

## The Body and the City: Walking Barcelona with *las Milicianas* and Eileen O'Shaughnessy

a response by Megan J. Sheard

In her recent book on Eileen O'Shaughnessy, Anna Funder examines a passage from George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia* in which Eileen, a British logistics worker with the non-Stalinist *Partit Obrer d'Unificació Marxista* (POUM) during the Spanish Civil War, sits alone in the Hotel Continental's lobby at night.<sup>1</sup> Located on the major promenade of Las Ramblas in Barcelona, the hotel occupies a central location in a zone scarred by conflict. The avenue follows the line of the former medieval wall between the Plaça de Catalunya and the Mediterranean Sea, separating the Barri Gòtic and El Raval neighborhoods, and was a site of skirmishes during the war (1936-1939).<sup>2</sup> As a broad, linear expanse within a denser urban mosaic, Las Ramblas acted at various moments as an avenue for collective movement, a no-man's-land in street battles, and a space to be defended; its cobblestones were even torn up to build barricades. It also hosted volunteers who, like Eileen, had traveled to Spain to work for one of a plethora of organizations defending the Republican government. At the time of this scene in 1937, the POUM has just been suppressed by Stalinist communist factions. Eileen's

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<sup>1</sup> Anna Funder, *Wifedom: Mrs Orwell's Invisible Life* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2023), 95-183. Eileen's married name was Blair; I follow Funder's use of her maiden name here.

<sup>2</sup> The street is variously *La Rambla* or *Las Ramblas* in Castilian Spanish, and *Les Ramblas* in Catalan. I use the plural form here to preserve the history of the street as a series of independently named sections, and the Castilian due to its common usage. I use Catalan for other site names and the Castilian *miliciana* for its application beyond Catalonia.

office at the hotel had been ratted out by spies and her colleagues arrested. Though she is now a target, she sits exposed in the lit-up lobby waiting for her husband George to return from fighting with the POUM on the Aragon front to warn him of the danger. When he arrives, she feigns unconcerned affection, only to hiss in his ear: “Get out!”<sup>3</sup>

Funder’s reimagining of the scene from Eileen’s perspective draws on the scholar’s research about the period and on Orwell’s description in *Homage* to contemplate the significance of Eileen’s actions. In the face of the arrest of her colleagues, and knowing her own capture was almost certain, she sat waiting in a space of total visibility and exposure. It was an act of courage in an extremely dangerous situation, and neither her first, nor her last: she had already saved Orwell’s book manuscript, which she typed, in an earlier search of their room by the Soviet-affiliated police.<sup>4</sup> Soon after, she would arrange for their escape to France.

The image of Eileen acting in isolated resolve might be compared to more literal images of women from the Spanish Civil War in which we see them standing alone: the iconic image of the seventeen-year-old journalist Marina Ginestá atop the roof of the Hotel Colón with a rifle on her back and a triumphant gaze, or a photograph of a smiling Rosita Sánchez from 1936, dressed in the uniform of the Republican militia with her baby on her hip. Like the images discussed by Anderson-Cleary in this volume, such image production amid the turmoil of the Spanish Civil War challenged both prevailing ideas about women’s place in society as well as some images produced by allies of the Spanish Republic.<sup>5</sup> Anderson-Cleary’s analysis shows how depictions on the Spanish left and their corollaries in the avant-garde movements sometimes repurposed the trope of the female body as a signifier of biological reproduction toward radical ends. These tropes emphasized terrestrial fecundity—farming being a firmly working-class occupation—or depicted women as the progenitors of (male)

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<sup>3</sup> George Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia and Looking Back on the Spanish War* (London: Penguin Books, 1966), 195; Funder, *Wifedom*, “In Plain Sight,” 168-179.

<sup>4</sup> For Orwell, Eileen’s ability to save the manuscript owes to Spanish manners, since the police seemed unwilling to turn a lady out of her bed: the manuscript was hidden beneath the mattress. However, it seems that a fair degree of nerve might be needed for a woman sleeping alone whose room has been entered by six armed men to stay *in* the bed. See Orwell, *Homage*, 200-1; Funder, *Wifedom*, 169-173.

