

Women-only WWII Military Reenactment Associations in Czechia: Between Authenticity and Emancipation

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Historical military reenactment as a popular phenomenon is becoming a prime focus for many scholars. However, the androcentric nature of military reenactment has led to the underrepresentation of women in WWII military reenactment in Czechia. In recent years, the number of female reenactors has risen, resulting in the creation of women-only reenactment associations. In this text, I build on the existing literature on female military reenactment and try to capture the processes of historical change regarding the cultural content of Czech WWII reenactment, within the framework of post-positivist oral history. The processes include: 1) the redirection of the focus from purely combat reenactment and performances to wider and more inclusive representations of military experiences, and 2) the promotion of women's perspectives and their further empowerment within the community, which ultimately has led to the emergence of woman-only reenactment associations. Here, I present the interpretation of newly-recorded oral history narratives of Czech female military reenactors, capturing their historical subjectivities as well as the above-mentioned processes.

Keywords: military reenactment, women reenactors, WWII, oral history, emancipation

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The study of women in military historical reenactment¹

The subject of military reenactment largely existed outside the academic spotlight until the 1980s. The historical establishment of the academic discipline began with the early exploratory papers by Turner (1990) and Thompson (2004), followed by an affective turn with the studies of Agnew (2007), McCalman, and Pickering (2010). Presently, the discipline is founded on the complex interdisciplinary concepts in recent publications by Agnew, Lamb, and Tomann (*Eds.*, 2020) and Agnew, Stach, and Tomann (*Eds.*, 2023). Nevertheless, most of the early texts and contributions focused primarily on male reenactment experiences, and female experiences (and voices in the case of oral history) were overlooked for a long time.

This situation has, however, significantly changed in the last couple of years with several seminal studies and monographs focusing on female experiences in military reenactment (Karpińska, 2020; Baraniecka-Olszewska, 2022; Tomann, 2022a; Tomann, 2022b; Zurné, 2023), namely two crucial studies by Tomann. In Tomann's first study, she follows a Polish Napoleonic cross-dressing female reenactor and defines cross-dressing as an ambivalent strategy, undermining the androcentric bias in reenactment, but not necessarily the current socially established gender patterns (Tomann, 2022b: 91–92). In her second study, she describes the subversive potential of female presence in reenactment. Though, military reenactment has tendency to reproduce uncritically past cultural patterns, behaviours, and structures as a result of authenticity being perceived as historical accuracy (Tomann, 2022a: 219). Lastly, Zurné's (2023) recent contribution to the literature is a study on two female-only reenactment groups that challenge the historical representation of women in armed forces during the Second World War (WWII).

Despite these recent studies, the female experience in Czech military reenactment is an unexplored phenomenon. The topic of military reenactment in the Czech Republic (Czechia), until recently, has drawn little academic interest, with only a single peer-reviewed text published (Hadarová, 2019). Nevertheless, in 2022, military reenactment became the main topic of an academic oral history research project awarded to the Faculty of Humanities at the Charles University, the first project of its kind. The outcome of this endeavour comprises this text, as well as recent peer-reviewed studies by Hlaváček (2023), Vacek (2023) Wohlmuth (2023, 2024), and Řičář (2024). Also, a collective monograph on the topic (Wohlmuth, *Ed.*, 2024) was published.

Similarly to other European countries, military reenactment in Czechia is predominantly focused on male martial experiences (Hunt, 2008), which are typically performed in pitched battles, frontline fighting, and camp life (Daugbjerg, 2020), where women were historically less present. It is undeniable that male experiences

¹ I would like to thank both anonymous reviewers of the text for their helpful and insightful comments.

are overrepresented in WWII reenactment, which could be the reason for a lack of studies focusing on women or female military reenactment experiences. One of the aims of this study is to change this situation.

Theoretical and methodological background

My research primarily centred on concepts of post-positivist oral history. I conducted oral history (OH) *life-story* interviews with female military reenactors and also drew on OH interviews with other reenactors. The difference between the *life-story* and the (rather biographical) *life-history* interview is that *life history* represents a “chronologically told narrative of an individual’s past” (Abrams, 2016: 40), while a *life story* is a “narrative device used by an individual to make sense of a life or experiences in the past” (Ibid.: 40). We tell life stories “to communicate our sense of self, who we are, to others” (Ibid.: 41).

