



The Effacement of Women in the French Resistance

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Abstract

Women who participated in the French Resistance effort have been thought to conceal their efforts from history. This paper aims to show that though it might be possible to come to this conclusion if their words are taken at face value, women in the French Resistance often represented their contributions in similar ways: notably through the medium of memoirs that focus on duty, banalities of life, and a refusal to succumb to negative attitudes or victimization despite the horrors of the 1940s. By comparing three notable female resistance figures (Lucie Aubrac, Germaine Tillion, and Agnès Humbert) in conjunction with numerous interviews of other women, it is evident that these women do not seek to efface themselves or other women's contribution. Instead, the common bias of looking at Resistance efforts through a masculine heroic lens marginalizes these women's contributions. We may reconcile these women's efforts to their true place in the historical record by removing this lens, and rethinking what female heroism means. The fact that these women deny their heroism does not downplay their contribution to the Resistance effort, especially after constantly affirming the importance of these efforts.

Keywords: French Resistance, Women, World War II

Introduction

Although women have contributed so much to France's resistance effort, public sentiment has rather ignored them in the scheme of active opposition to Nazi forces. Many scholars claim that this is due to "self-effacement:" that many women in the French Resistance have downplayed their part by avoiding recognition, concealing their wartime experiences, and deferring to their male counterparts (Andrieu, 2000, p. 12). They claim this because of women résistantes often admit they were not heroes but instead state their motivations of duty and morality. This paper seeks to use the writings of Resistance members to assess how claims of self-effacement arose and whether they are valid. This paper aims to do this by assessing the tone and portrayal of women resisters in their own words as well as the writings such as Julian Blanc, Weitz, and Corina Dueñas. In memoirs and interviews of women in the Resistance, common themes emerge that give insight to who these women were and how they commented on their work and contributions in the Resistance. Three memoirs, Lucie Aubrac's book *Ils Partiront dans l'Ivresse* (2021) and the film adaptation by Claude Berri (1997), Agnes Humbert's

Resistance: memoirs of occupied France (1940), and Germaine Tillion's *Ravensbrück* (1975), will form the basis of this analysis, in conjunction with Monique Saigal's book *Héroïnes françaises, 1940-1945: Courage, Force et Ingéniosité* (2008) which includes many interviews she conducted with women who participated in the resistance. This paper argues by studying these sources, women did not efface themselves or their efforts from the historical record. For many women, their work as Resistance members were integrated with their daily lives and at times sporadic for this reason many of these women did not count themselves as heroes. Instead, their morality and natural sense of duty was a reaffirmation of their feminine identity that they saw as integral and indispensable for Resistance work.

Lucie Aubrac: Fighting with Feminine Arms

Many *résistantes*, or women Resistance fighters, operating in the domestic sphere used the constraints that society put on them to their advantage as they fought for liberation. Often, they did this with specific reference to contemporary gender norms. This veil of normalcy was integral to Resistance efforts because it could often make very dangerous situations for *résistantes* normal, which made women an invaluable segment of the French Resistance (Weitz, 1995, p. 197). Lucie Aubrac, a well-known *résistante* helped in publishing the liberation newspaper, organized meetings, delivered packages and planned escape plots. Aubrac describes her and other women's experiences as "fighting with feminine arms," or seduction, which was a central tactic used in *Outwitting the Gestapo* (Saigal, 2008, p. 167; Aubrac, 1994). This includes many instances of using her pregnant condition to gain sympathy for her female sensibilities while disguising her resistance activities. Her ability to manipulate and take advantage of German soldiers' sympathy for her, a pregnant woman whose "only recourse was marriage," proves instrumental in freeing her husband from prison; to the soldiers, she was a desperate woman in love and who wanted to save her honor. She was able to use "her weakness, her love at first sight for the prisoner and her pregnancy" as ammunition for her work in the resistance (Saigal 167). Aubrac was able to use conventional stereotypes of femininity and womanhood to facilitate a daring prison escape for her husband and other Resistance members sentenced to death. Speaking of the escape, Aubrac deliberately states, "it is something that could have been only accomplished by a woman," (Saigal, 2008, p. 167).

