archival material, we aim to identify

'the myths and silences', both in the testimonies and in aspects of public history and life that relate to the impact of women's choices at all levels of their lives. These are considered through the lens of violence, especially direct, cultural, and structural violence (Sklavou, 2019). In addition, the action and role of women in specific time periods will be told through the historical, political, and social context of the time.

Scope of the study

For this research paper, archival and bibliographic research was conducted, but primarily the data was obtained as primary material through oral interviews with a sample of women. The systematic recording of texts, textbooks and historical archives contributed to the collection of existing material on the time periods under review, while oral narratives were used to explore and analyze the accounts that emerged from the women's experiences and their history as they experienced it. Data collection and processing was based on the qualitative research model.

Aim and objectives

The aim of this proposal is to highlight the multifaceted action and presence of women throughout the struggles that took place during the occupation, the resistance, and the subsequent march towards the years of the Seven Years and the dictatorship in Greece. Women participated actively throughout this historical, social, and political course of the country, as (co-)fighters, mothers, comrades, sisters, friends, widows and many accompanied by the tragic loss of their children. Their role, action, contribution, and the consequences they suffered remain unseen, in danger of being lost in the oblivion of the years. The present research effort seeks to highlight these experiences by recording their personal testimonies and experiences, but also the impact of violence, especially state violence and its crimes, on all aspects of individual and collective life.

The research questions of the study, which may also be working hypotheses, are formulated as follows:

The narrative of women over historical time remains invisible, as their struggle at many levels and its impact on their personal, family, professional, economic, and social lives are silenced, marginalized, or even replaced by the recording of historical, political and military events and achievements.

Individual memory and testimony and the recording of these in the present day contributes to the healing of trauma, as well as to the democratization of history, the restoration of the status and struggle of women and the reshaping of the collective memory and history of a people, regardless of different beliefs, ideas, and perceptions.

Gender-based violence and the torture of women, due to the intense social stigma, remain uncharted territories, at the initiative of women themselves who wish not to verbalize their experiences even today.

The extreme expression of state violence and organized attempts to subjugate power through state crimes and torture, includes a range of gendered practices to control women's sexuality and reproductive capacity.

Usefulness and contribution of the research

The choice of the research topic was based on the study of existing literature and the researcher's personal interest in the population under study. The literature investigation, the study of historical sources and the review of relevant articles and research showed

that this dimension has not been studied. Mostly, individual writings of personal stories of female fighters or interview records also individually from women were found, which according to Van Boeschoten (2003), focus on historical, political, ethnic/patriotic, and military aspects. Therefore, this paper is expected to shed light on the unseen as well as the visible side of women's struggle in each historical period from the inter-war period until 1974 with the fall of the dictatorship, emphasizing consequences on their personal, family, professional and social lives, but also highlighting their narrative as a means of documenting the effects of the interpretative and relativistic contours of the dimensions under study (Mantzoukas, 2007). According to Boglis (2017), civil violence is not simply about a count of the dead. It is a total social phenomenon that must always be studied in relation to its actors, the forms in which it manifests itself (acts with a strong symbolic content, e.g. rape of women, beheading of rebels, etc.) and the specific historical period.

Methodology

The aim of the analysis in this research project is to structure and organize data to produce new knowledge, through primary data, but also through the management of existing sources and information (written and digital). To design the main research process, a) the theoretical framework of the topic was extensively studied to accurately formulate the general purpose and specific research questions and b) all available literature and theoretical material (Sklavou, 2008). The completion of the theoretical review was followed by the process of designing and constructing the research tool.

The processing of the personal narratives is based on thematic analysis (Tsiolis, 2014; Galanis, 2018; Braun, Clarke, 2006). Based on this method, predefined categories will be constructed to group the data according to the axes of the research tool. The main objective was to detect through the interview's behaviors, experiences, beliefs, and facts in order to then lead to conclusions about the research dimensions under study. The emphasis on the qualitative model in the process helped to highlight perceptions based on the experiences of the interviewees themselves. After all, the open and non-standardized format of interviews in qualitative research does not aim to verify a theory, but to highlight new associations and issues (Kyriazi, 2001).

The interaction to seek and find information during the interview helps to enhance the participation of the interviewees and reveal their views. In addition, the exploration of behaviors in qualitative research is about understanding the diversity of each research subject, as narratives constitute a different testimony and a unique truth (Kallinikaki, 2010). Finally, data collection through the tool of semi-structured individual interviews, which is a source of data collection in qualitative research and contributes to an in-depth approach to the subject through a non-standard interview format, with flexible questions, which can be redesigned on the spot.