The post-positivist oral history paradigm, situated in the interdisciplinary space between ethnology, historical anthropology, and memory studies (Wohlmuth, 2024: 50), began during the 1980s thanks to the cultural or “theoretical” turn in oral history (Shopes, 2014; Portelli, 1991; Abrams, 2016). The methodology emphasises the study of *life-story* narratives, which focus less on factual information (historical references) about past events, but rather on representations of various cultural content, forms, and processes (Portelli, 1997: 79–80) employed by narrators to construct a meaningful narrative of their own role and position in history. Narratives also usually reflect a narrator’s effort to achieve subjective *composure* – an effort to construct a narrative that is socially acceptable (Abrams, 2016: 59–60; Dawson, 1994). Sometimes this is difficult to achieve, and narrators produce traumatic and/or counterfactual narratives, for instance so-called *uchronic stories* (Portelli, 1991; Abrams, 2016; Thomson, 2013).

In other words, this oral history paradigm aims at “sorting out the structures of signification” within OH *life-story* narratives, and “determining their social ground and import” (Geertz, 1973: 9) through the concept of “thick description” borrowed from symbolic anthropology (Geertz, 1973) and the microhistory methodology of “clues and traces” (Ginzburg, 2013; Magnússon, Szijártó, 2013). To achieve this goal, the methodology has cultivated the “hermeneutics of listening” (Casellato, 2014: 275). The focus is on how individuals shape their life-stories based on their personal experiences within a given cultural historical context. This means highlighting the subjective nature of memory, but at the same time its cultural background (Portelli, 1997: 79–91), or “how people tell stories about their lives while drawing upon imagined forms embedded in culture” (Abrams, 2016: 66; Dawson, 1994). The specific configuration of cultural content, forms, and processes present in a narrative is called “historical subjectivity”, according to post-positivist OH (Portelli, 1997).

In this text, I present interpretations of OH narratives of female military reenactors, capturing their historical subjectivities. Additionally, this paper describes some of

the processes of historical change in the cultural content of Czech WWII reenactment within the frame of contemporary history (mostly post-2000). The narratives portray female reenactors as active agents in the process of the emergence of the female presence in Czech WWII military reenactment, a development that has significantly transformed the practice. These above-mentioned processes include:

1) the redirection of the focus from combat performances to more inclusive representations of military experiences. Here, I argue that increasing numbers of female reenactors, participating in both public and private reenactments, caused a) a significant reduction of androcentric bias, and b) an increase in the authenticity of the historical reenactments. The greater gender inclusivity on the one hand has deepened the representations of women during reenactments. Nevertheless, it has been also responsible for new points of contention, such as inconsistencies from the perspective of male reenactors, e.g. female soldiers were often responsible for logistics or administration, and were not frequently employed in combat roles, which are now often much more attractive roles for female reenactors.

2) the promotion of women's perspectives and their further empowerment within the reenactment community, which ultimately has led to the emergence of woman-only reenactment associations. I argue that these associations function as *safe-spaces*, where female agency is strengthened even more through mutual support.

In general, my research centres on how significantly heightened gender inclusivity has influenced and transformed Czech WWII military reenactment during the past two decades, according to the "native point of view" of my narrators (and other Czech reenactors). Focusing primarily on narrative sources (oral history interviews) is justified because they are one of the few historical sources available for this research. Czech military reenactment is an ephemeral practice, leaving few archival sources behind; egodocuments (diaries, letters, etc.) are almost non-existent and none of the narrators in this study kept an informative web page or other digitally-available source.

Secondly, I use the analytical concepts of the affective turn in reenactment studies in order to understand and interpret meanings in the narratives of military reenactors. The affective turn within the discipline shifted the interest from the analysis of evidence, corroboration, or authenticity (concepts imperative for reenactors to render the credible past) to a focus on affectivity, individual immersive experience (McCalman, Pickering, 2010: 6–9), and what is especially crucial for the epistemological interest of post-positivist oral history: the production of historical meaning (Magelssen, 2020: 191–194). Here, it is especially relevant to study military reenactments dealing with so-called symbolic centres of national history (Havelka, 2004), reenactments with (potentially) revisionist historical meaning (Magelssen, 2020: 193), or those representing a wish to re-start a certain "unfinished war" (Horwitz, 1998). This turn, which greatly contributed to the theoretical base of reenactment studies, postulates an uneasy relationship between central categories of realism, authenticity, affect, and historical meaning.