Aubrac affirms the important role women played, not in spite of their feminine attributes and expectations, but because of them. Seen mostly as caretakers, women took advantage of this common perception to further resistance goals, and Aubrac affirms the importance of this advantage. In an interview with Monique Saigal, Aubrac recounted, “If a parachutist breaks his leg at a police station, a résistante put him in her car and when stopped by the Gestapo she tells him that he’s wounded and is taking him to the hospital...the control lets him pass, and everything is normal.” (Saigal 167). This example shows that women were a neutralizing presence, and could take a suspicious or dangerous situation and deescalate it because of their caretaker status within society.

Women’s invisibility and appearance of normality was integral to the resistance effort. The home was not the only place this was true. Working women with government positions proved very valuable, and their resistance efforts would require them to maintain their jobs and their civilian life. For example, women working in France’s national rail system, the SNCF, organized undercover train departures and warned agents of the presence of German officers on the platforms. Women working in the Post Office intercepted letters of denunciation and listened in on phone calls. Women working in the Prefecture could give resistance members identity cards, and travel permits (Diamond 104). Ultimately, in the scope of being recognized for resistance efforts, many women did not change their lifestyles significantly or perform extraordinary acts of resistance but that is what gave them an advantage in secrecy.

For many women, the work they did was intermingled with their normal lives. Being that they did not carry out separate missions in the name of the resistance could explain why some women of the French Resistance might discount their involvement against Nazi occupation. For example, Bertie Albrechet organized women to help families whose members were in prison. These women provided food, moral support, and prison visits to boost spirits (Diamond, 1999). Whether it be feeding, housing, nurturing, or working in the public sphere, how women saw their activities was significantly shaped to take a humbler view. Even where some women did not have the obligation of doing domestic chores, it was necessary to keep up them so that they were not suspected by the Nazis (Weitz, 1995). One other noteworthy fact, tying into the concept of normalcy, was that for many women, their contributions in the resistance were sporadic. Since many women’s lifestyles did not change, it is reasonable that they would think they had done nothing. Their meaning is not that their work wasn’t important or that they did nothing, but

rather that their work wasn't that much more than what they would have done without Resistance involvement. Despite their contribution often being woven in their everyday tasks or gender roles, they made a conscious decision to oppose Nazi occupation and could have faced severe consequences if they were found out.

Despite Aubrac's success, she avows that none of her activities were heroic. Scholars such as Margaret Weitz (1995), Carolina Dūenas (2007) and Julian Blanc (2017) have written that this type of verbiage is "self-effacing." Aubrac contends it was not so much courage, but rather nerve, that fueled her actions. She explains how she could never accept Nazi rhetoric, stating, "My activities were not heroism, it's having skill and capacity... I just applied my feminine assets" (Saigal 170). At face value, this commentary on her courageous work as a Resistance member and her well-executed prison break does seem self-effacing. However, she didn't view herself as a hero, but as someone with the ability to act and contribute to a greater cause. This is a common tendency among the *résistantes*: affirming the incredibly important roles they fulfilled, but not thinking of themselves as praiseworthy heroes. In collecting statements from *résistantes* about why they performed their work despite severe consequences, Saigal received responses such as "to uphold human dignity, because I couldn't sit back and do nothing, for my country, or it was just my duty (202). Overall, this tendency to interpret what others see as heroism for simple duty makes it less likely that their contributions will be known, heard, and valued in the historical record.

