



Women in the Italian Resistance (1943-45): A fight on many fronts

*Festa della Liberazione
ANPI & Scottish Branch of the Partito Democratico
Glasgow, April 26 2025*

(img: the Brera Partisans; Tino Petrelli, April 26, 1945)

PROF MAUD ANNE BRACKE

UNIVERSITY OF GLASGOW

MAUD.BRACKE@GLASGOW.AC.UK

RESEARCH AND TRANSLATIONS BY

CHRISTINA CHATZITHEODOROU, UNIVERSITY OF GLASGOW

Resistenza: what, who, where?

(img: Brigade Garibaldi, Tuscany, 1943; Comitato di Liberazione Nazionale, 1944;
Tina Anselmi at the liberation, 1945)





Gruppi di difesa della donna (1943-45)

"Women (are) from all social classes: housewives, factory workers, office workers, intellectuals, and peasants gather united by the need to fight and (united by) the love for the country. Women of every religious faith, of every political tendency, women without party unite for the common need that there may be bread, peace, and freedom, ... In every block or neighbourhood, in every factory, office, school, village, they form the gruppi di difesa della donna".

(Leaflet 1944, Fondo Gruppi Difesa Donna, Istituto Nazionale Ferruccio Parri)

"A group of GDD was established in this municipality... This group has, since the beginning of 1945, collaborated closely with the G.L. "Val Germanasca" Brigade, working in particular on ... the following activities:

- ▶ I) Assistance to Freedom Fighters
- ▶ II) Aid to the families of those who fell for freedom and to those left behind after enemy raids
- ▶ III) Relief to freedom fighters captured by the enemy
- ▶ IV) Flowers to the graves of the fallen
- ▶ V) Distribution and dissemination of the underground press"

(Leaflet 1944, Fondo Anna Barullo, Istituto Piemontese Per La Storia Della Resistenza E Della Società contemporanea)



Bringing resistance to the domestic sphere

- ▶ “When foreign prisoners and Italian deserters came to our house seeking refuge and protection, she [Genoveffa Cervi] always welcomed them as her children and went out of her way to care for them when they were sick, to provide them with clothes and beds, [to] prepare meals for them.” (*‘Testimonanza di Ines e Maria Cervi’, La donna reggiana nella Resistenza, Celebrazione del ventennale della morte di Genoveffa Cervi, 7 Febbraio 1965*)
- ▶ “Precisely because she is the direct creator of life, the woman is more inclined than the man to defend it.” (Ada Gobetti, VII congresso dell’Udi, 1964 cited in Alloisio and Beltrami, *Le volontarie della Libertà*, 30.)
- ▶ “For me, it was a liberation. It meant the first independence from the family, ..., getting out of a routine, being in solidarity with others, fighting for an idea even if it was very vague because I knew nothing about politics.” Cristina Casana (interviewed in Alloisio and Beltrami, *Le volontarie della libertà*, 39-40)

Agents of communication and connection: the *staffette*

Ida d'Este's description of her work:

- ▶ "1. riding a bicycle
- ▶ 2. assaulting trucks at roadblocks
- ▶ 4. staying silent and invisible
- ▶ 5. improvising
- ▶ 6. not wanting to know more than what needs to be reported
- ▶ 7. making a dumb face
- ▶ 10. inspiring confidence even without a safe word"

(Ida d'Este, *Croce Sulla Schiena*, 39)

- ▶ Onorina Pesce and other staffette played a crucial role in 1944 in finding and killing fascist spy Domenico di Martino, who worked for OVRA, the secret police of the fascist state (Pesce, *Il pane bianco*, 50-53)