The study of the topic will move historically through the time sequence of the years 1923 - 1974, which is divided chronologically into the following periods:

1923 - 1940 the interwar era

1941 - 1944 the occupation and the National Resistance

1944 - 1945 the period after the Liberation

1946 - 1949 the Civil War

1949 - 1967 Post-Civil War Greece

1967 - 1974 the Military Dictatorship.

The research focuses on the study of the gendered constitution of memory, individual or collective, personal, or public, specialized through the study of women's discourse, oral and written personal testimonies (depending on the historical period). The process therefore involves the recording of all available oral or written testimony, so that, taken as a whole, they constitute the outline of history, both official and personal, through the eyes and experiences of women, in specific dimensions, which relate to the following: women's profiles, women's narrative, the role of the paternal family in women's struggle, gender dimension in the struggles, torture as a means of exercising state power, gender dimension of torture, the rule of silence and the game of survival, ties between them as a prophylactic mechanism, life in exile and prison and the struggle for survival, fear versus a sense of duty, consequences of torture, the impact of state violence on women's lives - paternal family, the impact of state violence on women's lives, marital family and children (next generation), faced with torturers in later years and women's view of today.

Sample

The sample in qualitative research is not quantitatively large to draw valid conclusions, it is usual to be a two-digit or even a single-digit number (Mantzounos, 2007). A large sample does not serve the objectives of qualitative research, on the contrary it may even work negatively, as increasing the sample size may lose the qualitative characteristics or individualization in the cases that qualitative research is aiming for (Bordage, Dawson, 2003). Our sample consists of 10 women, who developed various forms of actions, from the Greek civil war, experienced state violence and the violation of their rights and the consequences of all the above in their own lives and those of their intimate partners.

Finally, the finding of the sample was mainly carried out using the snowball technique, which was initiated through a small core of women through relevant associations, namely the Society of Friends of the Memorial Site of the Anti-Dictatorship Resistance in Thessaloniki and the Association of Imprisoned and Exiled Resistance Members 1967 - 1974 (SFEA). It is not the purpose of this research to record many women, but to focus on an in-depth study of the findings in order to identify and analyze all the hypotheses of the research. The selection of the sample cannot be considered random, as mentioned above, they were identified through this organization. However, an effort was made to make the sample very largely representative of the population in characteristics.

Data collection tool

Data collection was carried out through the tool of individual interviews, which is a source of data collection in qualitative research and contributes to an in-depth approach to the topic (Kallinikaki, 2010). Interviews were also chosen over other tools as they capture the meaning and importance that each individual attaches to things and how they perceive it by participating in a process or activity. Observation and interviews are two tools that help to elicit qualitative data and information regarding a variety of behaviors (Cohen, Manion, 1994). According to Howard and Sharp (2000), the flexibility provided by the interview process helps to transmit information directly from the respondents to the interviewers. The individual interviews conducted were semi-structured, lasting 1 ½ - 2 ½ hours. As for the content of the research dimensions, they were phrased in a natural way and in the flow of the conversation, so that they had a clear meaning, did not distract the interviewees and sensitive issues were raised in oblique

questions rather than in a direct manner (Kanaki, 2022). During the interviews, clarifying questions or comments were asked to enhance participation or to elaborate on the content of some topics.

Data processing and analysis

The aim of the analysis in this research work is to structure and organize an analytical record of coding and themes emerging from the interviews to generate new knowledge through primary data (Howard, Sharp, 2000). On this basis, the analysis and processing of the data was carried out with the software program NVivo (Kanaki, 2022), one of the software used in data analysis in qualitative research. Specifically, the interview transcripts were recorded, codes were created from the research dimensions, and we proceeded to formulate themes to classify the responses from all interviewees into the corresponding axis. The main objective was to trace experiences, attitudes, values, beliefs, and facts through the interviews, so that we could then draw conclusions through the relationships underlying the research categories. After the interviews were transcribed into texts in the form of the written word, they were studied by the researcher to obtain an overall sense of meaning, verbal and non-verbal. After the data collection was completed, the overall presentation of the interview texts in the form of dialogues followed, and categories were created to classify the data, based on the axes of the research tool in NVivo. Each axis included responses with specific characteristics to further process the collected information and draw research findings. Finally, the findings were discussed in relation to the overall purpose and research hypotheses and in relation to the theoretical approach to the topic, their confirmation or refutation was justified. In data processing, numbers were not represented by percentages, but were rendered as such due to the small sample size (Blalock, 1960).

Ethical and moral issues

Prior to each interview, a telephone call was made to the women in the sample to get to know each other, to inform them in detail about the research and its purpose, the confidentiality of personal data, as well as the researcher's details, and to agree on the time and place of the interview. All interviews were conducted in physical presence, except for two which were conducted remotely due to serious health problems or for precautionary reasons, given the continuity of the pandemic during the period of the research. At the start of the interviews, the necessary time was taken to familiarize and acquaint respondents with the process, during which further questions about the purpose of the survey, the process and the use of the data were resolved. Participants were also informed of confidentiality issues, their consent for recording the interviews was sought and recorded, as well as their consent to participate in the research process.