The film adaptation of Lucie Aubrac's story can be a tool for putting the discussions of representation and heroism of *résistantes* into focus. At a first glance, the description of the film, on its cover creates its own narrative separate from the book. The 1997 film *Lucie Aubrac's* description is that, "Her absolute devotion to her husband leads to a dramatic conclusion, risking life and limb in her attempt to free him from the hands of the Gestapo in one of the most remarkable love stories ever told" (Berri, 1997). The description portrays Aubrac's prison break of her husband solely as an act of love, a sign that Berri marketed the film without considering the major resistance aspect of Aubrac's rescue. Aubrac described her annoyance with the film, because "you finish the film believing that if I was a *résistante*, it was for love" (Humbert, 2012, p. 112). Many times, in *Outwitting the Gestapo* and in her interviews, Aubrac cites patriotism, duty, and camaraderie as her primary motivations for what she did. Though Lucie Aubrac and other *résistantes* often highlight protecting their loved ones and fellow members in their memoirs

as their motivations for their participation, these are not the most notable or the most emphasized.

In many women's testimonies, especially for Aubrac, resistance took place in everyday life, including mundane tasks. In *Outwitting the Gestapo*, she says, "Years later when I tell my children about the German occupation and the resistance my most tenacious memory will be...at the trolley stop, exchanging ration cards... our clandestine lives" (Aubrac, 1994, p. 143). For scholars like David Walton, "the domestic face of resistance operations was the most engrossing part of Aubrac's memoirs" (cited in Humbert, 2012, p. 113). Because Berri as an author and director does not shed light on the daily aspects of resistance, his script neglects the most pertinent examples and representations of the résistantes. Many women during the resistance were not exceptional in their societal role nor did they describe themselves to be. In contrast, Berri's film takes a traditionally masculine tone in emphasizing Aubrac as a heroine figure. This is contrary to Lucie Aubrac's down-to-earth writings, where she recounts her emotions and uses humor throughout the text.

Contrasting Aubrac's commentary and Berri's film shows not only the differences in mediums but also the female versus male perspective. The journal or the diary has been often thought of as a feminine genre. The central themes of these memoirs are family, the domestic scene, and preoccupations with the health and well-being of their family and friends. These themes are present in many women resistance members own representations of their experience. What is noteworthy, as Margaret Collin Weitz points out, is that "Masculine diaries focus on action that takes place in public and professional arenas... men seldom speak of daily events, perhaps not judging them fit for history" (Dueñas & Fisher, 2012, p. 77). This inherent difference has two primary effects. First, it trivializes many women's tasks that were integral to the Resistance. Second, it highlights how men might construct a heroic narrative of action, instead of the more commensurate daily tasks that were necessary to achieve the same goals. Interestingly, Berri made the same choices in directing Aubrac's story, leaving out the "slice of life" elements and constructing a heroic narrative. Though this decision may have been about the film's box office performance, it provides insight into the perceptions men develop about what proper action (and in this case, resistance) looks like. In this example it is evident that "being a hero" is not always uplifting to female contributions of the Resistance. There are ways women describe themselves in a way that deemphasizes their heroism without being self-effacing.

By contrast, Monique Saigal's desire to present female stories from the Resistance on their own terms comes from her own observations as a Holocaust survivor. Her mother and uncle were part of the Resistance, and Saigal was inspired by her grandmother Rivka Leiba who she describes as "marvelous gentle, loving woman ready to sacrifice anything for the ones that she loved." She protected her son, who also was working in the Resistance, from the Gestapo while he hid in another room. Her grandmother was taken and later gassed in Auschwitz 15 days after her arrival. Monique Saigal was hid as a small Jewish girl. In her book she aims to pay homage to the courageous women in the past and seeks to tell their stories to the newer generations of women (Saigal, 2008, p. 210). Her background almost certainly informs her suggestion that "the heroism of women is not the imitation of the heroism of men, far from being masculine, they were simply exemplary. They raised their femininity to the highest level" (201). At times, this entailed being optimistic and courageous when being humiliated or in dismal conditions. These women in their femininity chose to highlight their mindset and the banalities that facilitated their survival in hard times. This speaks to how femininity presented itself as an extension of women's duty to do what was right. One theme among many women of the resistance as cited by Lucie Aubrac is a feeling of patriotism and doing what needed to be done. Because women did what they felt was completely natural, many did not see the need to gain public recognition.

