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Female Combatants in the Spanish Civil War: *Milicianas* on the Front Lines and in the Rearguard

By Lisa Lines¹

Abstract

The history of the military participation of women during the Spanish Civil War has thus far been neglected, underestimated or downplayed by historians. This article aims to redress this imbalance. It examines the actions of the *milicianas*, and the military roles they played, from the beginning of the war until July 1937 when the majority of women had been removed from combat. Most of the secondary literature attempts to dismiss the military contribution of the *milicianas* by arguing that women did not participate in combat on equal terms with men. Instead, the literature focuses on the domestic and auxiliary tasks performed by the militia women at the front. This article shows that in fact women did participate in combat on equal terms with men. Using primary sources, in particular the various memoirs written by *milicianas* or their oral testimonies, this article discusses the type of combat duties women undertook and the battles in which they were involved. The article demonstrates that the *milicianas* did make a significant contribution to the Republican war effort.

Keywords: female combatants, *milicianas*, Spanish Civil War

Introduction

The history of the military participation of women during the Spanish Civil War has thus far been neglected, underestimated or downplayed by historians. This article aims to redress this imbalance. An understanding of militia women's participation in combat during the Spanish Civil War and of their activities in the front lines and in the rearguard is necessary to gain an appreciation of the significance of the *miliciiana* phenomenon. The absence of such an understanding allows the misconceptions to continue concerning the women who took up arms against the fascists in Spain. The historical significance of the *miliciiana* phenomenon lies not only in the extent to which these women aided the war effort. The combat role played by militia women signified a change in gender roles that was occurring in the Republican zone as a result both of the war and of the social revolution. Part of the significance of the *miliciiana* phenomenon also lies in its uniqueness in Spanish history. While a limited number of Spanish women had participated in combat prior to the Spanish Civil War, this was the first instance in which a large number of women not only took up arms to fight, but were integrated into the fighting force as combatants on equal terms with men.

There are several important distinctions between the *milicianas* who fought in the front lines and those stationed in the rearguard, and it is for this reason that these two subjects have been discussed separately. Front line *milicianas* were with few exceptions integrated into the Republican fighting force as members of mixed-gender battalions. In contrast, the *milicianas* in the rearguard were largely organised into women-only battalions. A further difference is that front line combatants moved around Spain

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depending on the needs of the conflict, whereas *milicianas* of the rearguard remained living in their homes. Women's battalions in the rearguard played a defensive role and participated in combat only when the battle came to their cities and towns. There is little evidence of movement of women between the front lines and rearguard. Thus, front line and rearguard *milicianas* can be seen as two separate and distinct groups of women.

This article will demonstrate the scope of women's military participation through a systematic examination of their military activities. A comprehensive picture of what life was like for women who fought on the front lines will be provided, outlining the combat roles that they played on a daily basis. Contrary to what has been asserted in much of the secondary literature, it will be demonstrated that the great majority of *milicianas* did actually participate in combat on equal terms with men, though they were also responsible in many cases for fulfilling an auxiliary role.

Further, it will be demonstrated that the *milicianas* played a more extensive and sophisticated combat role than has previously been shown. This article will present a detailed discussion of the many military activities women undertook in the front lines, including participation in battles and advances, standing guard, taking prisoners, fabricating bombs, and firing upon the enemy.

This article will also include a discussion on the auxiliary tasks *milicianas* carried out when not in combat. In many cases, women suffered a double burden at the front, as they were expected to carry out both combat and supportive tasks. This demonstrates that while gender roles were changing, they had not been completely revolutionised. Women in the Republican zone had not been liberated, and true equality had not been achieved. Rather, certain traditional and sexist attitudes prevailed, even among some members of the Republican militias and left-wing political groups.

Though not often included in a discussion about the militia women, an important aspect of the *miliciana* phenomenon was the presence of thousands of armed and trained women in the rearguard, who were organised into women's battalions and were prepared to participate in combat if needed, whether it be in the front lines or in defence of their cities and towns. This article takes as its definition of a *miliciana* any armed woman who participated in combat, or who was trained and prepared to do so, in defence of the Republic during the Spanish Civil War. While these rearguard *milicianas* are not often discussed in the secondary literature, it is clear that these women played a significant role not only in military terms, but also in terms of demonstrating to Spanish society the change in gender roles and accepted codes of behaviour that was occurring concurrently with the war. This article will include a discussion of the rearguard *milicianas*, the battalions into which they were organised, their arms training, their military role in the Republican defence, battles in which they took part, and the debate surrounding their purpose.

Milicianas in Front Line Combat

During the first eight months of the Spanish Civil War, *milicianas* played an important role in the Republic's war efforts. This section aims to correct three misconceptions surrounding women's military participation in the civil war: first, that women did not participate in combat equally with men; second, that they played a limited and unsophisticated role in combat; and third, that their participation was not as dangerous or as life-threatening as that of their male comrades.



Figure 1: Map of Spain Reflecting the Battle Zones in 1936 (Booshank, 2008).

The vast majority of *milicianas* in communist, anarchist, *Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista* (Workers' Party of Marxist Unification, POUM) and even Republican Army units participated in combat on equal terms with their male counterparts. This was the case despite the fact that they also suffered a double burden, as they were often expected to undertake tasks traditionally considered 'women's work,' such as cooking, cleaning, sewing and laundry. In an interview with Dolors Marín, Concha Pérez Collado related adamantly that anarchist *milicianas* participated in combat equally with the men:

Look, exactly what the men did, well that's what we women did. At any rate, look, because we were women we always took on some extra work, like cleaning more or cooking or something. But then we stood guard equally with the men. When there was the attack at Belchite, we went into the attack equally with the men. We did what we humanly could, some of us [women] were stronger than others, same as the men (Marín, 1996, p. 356).