<sup>5</sup> Associations between different worker’s confederations during the war are marked by a degree of complexity. The Confederación Nacional del Trabajo (CNT) was a major worker’s organization under the banner of the Asociación Internacional de Trabajadores (AIT) whose connection is represented CNT-FAI; the emergence of the Federación Anarquista Ibérica (FAI) produced the CNT-FAI. For a useful explainer, see “CNT, FAI, AIT: la barrera inexpugnable (CNT, FAI, AIT: The unbreachable barrier),” Special Collections & Archives, UC San Diego, accessed 19 March 2024, <https://library.ucsd.edu/dc/object/bb1366015z>.



Figure 1: *Gràfic del moviment facciós. 19 de juliol del 1936* (Diagram of the insurgent movement. July 19, 1936). This propagandistic map of Barcelona shows the military uprising and its repulsion by Republican-allied forces, predominantly the CNT-FAI. Red areas show forces *feixistes* (fascist forces, i.e. Nationalists) and green areas show forces *proletòries* (forces of the proletariat), with arrows indicating movement. Las Ramblas can be seen between (7) Plaça de Catalunya and the port. Note the upper and lower occupation of Las Ramblas by Nationalist forces and the density of the old city, particularly the Barri Gòtic to the east. Comissaria de Propaganda de la Generalitat de Catalunya, 1936. Courtesy of Special Collections & Archives, UC San Diego.

soldiers. Women did briefly appear as fighters, or *milicianas*, in Republican-affiliated posters, though often as single figures flanked by men.<sup>6</sup> One call to arms features a woman in dungarees pointing at the viewer in a clear reference to World War I Uncle Sam posters, her other arm outstretched and brandishing a rifle as a male militia marches behind her, with the slogan *Les milicies, us necessiten!* (“The militias need you!”) above.<sup>7</sup> Another poster shows a woman bearing the bold red and black flag of the CNT-AIT leading a brigade of armed men, one of whom appears to kneel deferentially. Another shows a woman engaged in trench fighting with two male soldiers, who take aim over the body of their fallen comrade with the words *¡No pasarán!*, or “They shall not pass!” inscribed above them in blood (fig. 1). In the background, an all-male contingent advances in monochrome.

These depictions of women were a minority theme among propaganda posters during the war. They were also short-lived, quickly replaced by posters encouraging women to labor on the “second front” of farm, factory, and domestic work like sewing as women began to be pushed back into the “rearguard” of the war.<sup>8</sup> But like the iconic photograph of Marina Ginestá—who maintained she was never a combatant—such images project a set of possibilities beyond their direct realization.<sup>9</sup> These are the possibilities that artists like Kati Horna simultaneously create and take up as they seize the means of image production to present women with greater fullness: the powerful elderly *campesina* with a wrinkled face, the young girl whose smile and bright eyes

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<sup>6</sup> Strictly speaking, the terms *miliciana* and *miliciano* refer to combatants in the worker militias before their incorporation into the Republican army. I use the term here to draw out the figure of the female fighter, but also acknowledge Esther Gutiérrez Escoda’s point that the continued use of the term after both women and men were more correctly soldiers has contributed to a misunderstanding that women only fought in the earlier period. See her interview by Sebastiaan Faber, “Yes, Women Did Serve in the People’s Army of the Spanish Republic: Esther Gutiérrez Escoda Sets the Record Straight,” *The Volunteer*, August 18 2022, accessed 18 March 2024, <https://albavolunteer.org/2022/08/yes-women-did-serve-in-the-republican-army-esther-gutierrez-escoda-sets-the-record-straight>.

<sup>7</sup> Mary Nash interprets this poster as an example of the image of the *miliciana* being used to convince men to sign up. It could therefore be read as an appropriation of the *miliciana* into the visual vocabulary of women shaming men into signing up already extant in posters of the period. See Mary Nash, *Defying Male Civilization: Women in the Spanish Civil War* (Denver: Alden Press, 1995), center plates.