Germaine Tillion: Forgetting Myself

Germaine Tillion was an ethnologist studied a wide range of academic disciplines at the Ecole du Louvre and the Sorbonne. She worked at the Musée du L'homme, a museum dedicated to archeology, ethnography, and cultural studies, as a researcher and later joined the Musée du L'homme resistance network. She designated the name because "whenever we spoke of the first to die, we would say 'the ones from the museum'" (Torodov, 2001, p. 145). Her role was collecting intelligence on the German Army, troop movements and prisoner camps (Todorov 145). She was betrayed by a priest working as a double agent in 1942, which led to her deportation to the Ravensbrück concentration camp.

Germaine Tillion's contribution to the representation of the Resistance is not in the form of a memoir. Having a background as an ethnographer, she has written about her experiences from a similar perspective. Her book, *Ravensbrück*, is more of an objective analysis of the camp

instead of her subjective experience there. Her representation as a female *résistante* is different than that of many women who gave interviews and wrote diaries that were centered on more mundane experiences. In an interview with Alison Rice, Tillion does not give a clear reason why she reacted this way, but she proclaims it was “instinctive, but also as a way of dominating” (Rice, 2004, p. 166). She states, “I was careful to speak as little as possible of myself” (Rice, 2004, p.169). Despite her very objective and arguably “masculine” way of writing, her colder, objective, and ethnological approach stems from female motivations. Her motives for making such an objective analysis also ties in with the “self-effacing” nature many women in the Resistance displayed, which further sheds light onto why many women initially did not seek recognition or to write about themselves. Tillion purports, “It was clear that my initial tendency was to try to forget myself,” the reason being that she was “too close and too affected” (Rice, 2004, p.169).

Though she participated heavily in the Resistance and contributed to the historical record with her book, she wanted to forget her own experience and trauma she suffered in the camp. Tillion’s mother would be killed in the gas chambers at Ravensbrück in 1945 (Todorov, 2001, p. 145). The entirety of *Ravensbrück* is an objective analysis and the testimonies of survivors in the camp, with the exceptions of the use of first person and some anecdotes. The book is not a telling of her own struggles, experiences, or emotions in the concentration camp, which may further downplay the contributions she made over the course of her resistance involvement. Many women seemed to have not written or spoken about their roles to distance themselves from the hardship that they encountered during the war. In this vein, Yvette Bernard Farnoux told Monique Saigal that she would not tell her grandchildren of her acts of resistance because “I didn’t want them to pity us” (Saigal, 2008, p. 52).

Agnes Humbert

Agnes Humbert is another *résistante* whose memoir sheds light women’s activities in the Resistance. Like Germaine Tillion, Agnès Humbert was an independent intellectual working woman. She studied art history and ethnology at the Sorbonne. Divorced she would later work as a research assistant at the Musée des Arts et Traditions Populaires. She was in her forties when she joined the resistance movement, where she helped set up a Resistance newspaper (Blanc, 2017, p. 78). Her memoir presents an interesting intermediary between both Lucie

Aubrac and Germaine Tillion. While unmarried, her concern for her family, and especially her *résistante* mother, are still prominent themes. In a scare that the *résistantes* would have to leave Paris, Humbert says, “Vige urges me to leave Paris, yes... what about maman? I can’t leave her on her own just now.” She further states that in that moment “domestic concerns make me renounce thoughts of leaving” (Humbert, 2008, p. 41). Here, according to Julian Blanc, Humbert minimizes her resistance contribution by not being able to possibly imagine why she would be wanted by the Gestapo, which alludes to her perception of her own minuscule contribution.

Another theme found in Humbert’s writings is the relationships she forms with other women in living quarters and factories, and the close relationships that she formed in prison and forced labor camps. One friendship that really impacted her was a Belgian resistance member much younger than her by the name of Kate. In the difficulties of factory work Humbert writes, “But I shall still have the pleasure of seeing Kate’s pretty face on the journeys from Ritterstrasse to the Rheika and back again - which is a lot to be thankful for” (Humbert, 2008, p.127). To Humbert, friendship does not simply provide material for her writing but is a mechanism for survival.