Pérez Collado reiterated this opinion during a later interview in 2005, asserting that men and women acted equally in combat (Lines, 2005). The testimony of Pérez Collado is significant because, at the very least, it demonstrates that the *milicianas* themselves felt that they were making the same military contribution to the war effort as were the militia men.



Figure 2: *Milicianas* stationed at Huesca, on the Aragon front, 1937 (Morris, 1986, p. 30).

In the POUM column captained by Mika Etchebéhère, women and men most certainly participated in combat equally. In fact, in this column, all tasks, both combat and supportive, were undertaken equally and there was no gendered division of labour (Etchebéhère, 2003, pp. 39-40). Indeed, evidence suggests that even female combatants in the Republican Army participated in combat on equal terms with their male comrades. Captain Fernando Saavedra of the Sargento Vázquez Battalion reported on the military activity of three female combatants in his unit, Ángeles, Nati and Paca. In an interview that was printed in the independent newspaper *Crónica* in December 1936, he stated, '[They are] three comrades who, rifle in arms, have come to fight with us. I have to say that they are brave, and that, like the men, they carry out their mission. They stand guard, go to the trenches, and, finally, they fight like any one of us' (García Vidal, 1936, p. 5.)

The combat experiences of militia women do not differ widely, regardless of the political group (if any) to which they belonged. The evidence provided here demonstrates that communist, anarchist, POUMist, socialist and unaffiliated *milicianas* played a sophisticated and extensive military role in the conflict.

Lina Odena was perhaps the best-known *miliciana*, becoming famous after she died in combat early in the Spanish Civil War (see Figure 3.) Odena was a young communist activist, and a member of the *Dirección Nacional* (national leadership body) of the *Juventudes Socialistas Unificadas* (United Socialist Youth, JSU) (Los Dirigentes, 1936, p. 2). From the first day of the fascist insurrection, Odena was a leader of the anti-fascist resistance. In July, she helped to organise the militias in Almería, on the southern coast of Spain, and fought in the front lines there. From there she went to Guadix and led the militias into battle (Los Dirigentes, 1936, p. 2). Odena travelled to various sectors of the Granada front, in command of a militia unit, (*Mundo Obrero*, 26 August 1936, p. 3) and achieved the post of commandant (Rubio Moraga, 1998, p. 104).



Figure 3: JSU poster featuring Lina Odena (Nash, 1999, unnumbered page).

On 13 September 1936, Odena died on the Granada front, in the Guadix sector. Odena and a comrade were on a reconnaissance mission that night, past the most advanced post of the sector and behind enemy lines. They became lost, and were discovered by the Nationalists who began to fire upon them. They both returned fire, but were outnumbered. Almost out of ammunition and fearing being taken prisoner, Odena used her last bullet to shoot herself in the head. Clearly, she was aware of the horrors of rape and mutilation that almost certainly awaited her upon her capture. Shortly after her death, Odena's unit was successful in the attack that she had planned (Ibárruri et al., 1936, p. 4). Her suicide was reported widely in the communist, socialist and independent press as a brave and noble act, and she became a Republican war legend.

A member of the communist youth from the age of thirteen, Fidela Fernández de Velasco Pérez had already been politically active and trained in the use of arms long before the civil war broke out (Strobl, 1996, p. 52). She fought in the front lines against the fascists from the very beginning of the war. Very soon after being sent to the front outside Madrid, she participated in an attack that successfully captured a cannon from the defeated fascists. She later fought in Toledo, and then returned to the Madrid front where she was transferred into the same unit as Rosario Sánchez de la Mora. Strobl notes that Fernández de Velasco Pérez was always involved in the most dangerous actions. Not only did she fight in the front lines, but she also took part in many missions behind enemy lines as part of a group of shock troops.

For years afterwards Fernández de Velasco Pérez could remember exactly how to construct a bomb. She recalled, 'we boiled cans of condensed milk and filled them with bits of crystal, rocks and nails, and we added dynamite. The fuse came out the top and we had to throw them very fast because the fuse was quite short' (Strobl, 1996, p. 52). Fernández de Velasco Pérez remembered that life in the trenches was difficult, as it was necessary to sleep in the mud, in the snow, and standing up. Often there was no food. After a year and a half of fighting on the front, Fernández de Velasco Pérez was injured and unable to continue fighting. Instead, she became a secret agent and took on many dangerous missions behind enemy lines. She remained in this role until the end of the war (Strobl, 1996, p. 52).

The stories of lesser known communist militia women also emphasise their participation in battle and their dedication to the Republican cause. Margarita Ribalta, a

member of the *Partido Comunista de España* (Communist Party of Spain, PCE), was interviewed by *Estampa* while wounded and recuperating at the communist militia headquarters (Lain, 1936, p. 25). She told the reporter that she was a member of the JSU, and had enlisted in the militia with a male companion at the beginning of the war. He was sent to the front, but Ribalta was assigned to work at headquarters, about which she was not pleased (Lain, 1936, p. 5). After a few days, she was enrolled in a column and left for the front. Once there, she volunteered immediately to go out with an advance party. She explained that the group climbed to the top of a hill, and saw a group of fascists shooting a machine gun in the distance. The Republicans opened fire at the fascists. They shot and killed the man who had been handling the weapon. The rest of the group of fascists were either shot or fled (Lain, 1936, p. 5).

Ribalta ran into the field between the two posts, the whole advance party following her, and seized the machine gun. The group dismantled the weapon and were returning to the Republican line, with Ribalta carrying the machine gun on her back, when a Republican aeroplane appeared. Unfortunately, upon seeing the group advancing towards the loyalist lines in possession of a machine gun, the plane mistook the group for fascists and dropped a bomb just as they had reached the top of the hill. Ribalta dropped to the ground and began to roll down the hill, but was wounded in the face and arms. When she returned to the communist militia headquarters to recover, Ribalta discovered that her male friend was also convalescing there. Ribalta explained that it was for this reason that she stayed on to recover: 'I am here because he is also. If not, with bandages and all, I would have already returned to the front' (Lain, 1936, p. 5).