<sup>8</sup> Esther Gutiérrez Escoda notes a that critical misunderstanding in Spanish Civil War scholarship is that women were banned from being part of the Republican Army from the fall of 1936, when in fact their presence continued in both the army, and the *maquis* (guerilla resistance) after the war’s official end in 1939.

<sup>9</sup> This is not to overlook the importance of such images as propaganda for the Republican cause, but merely to assert that they carry an excess of meaning beyond their strategic use (i.e., whether or not Ginestá was really a combatant is peripheral to the possibilities her photograph evokes for women who see it).

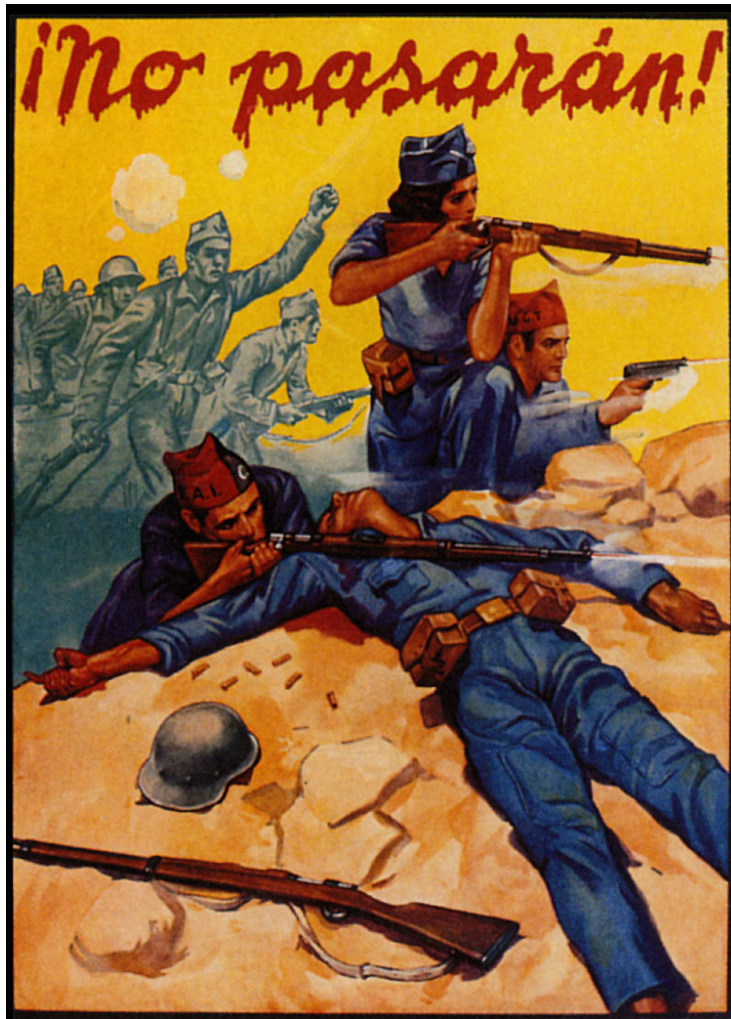


Figure 2: *¡No pasaran!* Spanish Civil War poster showing a *miliciana* engaged in combat with male CNT-FAI soldiers. Digital image © 2022 New York University. Image reproduced under fair use. Courtesy of Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives (ALBA).

suggest a future unavailable to any of the women who precede her.<sup>10</sup> A certain imagination breaks loose.