The personal data of the research participants remained confidential throughout the research process and anonymity was maintained at all points of reference in the interviews and no information was used for which consent was not given. Every effort was therefore made to ensure full protection of personal data during the processes of sample selection, obtaining consent, data collection and analysis. The procedures are subject to the relevant legislation regarding the safeguarding of personal data (applicable provisions in Greece and Regulation 2016/679/EU of the European Union).

Barriers

Several obstacles arose in this research, which to some extents were anticipated and addressed as far as possible. First, the issue of the aggravated health of some women, which was prohibitive for some even to participate in the process. There were women alive whose mental health did not allow them to be included in the sample, while others, due to chronic and serious health problems, postponed interviews, thus moving the completion of the whole research process in data collection in time. Finally, the reduced number of surviving women, as many have passed away in recent times, coupled with the refusal of some to participate in the research, made the process of finding the sample complex.

Main conclusions

On this basis, the following general and specific conclusions are drawn because of the theoretical and research approach to the subject matter. Firstly, the literature on the specific historical periods examined remains scanty and covers mainly historical and martial aspects in the subjects, with almost no focus on the impact of historical developments on people's lives and views and how they experienced the social and divisive consequences of the events. Even more so when these elements concern women or other smaller groups who participated and contributed, in an obvious or not so obvious way, to the struggles of each era. The women's narrative, for which very little space and time has been devoted over the years, is important to highlight because of its specificity and gender characteristics, as it is significantly differentiated from the recording of events, situations, and experiences of those of male (co-)fighters or the analysis and simple quotation of facts about the political, national/patriotic, or historical context in question. Women's struggle, as it has been examined from different angles, both documented and unseen, has been multifaceted, complex, multidimensional, and extremely challenging.

Each woman, as a fighter in every multifaceted role (mother, companion, wife, warrior, spy, helper, housewife, etc.) in her own environment, paid a heavy price at the personal, family, professional, economic, social, and political levels. Women's participation in the struggles marked to a certain extent the overthrow of dominant gender relations and roles and, more importantly, the emancipation of women. Women demanded and claimed a role and space in the struggles, as they felt that they themselves had very good reasons to become fighters and not just watch their husbands, children, loved ones and their entire lives disappear.

The family environment has a prominent role in the growth, development and later career of women, the loving, caring and respectful relationships that women experienced largely determined their personalities, choices, opinions and later their careers. Regardless of the external circumstances, if there are stable caring and attachment figures in a family, children are firmly attached to them with bonds of security and love, obstacles are overcome, and people receive resources that they retain throughout their lives. No trauma in childhood surpasses the total loss of the family. The transfer of knowledge, ideology, philosophy of life with an emphasis on the collective rather than the individual, patriotic outlook on national issues and democratic concepts of freedom and human welfare seems to be transferred almost exclusively from the early years of life by a powerful learning mechanism, with a cognitive and social background, through life

patterns and attitudes of parents and women's caregivers. The absence of one parent, either permanently or temporarily, seems to have stigmatized the women who have experienced it to date, but due to the extended form of families, this person has been "replaced" by very close relatives and the children continued to grow up in a close-knit family environment.

The structure of the Greek family and the small communities, either in the villages or at the neighborhood level in the larger cities and in Athens, acted as a protective net in the safety and support of the women throughout their journey and was the main protective net in their struggle even to stay alive in some cases. Otherwise, things were very difficult, as the women fighters had no help and support, both mental and material. The acceptance and respect women also experienced within their microcosm from their male friends, comrades and (fellow) fighters. The struggle, in every era, gave them a platform, a public voice, respect and status and they all worked with the common cause and the high democratic ideals they were fighting for as their main axis, beyond discrimination and inequalities in terms of gender. Women stood alongside men, fought deservedly, and distinguished themselves many times more than the male warriors in order to prove their worth and usefulness. Especially in later years, everyone participated equally in the proceedings and on a basis of respect, acceptance, and contribution, regardless of gender characteristics.