Trinidad Revolto Cervello joined the JSU in 1933 (Rodrigo, 1999, p. 76). Having participated in battle in front of the Military Headquarters and at the Atarazanas Barracks in Barcelona during the first few days of the uprising, Revolto Cervello then joined the Popular Militias and took part in the attack on Majorca (Rodrigo, 1999, p. 76). At the beginning of the war, Teófila Madroñal enlisted in the Leningrad Battalion and underwent arms training (Rodrigo, 1999, p. 76). When the Siege of Madrid began on 7 November 1936, Madroñal fought in the sector near the Estremadura highway. At the age of only seventeen, Julia Manzanal became the Political Commissar for the *Batallón Municipal de Madrid* (Municipal Battalion of Madrid). Despite the fact that her primary role was to provide a political education to her comrades, Manzanal related that she was armed with a rifle and a .38 Messerschmitt revolver, participated in combat during battles, took her turn standing guard, and on several occasions even worked as a spy (Strobl, 1996, p. 63).

It is significant that several communist women held leadership positions within militias and in the Regular Army. Aurora Arnáiz at 22 years of age was in command of the first column of the JSU, and led them into battle on the Madrid front against General Mola's troops (Scanlon, 1976, p. 292). Odena, as previously mentioned, also served as a commandant and led her troops into battle in Granada (Rubio Moraga, 1998, p. 104).

The stories of anarchist militia women do not differ significantly from those of communist *milicianas*. Once the Nationalist uprising in Barcelona had been quelled, Pérez Collado travelled to Caspe on the Aragon front where she joined the Ortiz Column (Rello, 2006). Her unit then moved on to Azaida, where they remained until the attack on Belchite, in which Pérez Collado and her militia took part, began on 24 August (Thomas, 2003, p. 704). While stationed in Azaida, Pérez Collado met other anarchist militia

women who had come to the front to fight, including Carmen Crespo, a member of the Sur-Ebro Column. Crespo was later killed by a grenade in a battle at the Sierra de la Serna in December 1936 (Marín, 1996, p. 354-355; Giménez, 2006, p. 239).

The Basque anarchist Casilda Méndez fought on many fronts and in several different militias during the war. Initially, Méndez fought as a member of the Likiniano Group in the street fighting, and then travelled with this group to the San Marcial front, where she fought until the fall of Irun (Jiménez de Aberasturi, 1985, p. x). While Méndez reveals that she did the cooking for her unit, she emphasises that she was not merely the cook. She participated in combat along with the men in her militia, and was equally involved in other military tasks such as erecting parapets and digging trenches (Jiménez de Aberasturi, 1985, p. 42).

Later, she fought with the Hilario-Zamora column on the Aragon front, and took part in the attack on Almudévar (Jiménez de Aberasturi, 1985, p. x). She notes that on the Aragon front women enjoyed a greater equality, and their identity changed from 'woman' to 'combatant' (Jiménez de Aberasturi, 1985, p. 49). Méndez fought in the battle to capture Quinto and Monte Carmelo (Iñiguez, 1985). After a short period working in a factory in the rearguard, she again returned to the front in the Ebro sector with the 153rd Division, where she relates that conditions were continually unfavourable for the Republicans, and fought in the Battle for the Ebro River (Jiménez de Aberasturi, 1985, p. 65). Méndez believed that the battle 'bled us dry without doing us any good', except that 'perhaps it delayed the end of the war a little' (Jiménez de Aberasturi, 1985, p. 65).

The stories of the *milicianas*, while most often emphasising their confidence and capability in combat, also include information on the difficulties they faced in the front lines. The old weapons used by the Republicans were often very heavy and cumbersome. However, having described the initial problems caused by these weapons, most women's stories end with an emphasis on how strong and capable they felt once they were able to use and carry these weapons effectively.

Sofia Blasco interviewed an anarchist *miliciana* named Carmen whom she met on the Sierra front. Carmen had been a seamstress's assistant in Madrid before the war, and had joined the militia planning to do laundry and sew for the militiamen. Once at the front, having witnessed the severity of the conflict and having seen comrades killed, she took up a weapon and joined the armed resistance against fascism (Blasco, 1938, pp. 89-91). Blasco met Carmen again several months later and noted that she had been transformed. Carmen herself had been shocked by her transformation: 'Fancy me, a weak woman, and now I can manage a gun with the ease that I used to wield a needle' (Blasco, 1938, p. 89). Carmen had become an expert in the use of her weapon and now, far from having difficulty carrying the heavy rifle, as she 'tramped up hill and down she had the sense that it was the gun that was carrying her along' (Blasco, 1938, p. 90).

Many of the stories of *milicianas* do not end with their forced removal from the front in 1937, but with their deaths in battle. A group of anarchist *milicianas* from the International Group of the Durruti Column were killed in the fighting at Perdiguera in October 1936. Among them were Suzanne Girbe and Augusta Marx who were killed on 16 October. Augusta was a member of the German Socialist Workers' Party and was a qualified nurse, but joined the militia as a combatant (Giménez, 2006, pp. 293 and 535). Juliette Baudard, Eugenie Casteu and Georgette Kokoczinski were killed in action the following day. Kokoczinski had served as a nurse in the column, but regularly took part

in nocturnal raids behind the Nationalist lines with the *Hijos de la Noche* (Sons of the Night) group. She was captured by the fascists and executed (Giménez, 2006, pp. 241-242 and 533). Suzanne Hans, also from the International Group of the Durruti Column, was killed in a battle in Farlete in November 1936, at the age of 22. Her partner Louis Recoulis was killed in the same attack (Giménez, 2006, pp. 276 and 535). Leopoldine Kokes was one of the few *milicianas* from the International Group of the Durruti Column left alive to be expelled from the militia several months later (Giménez, 2006, p. 536).