The *life-story* interviews with female military reenactors were conducted as oral history interviews in both the narrative (first interview) and semi-structured (second interview) form. In total, fourteen interviews with seven female narrators were conducted, which included four Wehrmachthelferinnen reenactors, two British WAAF reenactors, and one Soviet military nurse reenactor. The first of the women that I interviewed was Anežka, whom I knew from my previous research. She later recommended two more female reenactors. Anežka, as a gatekeeper, was essential in establishing a rapport with the others. For this study, I primarily analyse the narratives of three female reenactors belonging to a female-only Wehrmachthelferinnen association, which will be referred to as *The Warriors*. To prevent any personal harm and/or discomposure, I employ pseudonyms for all the narrators, and this text was submitted to the narrators for authorisation prior to its publication.

The recordings and transcripts of the OH interviews were analysed and interpreted according to the above-mentioned concepts of post-positivist oral history, recently also influenced by interdisciplinary feminist discourse. These feminist approaches redirected the focus to underrepresented historical actors by putting women's voices at the centre and allowing them to effect the shaping of the research agenda (Sangster, 1994). The sources were therefore approached in the spirit of feminography, that is "a distinct genre of women's oral history narrative in which we hear women owning their voices and the stories those voices tell" (Abrams, 2019: 206). In her corresponding research, Abrams concludes that "women are able to reflect on and critique their individual life decisions in the context of contemporary cultural norms rather than positioning themselves as passive objects of patriarchal structures and ideologies" (Ibid.: 220).

Finally, with regard to the methodology, this study builds on my previous research in this field. I entered this field in 2015 during my Master's thesis research, and it was in this context when I observed my first insights into military reenactment. For a better understanding, I complemented the analysis of this study using data from my observation of reenactment events collected during my dissertation research that were captured in my field notes diary.

This paper's structure follows the processes of the historical change in the cultural content of Czech WWII reenactment. Firstly, I present the historical context of female WWII reenactment participation by analysing the roles women typically assumed and highlighting the shift to more recent inclusive representations. Then, I interpret three female narrators' motivations in joining reenactments and explore their journey, from emancipation to finally establishing the women-only reenactment association, which functions as a safe space, strengthening their sense of community and camaraderie.

Women in Czech military reenactment of WWII: historical context and first steps

WWII has usually been commemorated through representations of male experiences. The creation of the image of a soldier/hero and establishing martial masculinity (Novikova, 2011) also allowed military reenactment to be seen as a performative power of WWII commemoration. This led to the rich production of historical meaning. Military reenactment dominantly involves the performance of heroic martial masculinity, which, according to Novikova is a “particular form of military masculinity that has been reinforced in commemorative rituals, practices and sites” (Novikova, 2011: 596). Military reenactment in Czechia is not an exception; participants mostly reenact male experiences in battles and frontline life, whereby a reenactment “constitutes a setting where actors... establish boundaries with traditional perceptions of the feminine” (Hunt, 2008: 462).

The rise of academic texts on the history of female military experiences has provided for female reenactors the historical evidence-based legitimisation for their involvement in reenactments, and represents the need for this study as well. Notably, *A Companion to Women's Military History* by Hacker and Vining (Eds., 2012), which follows female involvement in military institutions from antiquity to the present, stands out as one of the most important contributions to the literature. Women were always present in military institutions but were rather overlooked “before twentieth-century armed forces began actively seeking female recruits” (Hacker, Vining, 2012: 1). This was also due to the fact that women fought only rarely, and this excluded them from the epistemic interest of conservative military history (Ibid., 2012: 1).

During WWII, women started to join the military in large numbers (Vining, 2012: 234). For instance, the Soviet army recruited hundreds of thousands of women, with some performing combat duty in the infantry, artillery, or even air force (Vining, 2012: 261–262). The Czech (Czechoslovak) WWII case is telling. Despite a large presence of women in the Czechoslovak exile army in the USSR, their involvement was overlooked² until Flimelová and Štér's monograph *Ve stínu mužů* [*Overshadowed by Men*] (2021) shed light on their military contributions. Czechoslovak army women participated in all operations, mostly as non-combat specialists, with a few exceptions serving as anti-aircraft gunners, snipers,³ and assault infantry.⁴ Overall, the authors gathered evidence of nearly 1000 women who served in these ways (Flimelová, Štér, 2021: 379–423).