Themes and Conclusion

Though many of these women came from different backgrounds and were involved in different work in the resistance, there were similarities among them that they showed in their writings. For example cleanliness as mentioned by Agnès Humbert and others was a notable observation by Tillion as well. When describing the lowest social rung in Ravensbrück, she writes, “Each of the poor grubworms defied everything one might have believed about nature and hygiene. It was no surprised that they died; they were already removed from life” (Tillion, 1975, p.24). Another characterization of these women was that they refused to see themselves or present themselves as victims. This is seen through Humbert’s writings, where violent episodes are described with sarcasm and humor. Even in the worst of health, she would joke with the other women in the plants about their conditions. This ability to keep a sort of distance or lightness in these situations is similarly what helped Germaine Tillion write an objective and statistical analysis of the atrocities at Ravensbrück. Marie-Jo Chombart de Lauwe and Brigitte Friang had rules to survive in the camps and avoid self-victimization, which included “don’t cry like an idiot, counterattack,

don't succumb to weakness despite the pain, and don't be discouraged in the face of distress" (Saigal, 2008, p.206).

Despite the strength of these résistantes, Humbert seems to portray her efforts in a humble way that can come off as self-effacing. Julian Blanc in his afterword says, "She consistently underestimates her contribution" (Humbert, 2008, p. 292). While Julian Blanc purports that she is incapable of measuring the true value of her contribution, when in the next line she rationalized not leaving her mother because she might be arrested, she rebuts by saying "I've done so little...why on earth would they arrest me?" (Humbert, 2008, p.41). In one sense this can be seen as a rationalization for not leaving her mother because of her concern for her mother's safety, but this also does appear to be self-depreciating when taking into consideration her founding and contributing to the Musée du l'Homme underground resistance movement.

The narration also provides insight into representation of her activities in the resistance. Humbert as an author comes off as neutral to the circumstances, she finds herself in and to the people she meets. She uses wit and sarcasm that come off as humorous. Her memoir again highlights the natural camaraderie of women forced into disagreeable situations, and her new friendships were instrumental to her survival in the camp. Like Germaine Tillion, she uses humor to create distance from the situation she found herself in, the only difference being she writes this in her memoir. Tillion's writings, though they do include humorous tools, are more objective, straightforward, and impersonal. Brigitte Friang in an interview with Saigal signals the importance of humor and laughter by saying at time in the camps "we would break out into laughter, we would stupidly laugh to the extent of fear that we had felt." (Saigal, 2008, p. 208).

Humbert's reflection in prison and deportation come off lighter and more compelling because of the stories and characters that she writes about as well as the comparison of different peoples in the forced labor plant. She mentions meeting women who had affairs, or who have interesting backstories like being tarot card readers or con artists (Humbert, 2008, p.156). In *Ravensbrück*, Tillion also makes distinctions of ethnicities and nationalities in a more professional and objective way that is congruent with her training as an ethnographer. Reading Humbert's memoir after reading *Ravensbrück*, one can see the stark contrast of experience and recitation. This can be attributed to *Ravensbrück* being a death camp and Humbert's deportation to a forced labor factory. This difference that does not detract from the two women's courage and the similar ways they represent their experiences.

Ultimately, it is important to understand from memoirs and interviews of women in the French Resistance that heroism is not defined by traditional acts of masculine bravery or non-gendered acts of extreme courage. Being that many women's acts were entangled with everyday routines showed their inventiveness in war time that provided instrumental support and cover for the resistance effort. Some women did perform extraordinary acts that went outside the purview of everyday life. But living in a conspicuous time, all and any acts of resistance to a powerful and unwelcome occupier were extraordinary. These women no matter their specific contribution would face death and deportation if they were discovered. Their emphasis on duty, morality, and empathy shows their exemplary character. That the period saw a gendered look at the roles men and women played, meant that women's resistance was not heroic by any means, but rather an extension and a reaffirmation of their feminine identities in times of brutal occupation.

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