While there were fewer POUMist *milicianas* than communist and anarchist, their stories are nonetheless well known because of Etchebéhère's widely published memoirs, *Mi Guerra de España*, and the memoirs of Mary Low and Juan Breà, *Red Spanish Notebook*. In *The Spanish Cockpit*, Franz Borkenau relates an incident in which he met and spoke with a group of POUM militia women outside the Hotel Falcon in Barcelona, which the POUM was using as its headquarters, but he does not give any specific information on their actions in battle (Borkenau, 1937, p. 72). One of the *milicianas* is said to be a foreign volunteer, married to a Swiss newspaper correspondent. Later Borkenau refers to an English woman whom he also met in Barcelona, and who had volunteered for the POUM militia (Borkenau, 1937, p. 113).

Etchebéhère became a combatant after the death of her husband Hipólito, taking his place in the militia. In October 1936, Etchebéhère was stationed in Sigüenza during the Nationalist siege, in which soldiers, militia men and women, and civilians were trapped and hid in the cathedral while they were bombarded by the fascists (Etchebéhère, 2003, pp. 84-95). Later, Etchebéhère met Low and Breà in Barcelona, and related to them the story of what had happened at Sigüenza. This conversation was recorded in *Red Spanish Notebook*, which was written only months later:

I was there till the last. ... We barricaded ourselves in the cathedral ... We were there for four days, without food or anything, firing out into the town, and dying like flies. They kept on shooting cannon balls into the cathedral ... In the end the walls began to fall down on us, and we had no ammunition left at all, so those of us who were still left decided to make a run for it after dark as we couldn't fight anymore. ... Some of the comrades got lost and ran straight into the Fascists and were shot to pieces. They began firing on us at once, of course, and we scattered and reached the woods through a rain of machine-gun bullets. I wandered about for twenty-four hours, hiding among the trees and undergrowth, while they hunted me, before I could reach our lines ... About a third of us who set out from the cathedral reached home. I was almost delirious from exhaustion and want of food (Low and Breà, 1937, pp. 171-172).

Due to her bravery and decisiveness in action at the siege of Sigüenza, Etchebéhère was promoted to the position of Captain of Second Company of the POUM's Lenin Battalion (Durgan, 1997). She was then transferred to the front in Moncloa, where she led a special brigade of shock troops that undertook the most dangerous operations (Low and Breà, 1937, pp. 169 and 172).

Low, the Australian *miliciiana* who joined the POUM in Barcelona, tells in her memoirs the story of another foreign volunteer, Simone. She had wanted to bring

weapons with her when she came to fight with the POUM, but had been unable to enter the country with the weapons through normal channels. Such was her determination that Simone strapped the machine guns to her body and jumped out of an aeroplane over Catalonia. Later, Simone demonstrated this same resolve in battle in the front lines. Low spoke with a young militia man who had fought alongside Simone in the trenches. He told Low of the first time their unit came under attack. 'We hadn't been under fire before, and when the Fascists made the first big attack and came right over at us, Pepe and I really thought that everything was up with us and we had better run for it. But not she! She knocked our heads together – how it hurt – yes, she really had time to think of everybody in a moment like that – and pushed us back by the scruff of our necks.' Low asked the man if they had held their position after this. 'Oh yes, we held it. We kept on holding it, you know' (Low and Breà, 1937, pp. 191-192).

Breà reported a conversation he had with a Swiss militia woman identified only as Clara, who recalled her experiences on the Aragon front in a POUM militia. She related that her sector was relatively quiet, and that the worst of her duties was standing guard: 'Most of the time it would have been all right, if it wasn't for the dust. Standing guard outside was frightful, when the wind blew, and we all had to take our turn. One daren't turn away and cover one's head even for a moment because we were always expecting a surprise attack, and your eyes got so full of sand and bloodshot and it was heck' (Low and Breà, 1937, p. 144). Clara also showed Breà a large dark blue bruise on her shoulder that she had received from firing her musketon. She explained, 'They're so much lighter to carry than a rifle when you're springing about, but what a kick they've got to them!' She then concluded positively that 'you get used to it in time ... [and] I'm not a bad shot at all now' (Low and Breà, 1937, p. 144).

Despite styling itself as a revolutionary party, the *Partido Socialista Obrero Español* (Spanish Socialist Workers' Party, PSOE) rejected the notion of the radical militia woman from the very beginning. For the PSOE, the only acceptable role for a woman to play in the anti-fascist resistance was as a 'home front heroine,' undertaking tasks in the vein of civil resistance, ensuring the everyday survival of the population, and carrying out and voluntary relief work (Nash, 1998, p. 374). This is not surprising, given the PSOE's historical lack of attention to gender issues. Though some *milicianas* had been members of the PSOE, they were relatively few in number. The JSU, the communist and socialist youth organisation, had recruited some of its female members into front line combat positions, so it was mainly in this way that socialist women became militarily involved in the civil war (Alcalde, 1976, p. 123).

María Elisa García is one of the few women identified specifically as socialist who is known to have participated in combat. García escaped from Oviedo with her father and her brothers on 18 July 1936, to join the Popular Militias. She fought with her father as a member of the *Somoza* company, the third company of the *Asturias* Battalion (Zubizaola, 1937, p. 9). She first participated in battle on the Lugones front (north of Oviedo), where her father was killed. From there, García went on with her battalion to fight in the Basque mountains. An article in the communist newspaper *Mujeres* relates an incident during a particularly cold night, when the men of her company, concerned for her, assured her that she did not need to take her turn, and should return inside their temporary quarters to warm herself. García refused adamantly: 'No, no, I'm staying here, with you. Yes. I will stay right here. I have to avenge someone. I have to avenge my

father' (Zubizaola, 1937, p. 9). On the night of 9 May 1937, while García was at her post in the mountains of Múgica, the enemy attacked. García went into battle, alongside her male comrades, just as she had during every other attack. During the clash, she was shot in the head and died instantly (Zubizaola, 1937, p. 9).