WWII military reenactment in Czechia has its roots in the 1990s, but only around the year 2000, with the rise of the Internet and accessibility of information did

2 After the war, many women left the army and remained silent. Some were even persecuted by the communist dictatorship. Rare contribution to the Czechoslovak women's military history is provided by veteran Věra Tichá in her memoirs. See Věra Tichá (1966; 1984; 2003).

3 There were two such snipers, Marie Ljalková and Vanda Biněvská (Flimelová, Štér, 2021: 135–141).

4 Lidija Martijanovna Uvarenko and Helena Petrasová (Flimelová, Štér, 2021: 141–144).

reenactors start to make an effort for greater authenticity (Wohlmuth, 2024: 431). Many male reenactors do not recall women taking part in the formative 1990s reenactments at all. Our male narrators were extremely reluctant to talk about this subject, but, for example, Heinrich, who has 20 years of reenactment experience, openly stated: “When I started... there were simply no women in this hobby.”⁵ He later described a case when, in 2008, a girlfriend of one of the reenactors unexpectedly attended:

*I told him: “Dude, are you f***ing kidding me? She’s just gonna be here with us, like what is she going to do?” So... the girl was actually behind a shed somewhere keeping warm all weekend... so we... scolded him...”*⁶

Heinrich and others perceived the presence of women as a disturbance to the authenticity of the historical reenactment, an element alien to what they wished to remain a male-only practice.⁷ We can interpret this as the community being unwelcoming to women or to people who wanted to share their interest with their female partners. Another narrator admitted to displaying a prejudice against a woman who participated in reenactments in the role of staff assistant, thinking she might not be able to handle the “authentic” experience in the field without modern amenities, stating: “At first... I looked at her with suspicion because you are really like in the field for a week with no opportunity to wash...”⁸

There are also other factors involved, such as the age or social status of women participants. When Heinrich mentioned a woman he respects, he referred to her as an “older lady, like she is not a twenty-year-old girl. She is an ordinary mum, has a son and husband in the reenactment.”⁹ Such women have been clearly perceived in narratives as more acceptable than single women who join reenactment out of their own interest (as will be shown later). These women are often reduced to their sexuality (Baraniecka-Olszewska, 2022: 144–145, 148). Younger women without reenactor boyfriends or husbands are especially perceived as a disturbance, are mocked, and their motivation for participation in the event is regularly diminished: “They’re only attending for the purpose of making a friend for a night, or...”¹⁰

Even when gradually and grudgingly male narrators accepted that female reenactors were important for the authenticity of the event, female reenactors still came under special scrutiny. Being an “ordinary mum” seems to be the only acceptable status, and, according to our male narrators, any sign of a single female,

5 OH interview with Heinrich, 7 September 2023.

6 OH interview with Heinrich, 7 September 2023.

7 Baraniecka-Olszewska in her chapter on Polish female reenactment also makes similar conclusions (Baraniecka-Olszewska, 2022: 142).

8 OH interview with Heinrich, 7 September 2023.

9 OH interview with Heinrich, 7 September 2023.

10 OH interview with Heinrich, 7 September 2023.



Figure 1: Pin-up girls during the reenactment event in 2014 (Photo: L. Hadarová)

allegedly participating due to their sexual motivation, represents a disturbance. Historically speaking, this is a paradoxical position regarding, for instance, the WWII ordinary soldier's experience: women may not be present at the front, but soldiers socialised with them on a regular basis when units were rotated out to replenish, regroup, or rest. After all, the direct frontline deployment represented only part of the soldier's experience, which was much more diverse, and soldiers had to come to terms with the presence of (military) women in many contexts.

The participation of women in Czech WWII reenactment has become a phenomenon encompassing various roles. Firstly, many women assume secondary roles as wives or girlfriends. In this capacity,

they portray civilians and contribute to the immersive atmosphere, often performing camp roles associated with female labour. While their roles may not be explicitly military, their presence is integral to a historically convincing experience.

