

Gender and revolution in Europe from the 19th-20th century

Women and barricades

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ABSTRACT

A great many images and narratives surrounding barricades during the nineteenth century present women carrying flags, treating the wounded, and more rarely bearing a rifle. While the figure of the young girl or the prostitute is often glorified or condemned, it was more often within the context of the family unit that women participated in combat. Barricades were consequently a mixed-gender place, as well as a place of fantasies, as demonstrated by the women's barricade during the Commune in 1871. This ubiquitous presence receded during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, even though there is evidence of women's role from Petrograd to Maidan, from Madrid and Budapest to Prague and Paris. This decline is also the result of transformations in urban guerilla warfare, and the pre-eminence of emblematic female representation in demonstrations. While the action of women in combat is no longer seen as an extreme excess of violence, it is nevertheless marked by the assignment of gendered roles.



Woman on a barricade in Prague during the Revolution of 1848, author unknown.

The one image that is always used to evoke the revolutionary movements of the nineteenth century is the painting by Eugène Delacroix (1830), *Liberté guidant le peuple* [Liberty leading the people]. The participation of women in political and social mobilizations, however, was nothing new, as they were already present in the bread riots during the Ancien Régime, as well as in the great days of the French Revolution. However it was novel in respect to its circulation and posterity even as the use of both defensive and offensive barricades became a key strategy in Europe for the seizure of power by working-class and urban populations. This tactic re-emerged only episodically during the twentieth century, more as an invocation of the past than as a strategy in itself. The question of the relation between women and barricades cannot be reduced to assessing their effective presence. Sources either

minimize or, on the contrary, emphasize their role, which became a kind of marker for excess in combat, with feminine violence serving as an indicator of the political and social disturbances at work. This was notably the case for the Paris Commune in 1871, with its dominant figure of the fighting and incendiary *pétroleuse*.

The barricade appeared as a mixed space in which relations between women and men were also based in particular on more ordinary bonds of acquaintance and family. It was a neighbourhood affair in most clashes during the nineteenth century, with the family unit rising up to fight, and mobilized all kinds of actors who did not necessarily take up arms. Barricades had to be constructed and maintained, resupplied with provisions and water (wine according to detractors), while the dead and wounded had to be cleared away. Women were present in their "usual" indispensable roles as nurses, ambulance medics, or nurturers. Although these activities are not those of the combatant, nothing suggests that weapons did not sometimes pass from men to women, just as the flag did. While representations of the barricade are very often identical throughout the Europe of 1848—some images were used simultaneously in the French, German, and Austrian press—those of women differed according to the country. For example in France, women rarely bore rifles, but especially appeared alongside or on top of barricades brandishing a flag. Women bearing arms were more present in German, Italian, and Austrian revolutionary and counter-revolutionary imagery, as demonstrated by the engravings of the Austrian caricaturist Johann Christian Schoeller (1782-1851). In the context of nationalist movements, the women associated with barricades took their place in a repertory of actions both military and revolutionary, which represented them with the features of the Amazon, or dressed as a man while attempting to join the army.

For all that, the sources seldom mention violent female action. Accounts mentioning the killing of a woman bearing arms are rare, and police archives provide only a glimpse of their number and role. In June 1848 in Paris, judgments reveal essentially two types of highly stereotyped women: the matron who harangues—with speaking out being as important as taking up arms—and the young woman as standard-bearer, more of a revolutionary emblem than an actor. Accounts often insist on the presence of the "public girl," even though the acknowledged number of prostitutes is tiny. The heroization of the "innocent" feminine victim was also a recurring topos from 1830 onwards, such as the Frenchwoman killed at the time on the barricades of the place des Victoires, or the Austrian woman Elisabeth March, who was killed during the Vienna Uprising of March 1848. Women were particularly active in the insurrections of the People's Spring. Margarethe Adams was one of 585 women arrested and questioned in September 1848 in Frankfurt for transporting stones and rifles and for helping to construct barricades. In 1850, Pauline Wunderlich was sentenced to life in prison for her role in the fighting in Dresden between May 3-10, 1849.

Exclusively female barricades, such as the "women's barricade" during the Paris Commune (1870-1871), remained as much an object of fantasy as of controversy. Numerous contradictory accounts of the "united battalion" from the 12th arrondissement fueled the dark legend of the Commune, and made the *pétroleuse* a part of the grand narrative of women's emancipation. Their participation served to humiliate men who did not fulfill their virile role, as their fighting or military action sought to replace men who were absent or inadequate. Is this just a myth or reality? Louise Michel (1830-1905) recounted how she fought alongside other anonymous women on the barricades beginning in January 1871, sometimes wearing the uniform of the national guard.

During the twentieth century, the impact of photography—a better mirror of reality—did not exalt the presence of women on barricades, which since then has been celebrated and denounced less. Icons faded away and female participation, which was more frequent, became less original. Women were especially active on the raised barricades during the demonstrations and fighting of the revolution in Petrograd in February 1917, and later with the Spartacists in Berlin in 1919, or in Spain during the "fratricidal" fighting in the streets of Barcelona in May 1937.

With the Second World War, the revolutionary object of the barricade became an instrument of rebellion against the occupier. The people of Paris and Warsaw covered their cities in barricades during the summer of 1944. Women, men, and children helped erect them. Paving stones were lifted from the streets by families, building occupants, or entire neighbourhoods, and chains were formed to heap them up more quickly. Nevertheless, it was rare for women to hold the barricade, an image which remains iconic.

During the Cold War, in both Budapest on October 24, 1956 and Prague in August 1968, the people erected

barricades. This immediate and shared gesture united these often mixed groups, with their paltry defences temporarily prolonging hopes in the face of Soviet tanks.

During the events of 1968, the barricade once again became the revolutionary object of the student youth, with girls being almost as numerous as boys. It was reborn in the opposition to the Vietnam War in London on March 17 during the “Battle of Grosvenor Square.” In Paris, it gave its name to the night of 3-4 May in the Latin Quarter, where 574 people were arrested after extended confrontations with the CRS riot police, including 45 women.

Finally, from November 21, 2013 to February 22, 2014, the barricades of Maidan square became the heart of the revolt, as well as of the pro-European aspirations of “Euromaidan.” Throughout the winter, a large share of the city’s population discussed, ate, warmed themselves, demonstrated, and fought in front of journalists from across the globe. However, during confrontations, the traditional assignment of roles once again was imposed : certain “leaders” asked women to withdraw from “combat zones” and work to resupply the area with cobblestones and protective masks. As a result, the presence of women on barricades and the representation thereof—whether they are taking part in a revolutionary or military struggle—continues in the twenty-first century to be prisoner to the assignment of gender roles.

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