Not all of the primary evidence pertaining to women in combat specifies the political background of the *miliciana* in question. Further, not all *milicianas* identified themselves in political terms, since not all were members of political groups. Below is a selection of evidence demonstrating the military involvement of these women.

Jacinta Pérez Alvarez was one of the ten *milicianas* of the sixth company of the Acero Brigade (*ABC*, 30 July 1936, p. 23). Pérez Alvarez had never considered the idea of women participating in combat to be unusual. In fact, when asked what she planned to do after the war, Pérez Alvarez had replied that if there was a women's army, she would enrol in it (Alcalde, 1976, p. 133). She was killed in August 1936 during a battle in which she had fought for five consecutive days, in the first advance party on the front outside Madrid (Entierro de una Miliciana, 1936, p. 2). A newspaper article printed in the independent *El Sol* reported that after being shot, Pérez Alvarez bravely shouted to her comrades: 'Advance, keep going forward, it's only a nuisance, I will follow you at once' (Entierro de una Miliciana, 1936, p. 2).

The first company of the Largo Caballero Battalion contained roughly ten *milicianas*, of whom Josefina Vara was one (Héroes del Pueblo, 1936, p. 5). The battalion fought on the Sierra front, and in an article published in *Crónica* on 13 September 1936, Vara received a special mention due to her actions in battle on 4 August. She supplied ammunition to the advance party as well as firing her own weapon, and later helped her captain to capture and disarm several prisoners (Héroes del Pueblo, 1936, p. 5). It was reported that Vara knew no fear, and only worried that she would be made to leave the front for the rearguard (Héroes del Pueblo, 1936, p. 5).

The communist press reported on women who were promoted to leadership positions. Argentina García was the captain of the machine gun company of the second Asturias Battalion (Estampas de Oviedo, 1937, p. 6). Three months before being promoted to the position of captain, García had been wounded and left for dead while fighting at Oviedo. She had sustained four wounds in her stomach and arm, and remained unconscious for hours on the battleground. That night the cold woke her, and she managed to reach the Republican lines without being discovered by the enemy. As soon as she had healed, García returned to fight on the front at San Esteban de las Cruces, and was promoted to captain for her bravery in battle (Estampas de Oviedo, 1937, p. 6).

Francisca Solano, a member of the *Circulo Socialista del Oeste* unit, took part in the capture of El Espinar in July 1936 alongside two other *milicianas* in her unit (*ABC*, 29 July 1936, p. 3) (see Figure 4.) These women and many others from their area had been involved in the armed resistance to fascism since the insurrection (La Heroína de El Espinar, 1936, p. 3; Lazaro, 1936, p. 6). Upon the outbreak of the civil war, Solano's uncle encouraged her to go to the front as a nurse, since she had worked previously in that capacity. However, Solano refused to do so, preferring to join the militia as a combatant: 'No. No I won't be a nurse. I want to go and fight the fascists!' (de Ontañón, 1936, pp. 10-12). Despite the objections of her family, Solano enlisted in the *Circulo del Oeste*, received her uniform and gun, and left for the front that day. It was this determination that led her to take part in battle alongside her male comrades.



Figure 4: Francisca Solano and the *Circulo Socialista del Oeste* unit (*ABC*, 29 July 1936, p. 3).

Early on a Saturday morning in August Solano's unit advanced into El Espinar, without firing a single shot. They headed to the town hall and raised the flag of their column (de Ontañón, 1936, p. 11). Shortly afterwards the unit learned that a battalion of fascists were advancing along the road towards the town. Preparations were made to defend El Espinar against the Nationalists, but the attack came unexpectedly from in front and behind. Solano and her group began to retreat, fighting as they went. During the battle, one of Solano's comrades was injured and she took him to the hospital to be treated.

The rest of the unit did not discover this fact until they had safely retreated and the fighting had stopped. They realised that Solano and her comrade were missing, and they never saw them again. There were rumours about what happened to Solano, but no one knew the truth. Some believed that she had been taken prisoner at the hospital, while others had heard that when she was apprehended she had shot and killed a Nationalist lieutenant. Still others believed that she had been shot by a firing squad. The members of Solano's unit remembered her as their heroine, 'who had always been in the lead, the most enthusiastic and courageous of all' (de Ontañón, 1936, p. 11).

Though the majority of women fought as members of a militia, some women did enter the Republican Army. Esperanza Rodríguez was one of them. Rodríguez not only fought alongside her male comrades against the fascists, but her captain described her as the bravest fighter in the unit. In an article printed in *Estampa* on 10 October 1936, Rodríguez's captain said of her: 'How brave! Seriously! Look, it's eight years that I've been in the Regular Army, and I know this is a serious thing'. He described her as 'the best in combat, always the most lively, the first to shoot, the most tireless. In one battle she spent eleven hours on her feet, shooting' (Cada Region, 1936, p. 15).

The majority of *milicianas* fought as members of mixed gender battalions. One of the few women-only battalions in the front lines was the Women's Battalion stationed outside Madrid. At the end of July 1936, the PCE organised a Fifth Regiment in Madrid (Jackson, 1974, p. 87). An entire battalion of women, the *Batallón Femenino del 5th Regimiento de Milicias Populares* (Women's Battalion of the Fifth Regiment of Popular Militias), was organised. This battalion specifically recruited and trained women for

combat, and sent them to the front outside Madrid. An article printed in the independent newspaper *Crónica* on 2 August 1936 (Gandia, 1936, pp. 5-7) provides evidence about this battalion and the military actions of its members. It should be noted that women also joined and took part in combat in sections of the Fifth Regiment other than the women's battalion.