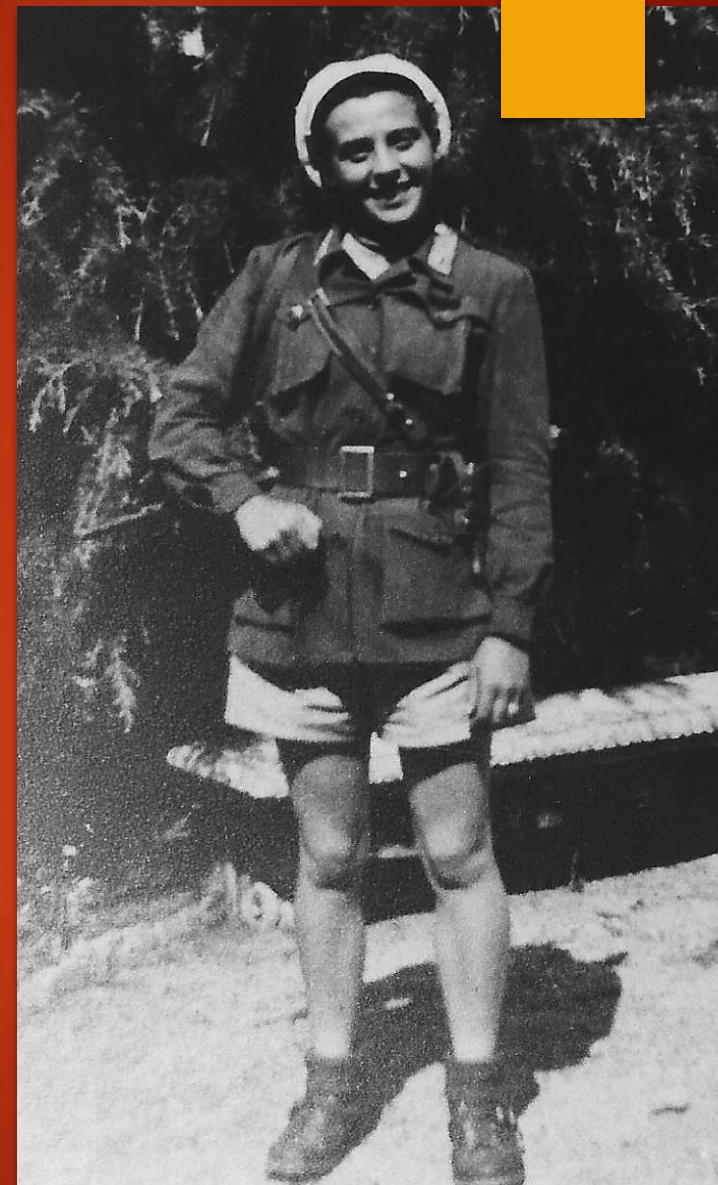
(Img: Caterina Rigoni Boer)



Transgressing the boundaries of gender: the *partigiane*

Irma Marchiani, housewife, partisan at Montefiorino (Apennines, 1944), arrested in August 1944. Imprisoned in Bologna and sentenced to death, escaped. Promoted to vice commander in the Matteotti Battalion of the Garibaldi Division in Modena.

Elsa Oliva: in order to gain the respect of the partisans of the 2^a Brigata della Divisione Beltrami, she gathered them to "to explain that I must not be considered a woman by anyone, but one of them [...] so many women took part in the resistance and their role was never recognised". Elsa Oliva, *Ragazza Partigiana*, 24-25.



Conclusion: liberation and its multiple meanings

- Sentivamo di essere dalla parte giusta. Lottavamo per la libertà, per essere libere", Luigina Castagna ('Dolores')

'We felt we stood on the right side. We fought for freedom, to be free'

- Mi chiedevo da dove potesse venire quel coraggio disperato [...] animata da un rifiuto feroce", Rina Sommaggio

*'I asked myself where this desperate courage came from [...] animated by a **ferocious refusal**'*



Further reading

- ▶ ANPI, *Donne del Piemonte nella Resistenza* (1954)

- ▶ **Local studies:**

Iolanda Crimi Giacobbe, *Donne siciliane nella resistenza* (1962)

Bruna Bortolotti, *La donna nella resistenza antifascista e la questione femminile in Emilia-Romagna* (1978)

Maria Alberta Sarti, *La donna piemontese nella resistenza* (1986)

Maria Teresa Segà, *Eravamo fatte di stoffa buona: Donne e resistenza nel Veneto* (2010)

- ▶ **Early documentaries:**

Liliana Cavani, *La donna nella resistenza* (RAI 1965)

Giuliano Montaldo, *L'Agnese va a morire* (1976, after a book by Renata Viganò)

- ▶ **Key recent studies:**

Benedetta Tobagi, *La resistenza delle donne* (2023)

Mirella Alloisio et al, *Le volontarie della libertà* (2022)

Jane Slaughter, *Women and the Italian resistance* (1997)

Memoirs cited:

Elsa Oliva, *Ragazza Partigiana* (1969)

Ida d'Este, *Croce Sulla Schiena* (2018)

Onorina Pesce, *Il pane bianco: Memorie di una partigiana* (2013)

Giovanna Zangrandi, *I giorni veri: Diario della resistenza* (2023)

The research for this talk is based on:

Christina Chatzitheodorou, *Women in Left-wing Resistance Movements in Occupied France, Italy and Greece: Between Resistance, Gender, and Memory (1940-1945)* (PhD thesis, University of Glasgow, 2025)

BENEDETTA TOBAGI

**LA RESISTENZA
DELLE DONNE**



**Women
and the
Italian
Resistance**

1943-1945



Jane Slaughter