Torture is the extreme form of state violence and refers to a premeditated manifestation of violent behavior against a person or groups, which causes visible physical harm. Direct, structural and cultural violence, in the eras we have explored, has been varied and multidimensional and has been inflicted by a person or persons legitimized in the role of representatives of state power and always with the aim of subjugating, humiliating and exterminating, physically and mentally, the victim. According to gendered memories of torture, in addition to common torture practices, the regime of terrorism in each era has formed a specific mechanism of interrogation and psychological violence derived from their gender characteristics and their maternal role. Women were subjected to sexual methods of torture, degrading practices centered on female functions, exposure of the female body and mockery of its parts, insult to reproductive capacity, psychological pressure in an offensive and vulgar manner, as female resistance, anti-regime action and participation in any form of struggle were absolutely intertwined with immorality and debauchery. Many testimonies and torture remain unseen by women's choice, as even today they carry a strong social stigma and are not easy to capture, both because of their cruelty and the need for distance and protection from the emotional burden they carry. Through the gendered practices of torture, the patriarchal male power over the female existence becomes apparent, while the process of cohabitation and subjugation has a dual role, as it concerns the extraction of information and punishment, but also seeks to impose absolute domination over the female body, reproductive functions and sexuality. The revival of traumatic events in nightmares, with images or even in hearing present events is strong, especially at the sight of people who caused the torture, which shows that despite the long-time distance from the events, post-traumatic stress and fear remain active and are revisited with relevant stimuli. The revival of traumatic events and their effects seem to be largely related to the women's personality and their degree of psychological resilience, the acceptance and help from their supportive and especially family network, and whether they were exposed for a short or long period of time to extreme forms of

violence and torture. Torturers were described as inhuman and ruthless beings, capable of anything and specifically selected and trained for this purpose, who were joy and pleasure from the pain, fear and suffering of others. Especially when these others were women, as a particular hatred and an attempt to devalue and subjugate them was recorded, which they tried to cover up by legitimizing their actions, in the context of institutionalizing and legitimizing violence, under the pretext of the national good and the interest of the homeland.

The struggle for survival in every era and in every situation had its own characteristics. In prisons and interrogations there was 'the rule of silence', as a method of protection from the rage of the torturers; in exile, women recalled all possible and unlikely methods of survival and problem-solving to cope with the daily abnormal living conditions, with whatever spiritual or material resources each one had. All depending on their social, professional, and educational backgrounds had organized themselves into self-help, support, entertainment, and daily needs groups. The women's greatest shield of protection was their social and friendship network, which acted as a lifesaver during arrests, interrogations, illegality, imprisonment, and exile, both for themselves and their families. And in many cases, in addition to providing material and moral support, it saved them from torture and death and offered them life-long relationships that have lasted over time. The effects of torture in the immediate future and over time are many. Pain, fear, (post)trauma and their consequences, especially psychological ones, persist and reappear, with serious physical health problems, but also with psychological implications with serious impact on their family, professional, mental, and social life. The impact on families was equally severe, either because women experienced a very difficult situation very early in their lives as children, with severe deprivation and suffering in their daily lives with extreme poverty, uncertainty, and health problems, and even more so with temporary or long-term absence of one parent, or because in the following years in their own families they had to manage to balance physically and psychologically and cope with multiple roles in order to survive themselves and their children in an ecologically sustainable way.

The impact on women and the family in no way leaves children unaffected, regardless of their age. Parental deprivation, whether temporary or permanent, violent practices, survival difficulties, insecurity, living in inappropriate conditions, extreme poverty, war and civil conflict have been major sources of trauma, stress and difficulties, both practical and psychological, for young children. The mixture of fear, terrorism and threats seems to work in reverse in times of severe crisis and shock or loss of basic freedoms and important possessions to people, and in some/some people, in the context of the primary need for survival of living beings, creates a protective matrix, activating a high degree of resilience and psychological resilience as a coping mechanism to withstand inhumane conditions.

In situations of crisis and deviation, human endurance is tested, but it seems that in specific generations, above and beyond physical and psychological torture, there is a sense of duty, the duty that each generation is called upon to fulfil, ideology, values, and democratic ideals, with a just and democratic society as the overriding goal. Despite the enormous personal, economic, and social costs, women remain active, dynamic and with great intellectual clarity in the present day, giving their own analyses of contemporary conditions and with serious concern, as they foresee

repetitiveness in events that can lead to serious social unrest and lawlessness. State violence has been a means for the conformity and cooperation of populations in all the historical periods under study, turning a large part of the population into an unwilling and passive group that aligns itself with the most powerful. The depiction of the events through the eyes of the women is captured in the now, with everything new intruding on their thoughts, with distance and time neutrality from the events, with a cool and clear view of the present, beyond the fear and trauma of loss and violence, as this is how the interpretive framework of the writing penetrates the memory and records it, in order to transform the individual experience into a collective property.

The historical era that spans the years under study seems to have caused an unalterable trauma that has yet to heal sufficiently, as the years that have passed are insufficient to transform the original messages through the processes of selection, forgetting and transformation. The long turbulent history of the Greek nation, the long periods of instability, insecurity, lawlessness, and violence have caused serious setbacks in the economic, political, social, and cultural life of the country, but also a huge loss in human potential that remains alive and negative to this day.

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