The *Crónica* article begins by describing a large group of women amassing in the courtyard of the Fifth Regiment headquarters in order to enlist, receive their uniform and weapon, and be organised in their units ready to leave for the front. The article makes special mention of a group of women who had already been to the Sierra front working as nurses, but who had returned in order to enlist as militia women. They explained, 'We want to fight. For this reason, we have enlisted in the Women's Battalion' (Gandia, 1936, p. 5). The article speaks of a student who was adamant she must be sent to the Somosierra, in order to be reunited with her two brothers fighting there. A widow explained that the day before her husband was killed fighting in the Sierra, and she had promised him she would keep fighting. The article included several photographs of women undergoing weapons training, and relates that the training they receive is 'exactly equal to that of the men' (Gandia, 1936, p. 6). It finishes by describing the large group of women climbing aboard trucks and leaving for the front.

Once recruited and trained, the members of the Women's Battalion of the Fifth Regiment were stationed in the front lines outside Madrid. Walter Gregory, in his memoirs *The Shallow Grave*, recalls the regular sight of members of the battalion coming on and off duty. He explains that they marched up and down Gran Vía in twos and threes, since it was so often shelled that it was too dangerous for them to march in proper formation (Gregory, 1986, p. 73). He remarked that, 'they looked very like women the world over and only their disheveled khaki uniforms after several nights in the trenches marked them out as something special' (Gregory, 1986, p. 73).

Many testimonies from foreign observers highlight the courage displayed by the *milicianas* in battle, demonstrating that in some cases they exhibited even more valour than the militia men. Borkenau, in his entry of 5 September 1936, wrote of the bombardment of the village of Cerro Muriano. While he was shocked to witness troops from Jaén and Valencia who 'ran away before our eyes,' Borkenau noted a small militia from Alcoy (south-east of Valencia), including two *milicianas*, who 'stood the bombardment ... with the proudest gallantry and unconcernedness' (Borkenau, 1937, p. 164). He emphasised that the two women were 'more courageous even than the men' (Borkenau, 1937, p. 164).

Similarly, in his oral testimony the Scottish volunteer Tom Clarke related that during the Battle of Jarama in January 1937, it was the bravery of three Spanish militia women that stopped their battalion from retreating:

I remember there was a bit of a retreat. There was a rumour went round, can't remember what it was, and they started retreating. We'd gone back a bit, and some of them were actually running. And here we came across three women sitting behind a machine gun just past where we were, Spanish women. I saw them looking at us. You know, I don't know whether it shamed us or what. But these women they stayed there (MacDougall, 1986, p. 62).

The bravery of the *milicianas* is also demonstrated by the fact that they risked injury and death to defend the Republic. When caught, the militia women were not protected from execution by the mere fact that they were women. Anthony Beevor relates that the German ambassador was alarmed during a visit with General Francisco Franco when he ordered the execution of a group of *milicianas* who were being held prisoner, and then continued to eat his lunch (Beevor, 1982, 89). Breà reported having met a man in Sigüenza named Casimir who told him that even pregnant militia women were executed by the Nationalists:

He had been telling me about some prisoners that had been taken by the Fascists while he was still serving in their army and looking for a way of escape. 'They were three men, and a woman'. ... 'I know what happened to those prisoners because I had to wait on the officers that day at their lunch and they talked in front of me. "Well, have you had those four prisoners shot yet?", one of the officers inquired. You should have heard the casual way they talked about it, as though it had been so many heads of cattle. And the doctor guffawed, and winked at the captain. "Four? You meant the five prisoners, surely? ... You forget that the woman was ... well..." (Low and Breà, 1937, pp. 165-166).

Non-Combat Roles in the Front Lines

The vast majority of *milicianas* participated in combat on equal terms with their male comrades. This is a clear demonstration that gender roles were changing in the Republican zone during the Spanish Civil War, and that accepted codes of behaviour were becoming more progressive. However, gender roles had not been completely revolutionised, and equality had not yet been achieved. Sexism remained prevalent in Spanish society, even among revolutionary elements. This is clear because *milicianas* largely suffered a double burden in the front lines, carrying the responsibility for the bulk of the domestic tasks in addition to their combat duties.

It is the combat role played by *milicianas* that is most important, since this was the first time in Spanish history that a large number of women had played this role, and it thus symbolised changing gender roles. However, in order to give a complete picture of what life was like for the *milicianas* in the front lines, it is important to discuss the non-combat roles they played in addition to their military activities. Women performed many auxiliary tasks at the front, regardless of whether they were fighting with militias controlled by the communists, anarchists, POUM, socialists or the Republican government. Once again, it can be seen that the day to day experiences of women in the front lines did not vary significantly according to the political group to which they belonged. These tasks included cooking, cleaning, laundry, sanitary, medical and political work. In some cases, these tasks were carried out by men and women equally, but in most cases, it is true that women suffered a double burden, since it was expected that they would complete these chores as well as fulfilling the same combat duties as the men.

Blasco reports that the five militia women she met, Maria, Rosario, Anita, Julia and Margarita were always working (Blasco, 1938, pp. 125-126). They would be cooking, cleaning, doing laundry and repairing clothes well into the night after their male comrades had long since completed their combat duties for the day. The women told

Blasco that they were constantly exhausted. Despite taking their turn standing guard and participating in combat just as the men did, they were also responsible for the 'irksome duties that always fall to women' (Blasco, 1938, pp. 125-126). Leonor Benito also explained that even though she stood guard and undertook other combat duties equally with the men in her unit, she was still expected to do the washing for the men (Arostegui, 1988, p. 159).

Two *milicianas*, Manuela and Nati, asked to join Etchebéhère's column due to their dissatisfaction with their treatment in the Fifth Regiment of the Popular Militias. They described the domestic duties that they were required to undertake in the Pasionaria Column, and gave this as the reason why they wanted to join a different column. Theirs is a notable example because it is one of the few in which *milicianas* report being prevented from fulfilling a combat role: 'My name's Manuela ... I'm from the Pasionaria Column, but I'd rather stay here with you all. They never wanted to give guns to the girls. We were only good for washing dishes and clothes. Our quarter is empty. Most of the militia fight elsewhere. The others are helping Martínez de Aragon to defend the cathedral, they say. The captain wants all the girls to leave Sigüenza'. To this, one of Etchebéhère's militia men responded, 'Then why haven't you left?' Manuela explained, 'Because we want to help'. She also declared, 'My friend whose name is Nati also wants to stay with you. She used to have long pigtails. Now she's cut them off, because you know, if we fall into the hands of the fascists they'll shave our heads, so it's better to have short hair. So can we stay?' (Etchebéhère, 2003, p. 73).