Thinking about images of *milicianas* and other women active in the war, in which they are so often depicted alone or with men, I wondered how we might adjust our historical imagining to see women not just on the frontlines and the city streets *at all* but also *together*. After all, Eileen did not only sit alone in Barcelona waiting for Orwell: she had also worked side by side with Lois Orr, an American volunteer in the POUM

office who at this moment had just been imprisoned.<sup>11</sup> Likewise, *milicianas* were not isolated figures, but worked together, including against the sexism they experienced from their male comrades. As Anderson-Cleary notes, Horna was a central photographer for *Mujeres Libres*, a women's organization and magazine committed to both anti-fascism and social revolution that at its height had 20,000 affiliates.<sup>12</sup> Such

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<sup>10</sup> See Lizi Anderson-Cleary's article in this volume. For a discussion of Ginestá and an interview with her son on the issue of whether she was a combatant, see Yvonne Schoultzen, "From Toulouse to Trotsky's Assassin: The Story Behind an Iconic Photograph," *The Volunteer*, May 17 2020, accessed 19 March 2024, <https://albavolunteer.org/2020/05/the-girl-who-dated-trotsky-s-assassin-the-story-behind-an-iconic-photograph>.

<sup>11</sup> For details of the arrests see Lois and Charles Orr's accounts in Lois Orr and Charles Orr, *Letters from Barcelona: An American Woman in Revolution and Civil War*, edited by Gerd-Rainer Horn (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), Chapter 8: "In Stalin's Secret Barcelona Jail," 183-201.

<sup>12</sup> Martha A. Ackelsberg, *Free Women of Spain: Anarchism and the Struggle for the Emancipation of Women* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 21.

women were not isolated heroes, but collaborators pushing aggressively at the boundaries of the politically and socially possible.

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I recently visited Barcelona and was struck by the intensity with which historical time is spliced and bricolaged together in the fabric of the city. Balloon twisters in clown suits create colorful heart and sword shapes on the steps of the Catedral de Barcelona, where the historical alliance of Spanish Catholicism and monarchy feel as weighty as the church's piers. Passing through the cloister, I was jarred by the contrast between geese splashing placidly in their pond and the somber quiet of the chapter house museum with its glittering jewels, where all cameras were on me and I was not permitted to use my own. As I stepped from the cloister into the narrow street, Catalan *senyera* and *estelada* flags reminded me of a long independence struggle traceable in buildings like La Sagrada Familia so celebrated by tourists. At the eastern edge of the neighborhood, municipal workers clean the streets by the old Roman wall with green-bristled brooms and stop to smoke beneath the trees.

Less obvious are the sites and traces of the war. Cobblestones torn up from Las Ramblas have long been replaced to be trod daily by throngs of tourists. The octagonal tower recorded by Orwell as a position from which the Assault Guards shot at anarchists is simply identifiable as the tower of the Basilica de Santa Maria del Pi, whose gutting by fire during the anarchist-led uprising of 1936 leaves no obvious trace. Even the Roman sepulchers that emerge startlingly from below the Plaça de la Vila Madrid seem to tell only of the ancient city of Barcino, though their position in a cavity below the square might make you wonder why the Carmelite convent that stood there was so badly damaged in 1936 as to lead to their discovery.<sup>13</sup> Having visited the city at the wrong time to take a Spanish Civil War tour, I instead scoured the guides' website for clues in interpreting the traces of war in Barcelona's built environs, and let myself wonder about gaps in official signage, which reported urban change like a string of empirical facts.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Olivia Munnoz-Rojas Oscarsson notes that restoring Roman sites after the Nationalist victory in 1939 aligned with Franco's ideological emphasis on the supremacy of Roman and Hapsburg empires in Spain's history. Olivia Munnoz-Rojas Oscarsson, "Wartime Destruction and Post-War Urban Reconstruction: Case Studies of Barcelona, Bilbao and Madrid in the Spanish Civil War and Its Aftermath" (PhD dissertation, London School of Economics and Political Science, 2009), 108.

<sup>14</sup> "Spanish Civil War tours in Barcelona and History of the War," accessed 19 March 2024, <https://thespanishcivilwar.com>. See also Catherine Howley's interview on Alan McGuire and Eoghan Gilmartin (hosts), "How Antoni Gaudí turned me into an Anarchist: Architecture and Class in Barcelona," *The Sobremesa Podcast*, 31 March 2023, accessed 19 March 2024, <https://open.spotify.com/episode/1UOqmlwH6D7YXA5gjGkGW0>.