Besides these roles, a group of female reenactors often perform as "pin-up girls", showcasing 1940s period glamour fashion, sometimes in a clearly sexualised way (Baraniecka-Olszewska, 2022: 149). Their shows entertain both reenactors and a broader audience. The strongly sexualised nature of these performances (incl. lingerie modelling, generating explicit catcalling by male reenactors¹¹) may raise questions about the boundaries between historical representation and objectification. On the other hand, it closely reflects the fact that female "pin-up" models, entertainers, sex workers, companions, war brides, or simply any other women performing their gender using glamour aesthetic cultural content were always historically present, especially with Western Allied WWII armies – and their omission from reenactments would represent a profoundly unauthentic practice (Meyer, 1992; Dougherty Delano, 2000).

Lastly, there are female reenactors who immerse themselves in the portrayal of female combatants and contribute significantly to the representation of female roles. These women challenge traditional gender roles within the historical context by participating in military-focused scenarios and thereby expand the scope of

11 Lenka Hadarová, Field Notes, 29. 08. 2015



Figure 2: The Warriors reenacting *Flakhelferinnen* (Photo: FB)



Figure 3: Field hospital exhibition (Photo: FB)

performances. Their involvement enriches the reenactment's historical accuracy and promotes a more inclusive understanding of the diverse WWII women's roles. In some ways, these women are perceived as less of a disturbance to the male experience. Their numbers have been growing, which resulted, for instance, in the emergence of female-only reenactment groups.¹² There are three such associations in Czechia, which perform reenactments of the Wehrmacht, WAAF, and the US Army.¹³

I managed to interview seven such women. This study focuses mostly on three women (Anežka, Terezie, and Veronika) from an association that I call *The Warriors*. They have around 10 members and have represented for almost a decade arguably the most visible and almost omnipresent female element of WWII Czech military reenactment. They mostly perform during public events, including a static representation of a period WWII Axis German camp in two forms: a field hospital (acting as nurses) and a signal corps HQ (acting as *Nachrichtenhelferinnen*). Occasionally, they participated as an anti-aircraft gun crew, the *Flakhelferinnen*. Since the German 8.8 cm Flak 36/37 gun is not available, the similar looking Soviet 85 mm gun M1939 (52-K) was used instead. Nevertheless, the *Flakhelferinnen*

12 The absolute majority of female-only military reenactment in the Czech Republic happens within WWII German, British, and US military reenactment associations.

13 The reenactment group portraying US Army Nurse Corps was the research focus of Lise Zurné. She studied the collective nature of affective encounters (Zurné, 2021) and followed women-only associations, including the Belgian *Flakhelferinnen* and Czecho-Polish U.S. Army Nurse Corps (Zurné, 2023).



Figure 4: The Warriors training 1 (Photo: Jan Bareš)

impression was discontinued some time ago. The women also organise strictly private events, such as cross-country skiing combined with military drills. These private events often focus on endurance and hardship that is essential not only in creating an authentic experience but also strengthening their sense of community (Zurné, 2021: 64).

The active presence of *The Warriors* during reenactments raises issues regarding authenticity. For example, Baraniecka-Olszewska notes that “the presence of women in reenactment is both the necessary condition for meeting the criteria for authenticity and a direct threat to it” (Baraniecka-Olszewska, 2022: 151). Their presence enriches the historical authenticity, but has been perceived by some of our narrators as a degradation of the event because, as one male narrator put it, “before [the women] got there, it could work in a strictly military way.”¹⁴ The sudden presence of women allegedly brought chaos to the supposed order of the reenactment performance, since the men started to behave differently and wanted to show off.¹⁵ Again, historically, every modern army had to cope with the presence of women in all kinds of social roles and to exclude them would be profoundly inauthentic.

The diversity of Czech female reenactors’ agency underscores the complexity of gender dynamics within historical reenactment, raising questions about the boundaries between historical credibility, personal expression, and the challenges of

14 OH interview with Siegfried and Carl, 22 August 2023.

15 OH interview with Siegfried and Carl, 22 August 2023



Figure 5: The Warriors training 2 (Photo: Jan Bareš)

navigating gendered expectations. In the interviews, we observed how some of the men balanced their expectations for authenticity. On the one hand, women were historically present on the battlefields so their presence in reenactment should be perceived as helping to achieve high levels of historical authenticity, but, on the other hand, women in reenactment were also perceived as a disturbance to the male authentic experience. Even if a woman reenactor “did it right” or credibly, there were always male reenactors opposed to women being part of the WWII reenactment in Czechia. Nevertheless, as mentioned, female reenactors are becoming an integral part of Czech reenactment events, resulting in the re-evaluation of what is being represented as war and shifting the focus from combat to non-combat WWII military reenactment.