Initially, the two women were refused by an old militia man who claimed they would not know how to use a gun. Nati quickly responded, 'Yes we do, we can even dismantle it, grease it, everything ... We can also fill the cartridges with dynamite. But if you won't give us a gun, let us at least stay to cook and clean; this floor is very dirty'. However, Manuela interjected indignantly, 'That, we won't do. I have heard it said that in your column the *milicianas* have the same rights as the men, and they don't [just] wash clothes or dishes'. In what has become a renowned statement, Manuela proclaimed, 'I did not come to the front to die for the revolution with a dish cloth in my hand' (Etchebéhère, 2003, p. 74). At this the militia applauded, and the two women were allowed to join Etchebéhère's column.

Milicianas were often also responsible for caring for the wounded. Breà reported having met a *miliciiana* from the POUM who was directed by her captain to aid the nurses in a hospital while her unit was stationed in a town (Low and Breà, 1937, p. 105). The communist Browne was shot whilst providing first aid to a fallen comrade (Jackson, 2002, p. 103). The anarchist Kokocinski, a member of the International Group of the Durruti Column, served as both a *miliciiana* and a nurse (Giménez, 2006, pp. 241-242 and 533). This is a complex issue as many women who served in the front lines primarily as nurses were also armed and undertook limited combat duties. At times, it is unclear who can be classified as a *miliciiana* who also took care of the wounded, and who was a nurse who also participated in combat. The communist Josefa Rionda is an example of this. She served as a nurse in the front lines at Colloto, and she routinely fired upon the enemy whilst in the trenches aiding the wounded. Rionda is referred to as both a nurse and a *miliciiana* in an article printed in *Mujeres*. (*Mujeres*, 6 March 1937, p. 6).

Descriptions given by the *milicianas* themselves of non-combat activities tend to focus on inequity and the women's dislike of what they considered a discriminatory

situation. However, instances in which the independent Republican press highlighted the domestic activities of the *milicianas* tend to present this role in a very different manner. The independent press, demonstrating continuing sexist attitudes despite the advances made towards equality, appeared to view the domestic role of *milicianas* in the front lines in positive terms. Newspapers such as *La Voz* and *ABC* published numerous photographs depicting women fighters cooking, cleaning, washing and sewing, and presented them in a way that clearly demonstrated that the journalists and editors believed this was the natural role for women to be playing in the front lines.

A photograph published in *La Voz* on 9 September 1936 showed three *milicianas* on the Somosierra front, washing clothes. The caption read, 'These brave women who after shooting bullets, now wash in a stream the clothes of their male combatant comrades'. A photograph with a similar theme was printed in the independent *ABC* on 3 November 1936. It depicts a *miliciana* who fought as part of the advance party on the front lines. The photograph shows her in uniform and with her rifle beside her, sewing the uniform of a militia man. The caption reads, 'This girl ... has just left her combat post in order to sew the clothes of her male comrades'. In late 1936, the number of photographs and references to *milicianas* completing supportive tasks in the front lines increased sharply.

Not all the non-combat duties performed by *milicianas* at the front could be considered traditional 'women's work'. The communist Manzanal performed an abundance of tasks at the front as well as her combat duties. She worked as a political commissar, which required that she keep her comrades informed of news from other fronts and political developments, give courses in reading and writing, conduct political education, and also keep the spirits of her unit up (Strobl, 1996, p. 63).

However, it was not the case in every militia that men were excused from domestic duties. In some units, such as the POUM unit captained by Etchebéhère, auxiliary tasks were distributed equally between the male and female fighters. These instances are important because they demonstrate that inroads were being made into the traditionally sexist attitudes held by Spanish society. Soon after Etchebéhère had been promoted to captain, the men in her unit refused to make beds, sweep or carry out other domestic tasks, as they claimed that this was 'women's work', and that the four *milicianas* of the unit should do it. Very calmly, Etchebéhère asked if they expected her to wash their socks. 'Not you, of course not,' one of the men replied. 'Neither the other women, comrade', Etchebéhère declared. Addressing herself to the entire unit, the captain announced, 'The girls who are among us are militians, not domestics. We are all fighting for the revolution, men and women, equal to equal, never forget it. And now, quickly, two volunteers to do the cleaning' (Etchebéhère, 2003, pp. 39-40).

The division of labour was also equal in Fernández de Velasco Pérez's communist column. In her interview with Strobl, Fernández de Velasco Pérez confirmed that when it was meal time, every one took turns to cook, including the men. 'There was no difference, everyone did everything. And sometimes I too took my turn to peel potatoes, although not very often. ... We were treated like men in all respects, and we acted like men as well' (Strobl, 1996, pp. 53-54). It is interesting to note that in order for women to be treated as equals, they had not merely to be treated like men, but to act like them too.

Historical accounts that emphasise the auxiliary role played by *milicianas* at the front and either ignore or play down the fact that militia women also participated in

combat on equal terms with men, implicitly disparage the military contribution made by women during the civil war. In addition, these accounts deny the courage of *milicianas* like García, Browne, Solano, Odena and many others who died under enemy fire while carrying out their normal duty as a militia woman.

Women's Battalions in the Rearguard

Women's military participation during the Spanish Civil War was not limited to the front lines. A great many more women were involved in the armed defence of their cities and towns, or were training in preparation for such a defence. Thousands of women in the Republican zone were organised into militias and trained in the use of arms from July 1936, with a view to their being sent to the front (though there is no evidence of this having occurred) or so that they could contribute to the military defence of their homes should this become necessary.