Figure 3: A group of *milicianas*, likely Barcelona 1936. Note the caps of the CNT-FAI on the women at right and their male comrades behind them. Image used under Creative Commons license. Courtesy of Generalitat de Catalunya, Arxiu Nacional de Catalunya 2023.

Though I searched for the Civil War in Barcelona, I didn't consider the impact of gender on wartime experience of the city's spaces until much later, despite its impact on my own experience. I had visited La Sagrada Familia in a hallucinatory wave of cramping that intensified both the oppression of heat and the euphoria of color, and found few places for respite in planned spaces built to keep tourists moving. On my last night in the city, a quick jaunt to see the Plaça de George Orwell in the heels I'd worn to dinner left me wobbling on the stones and looking a little nervously over my shoulder. But I was a summer visitor in a highly touristified space, attempting to connect with the city's history through a paradoxical genre of Anglo travel writing that Jane Hanley characterizes as combining war with a romanticized view of another country.<sup>15</sup> I hadn't thought of Eileen then: if I had, I might have stopped before the Hotel Continental, might even have imagined her in the cafeteria with Lois Orr, but I would still have been reading the war through an Anglo story. I wonder now about the Spanish *milicianas* like the members of CNT-FAI (fig. 3), members of *Mujeres Libres*,

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<sup>15</sup> Jane Hanley, "The Tourist Gaze in the Spanish Civil War: Agnes Hodgson Between Surgery and Spectacle," *College Literature* 43, no. 1 (2016): 196–219.

and women engaged in other roles involving active negotiation of the city's spaces. Which streets did they travel, alone or together, and where did they sleep? Not at the Hotel Continental. The exuberant faces of the CNT-FAI women in 1936 after the Nationalist coup was defeated in Barcelona are pictured in a moment of celebration, not under fire during fighting nor setting fires in churches. We don't see where they took shelter, how they navigated the narrow alleys of the Barri Gòtic, whether their male colleagues fought alongside them, harassed them, protected them. How hot was the summer sun in July 1936 as it rebounded from walls and streets? Did a sea breeze blow in along Las Ramblas to cool their faces while the stones of narrow Barri Gòtic alleys radiated warmth long into the evening? How many were also bleeding, and how did it feel to wear those dungarees, so newly and briefly permissible? I wonder where they cooked, what they ate, where they met to discuss their concerns away from men, where they relieved themselves when engaged in combat in the city, and—though not for too long—where they went or were taken when the war was lost.<sup>16</sup> Imagining the city as a space where these women were moving, fighting, and speaking together, I wonder what I missed when I walked through Barcelona looking for the war. Against the horizon of heightened bodily danger and the high stakes of the war for women's (re)suppression, the dungarees, rifles, art-making and journalistic activities of *Mujeres Libres* become perceptible as fragments of a heady rush for freedom, radical hopes not extinguished—perhaps even invigorated—by heightened danger.

Imagining *milicianas* moving through the city makes me think of Eileen and other international women who volunteered in Spain differently: not as isolated heroines among men, long deserving of recognition, and certainly not as a secondary rearguard, but as people embedded in friendships, familial ties, and comradeship with other women even as they navigated unfamiliar spaces. Like *milicianas* on the front, international women formed relationships with one another and wrote letters home to other women: Eileen's letters to her friend are a critical source for Funder's book. While Eileen's and Lois' Barcelona may have been a city of the hotel rather than the street and their privileges ultimately saved them from the effects of the Republican defeat, they left safer places and were forced to improvise in environments offering new possibilities and new, gendered dangers.

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<sup>16</sup> The consequences for Republican women combatants and allies in the aftermath of the war were particularly horrendous. See Esther Gutierrez Escoda, "Las mujeres militares en la Guerra Civil Española Política, Sociedad y Administración Militar de la II República (1936-1939)" (PhD dissertation, Universitat Rovira Y Virgili, 2009).

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