First steps

The growing interest of women in WWII military reenactment in Czechia generated a need for mutual support and eventually resulted in the emergence of three female-only associations as safe spaces for self-expression. I analyse and interpret the life-stories of three female reenactors: Anežka, Terezie, and Veronika, members of *The Warriors*. Many women face struggles such as objectification or undermined their own interest in history when joining reenactment (Zurné, 2023: 438). What motivates women to join is often attributed to a male figure (fathers, grandfathers,

partners, or husbands), as it occurred in most of the OH interviews, including, for example, in Terezie's case:

*My dad also does reenactment... when I was a kid, I really admired it... He used to bring me miniatures of the vehicles [like Volkswagen Kübelwagen]. I used to get so excited. And so, as I grew up, I looked forward to the day when he would take me to a reenactment.*¹⁶

Female reenactors often connected their beginnings in military reenactment to male influences. Baraniecka-Olszewska (2022: 138) points out that several academic studies reproduce the argument that women join reenactment because of their boyfriends, partners, husbands, or fathers. She also strongly argues that interpreting female participation through a male actor is substantially biased and leads to limiting female subjectivity to dependency on the male (Baraniecka-Olszewska, 2022: 144–145). However, it should not be surprising that female reenactors connect their beginnings to male influences since reenactment is male dominated. Only later in their narratives did the narrators point out the reason why they kept participating in reenactment. If we assume that women engage in military reenactment just to spend time with their partners, then why would the partners of other male reenactors not be active in reenactment too? Later in Terezie's interview, she pointed out that she started to be interested in history of her own volition: "So I became more interested in history on my own, I participated in WWII literary contests, I started to search for local WWII veterans..."¹⁷ This is evident also in Veronika's narrative:

*I am actually a history student. Ever since I was a child, history has been fun, interesting and fascinating... I studied history at university and met my now ex-boyfriend who reenacts the earlier era, not the Second World War. I started to learn about reenactment by attending Napoleonic events, and I used to watch his events like Austerlitz... Then we slowly started to put together my first period civilian costume... for the Seven Years' War [reenactment].*¹⁸

Even though Veronika confirmed that she got involved because of her boyfriend, she clearly declared her own genuine interest, not attributable to anyone but her. In addition, in Anežka's narrative, she attributed her introduction to WWII reenactment to her then-boyfriend. Nevertheless, she highlighted that it was "without a boyfriend pressure"¹⁹ that she found her way into reenactment. She also emphasised that there are "girls who have been into the reenactment completely

16 OH interview with Terezie, 16 August 2022.

17 OH interview with Terezie, 16 August 2022.

18 OH interview with Veronika, 10 August 2022.

19 OH interview with Anežka, 14 July 2022.

independently of their fathers, boyfriends or brothers... just because they want to and they enjoy it.”²⁰

From all of the interviews, it was evident that women credited male figures in their lives for the introduction to reenactment, but at the same time, all of them emphasised their own agency in the decision to continue their participation. Throughout Anežka’s narrative, it was important for her to be considered as a distinct actor, not through the lens of being someone’s girlfriend. She vividly described the moment she felt as if she truly belonged:

*I officially started doing German women’s WWII reenactment in January 2013, when there was my first event in uniform... Even though I had been thinking about reenacting before... I think that was kind of the official start, where I really felt like the person who belonged. Suddenly I was not just the girlfriend of one of the guys who’s just there to wear a skirt suit and smile and look pretty in pictures.*²¹