The *milicianas* of the rearguard are not often discussed in the secondary literature, and in the few cases in which they are, they are not categorised as combatants. Most historians do not include the women's battalions of the rearguard in their discussions of the *milicianas*, and in some cases do not discuss them at all. The underestimation of women's military role is exacerbated by the ignoring of the military role played by women in the rearguard. The *milicianas* of the rearguard were armed, trained and prepared for combat. Some, though not all, of these women did participate in some form of combat during the civil war.

The women combatants in the rearguard were significant because they played an important military role in the defence of cities, even if ultimately they were not required for combat. Further, these *milicianas* were far more numerous and more visible to the rest of Spanish society than were the militia women stationed at the front. As a result, it could be argued that they played an even larger role as models of the changing gender roles and new codes of behaviour for women that were developing during the social revolution. The female combatants of the rearguard prove that during the Spanish Civil War, women's military participation was accepted and formed a part of everyday life in the Republican zone.

There is evidence that several women's battalions took part in battles to defend their cities. These units include the women's militia organised by the PSUC in Barcelona, the Rosa Luxemburg Battalion that took part in the battle to defend Majorca, (Nash, 1998, p. 107; Keene, 1999, p.123) and the *Unión de Muchachas* that fought in the Battle for Madrid in November 1936 (Coleman, 1999, p. 48).

While the Battle for Madrid in November 1936 can clearly be considered front line combat, the example is discussed here because the majority of women who participated in this battle were members of rearguard women's battalions. The defence of Madrid is probably the most prominent example of rearguard *milicianas* participating in combat. The battle began on 8 November 1936, when the fascists attacked with three main assault forces at the Casa de Campo, while also attacking Carabanchel Alto as a diversion (Beevor, 1998, p. 136). Catherine Coleman reports that thousands of women took an active part in the battle to defend Madrid. Among these were the *Unión de Muchachas* (Girls' Union), a communist youth group of two thousand women aged fourteen to 25 who had been undergoing arms training and target practice since the outbreak of the war. This group of women participated in combat in the area around the

Segovia Bridge and on the Carabanchel front near Getafe (Coleman, 1999, p. 48). These women fought bravely, and were reported to be the last to retreat (Willis, 1975, p. 4). Despite the fact that women comprised a significant percentage of the fighting force in Carabanchel, and despite the large part played by these and other women in the Battle of Madrid, it is very rare to find information about them included in general histories of the siege.

During the war, there were various schools of thought on the need for women in the rearguard to receive military training and to form women's battalions. Some felt that the military training of women was necessary in case they were needed at the front. Carlos Rodríguez, for example, argued in an article printed in *Estampa* that women's battalions 'constituted a rearguard so organised it could present itself as the actual front of combat. Militarisation does not have to be only for men' (Rodríguez, 1937, p. 3). An examination of these different perspectives shows that the *milicianas* of the rearguard contributed militarily to the Republican war effort, and played a significant role in the fighting.

An article by Etheria Artay published in *Crónica* detailed the military training that various women's battalions were receiving, and explained, 'The women of Barcelona are preparing, in case the moment arrives when they, too, must fight' (Artay, 1936, pp. 7-8). Several hours each week, beginning at 8am on Sunday mornings, these women underwent military training. Mostly factory workers, they were referred to as 'future *milicianas*', as it was believed that the military situation might become so dire that it was necessary to send these women into combat in the front lines to aid the Republican defenders (Artay, 1936, p. 7). The article explained that it was not only in Barcelona that women in the rearguard were undergoing military training, but that the same was taking place in Madrid, Valencia, Vizcaya, Santander and the Asturias (Artay, 1936, p. 8).

The majority of women's battalions were not formed for the purpose of being transferred to the front, but rather with the intention that the women be militarily prepared to defend their own towns or cities (Herrmann, 2003, p. 18). The Lina Odena Battalion in Madrid was formed soon after the war began, with the purpose of providing military training for women in the rearguard. The battalion was not meant to be used at the front, except as an emergency if the rearguard ever became the front line of combat (Scanlon, 1976, p. 295). An article published in *ABC* declared, 'Women, determined to defend the Republic with arms, prepare for the war. These girls, enlisted in the Lina Odena Battalion, learn military instruction' (*ABC*, 31 October 1936, p. 4). The photograph shows a group of women marching in formation down a street, but they do not wear uniforms or carry weapons.

Louise Gómez, the organiser of the Women's Secretariat of the POUM in Barcelona, decided it was necessary to form a women's battalion soon after the war began. Low became a member shortly after her arrival in Spain, and wrote of her experiences in her memoirs (Low and Breà, 1937, pp. 185-190). She reported that the regiment met and trained daily, participating in drills, practising marching, receiving weapons training and performing target practice (Low and Breà, 1937, pp. 186-187). Low wrote in detail about the weapons training that her battalion received. She reported that after target practice and drills, the women received specialised training in the use of machine guns:

It was the only thing which was really difficult. We had no mechanical turn, and spent a long time learning to take all the parts of the machine to pieces and put them back correctly together again, and besides, the machine was so hard and heavy for us. But we did learn. In the end, I think that we could have assembled the parts of a machine-gun in the dark, without a clank to show the enemy where we were hidden, and fired it off as a surprise (Low and Breà, 1937, p. 190).

Such was Low's appreciation for weaponry that later, when she and Breà were leaving Spain and crossing the border into France, she 'couldn't bear parting' with her revolver.²

The military role played by women during the Spanish Civil War was sophisticated and extensive. Militia women in units stationed on the front lines were not limited in the combat roles they could play in defence of the Republic and social revolution. Members of women's battalions in the rearguard also performed a valuable military role, and served as examples to the wider public of the gender roles for women that now existed in the Republican zone.

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² Low and Breà, *Notebook*, 238.

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