Indeed, owning and wearing a proper uniform carries the strongest subjective meaning of belonging for all of the women narrators. It also means giving a voice to the female experience. Many male reenactors mention (and seek) *period rush*, one of the central reenactment effects, representing the corporeal experience of being completely absorbed in the event (Schwarz, 2020: 63–66). However, I would argue that this effect is different among female reenactors who do not participate in battles, and experience a different kind of immersion – the quest for the female voice. In Terezie’s story, she began to attend reenactments as a child dressed as a boy in civilian clothes, saying that her father was raising her “as a boy.” When she reached the age when she could no longer pretend to be a boy, she had to choose if she wanted to get a female uniform. She acquired a Wehrmacht signal corps uniform but, in her words, then she “just waited in the camp for others to return.”²² For her, uniformed participation was not yet the primary means of achieving the immersive experience until she joined *The Warriors*, where she was able to represent female military history and take control over her narrative. The uniform and the military in general represent order, tradition, permanence, stability, and clarity, but for these women also assertiveness, self-confidence, and power. Wearing a uniform in a particular all-female reenactment setting can therefore signify resistance not only to traditional female roles (Zurné, 2023: 444–447), but also to fluid modernity (Bauman, 2000) in this age of instability and unpredictability. In Terezie’s narrative, one can argue that because of her strict religious upbringing, assuming a role of an assertive and empowered military woman wearing an NCO uniform carries the meanings of her refusal to perform a submissive social role prescribed by conservative Catholicism.

20 OH interview with Anežka, 14 July 2022.

21 OH interview with Anežka, 14 July 2022.

22 OH interview with Terezie, 16 August 2022.

In addition, at the same time, it is a way to escape everyday chaos by being off the grid during reenactments and following strict rules, offering stability and clarity of existence.

The significance of active participation in reenactment is that the female experience in WWII was an under-researched phenomenon. Therefore, for narrators discovering new knowledge about how it was supposed to look and what it was like, this presented not only an exciting approach to historical research but also an opportunity to make the female military experience visible. In all the women's narratives, men are mentioned as important characters in the narrators' introduction to participation. Nevertheless, all of the female narrators emphasise their own interest in history as a way to legitimise their presence as women in military reenactment, especially when they can immerse themselves in history and reenact important female roles. The promotion of female voices, self-expression, and being in control of narratives becomes one of the most important meanings of reenactment in their narratives.

Quest for a voice within the reenactment group

Historically, the practice of shushing female voices in public has been overwhelming (Beard, 2014). When the female reenactors first started to participate, many experienced gender-related stigma. Some of them struggled to find their place in the male-dominated environment, where it was hard for them to integrate (Zurné, 2023: 438). At the beginning of Veronika's story, she described how she felt when her then-boyfriend, a Napoleonic reenactor, strictly opposed her joining the reenactment, even in the role of a female sutler:

It annoyed me a lot... partly because the feminist part of me was crying... I thought it was terribly unfair... It is unreasonable to determine [in this way] who can participate and who cannot... determining... that one gender can participate and the other can't, seemed to me nonsense and even stupid of the men to distinguish between female and male hobbies... Their perception was definitely a misunderstanding...²³

Describing herself as a feminist and as someone who knows history, Anežka also struggled with the role she had to perform. During the early days of her reenactment participation, she cooked for the male reenactors, a role she undertook in order to be accepted:

23 OH interview with Veronika, 14 September 2022.

*I was more of a helper in the beginning... I cooked for the boys... And sometimes I was a bit annoyed that they made me a helper for every good day, but then I started to think that I could... start a women's section, that the club would include standard male soldiers and then a women's section that would work together in parallel, but at the same time the women would have their own training and tasks.*²⁴

This became one of the pivotal life-story moments for our narrators, when they realised that they did not want to remain passive and to feel “terribly useless”, like mere decorations.²⁵ These roles greatly diminished their agency. The women reenactors desired to actively create historical meanings concerning women, and to have WWII reenactment represent more than a male-centred version of history (Baraniecka-Olszewska, 2022). This was one of the reasons for establishing *The Warriors*: “And I decided that I wanted to leave... and start an all-female club and an all-female unit.”²⁶

Creating a female-only association subjectively meant a lot for Anežka; she emphasised the meaning of being “free” and having things under her own control. The association went through different stages. At first, it was a female section, which developed into the female-only association five to six years ago: “I can actually do the work that those women did during the war, it can look authentic, and I can feel at least a little bit, how to say, useful.”²⁷ The idea was to share and showcase the knowledge on WWII female presence. *The Warriors* slowly became a standard association with a chain of command, mandatory training, etc., expecting discipline not only in following orders, but maintaining “authentic” behaviour within the group (e.g. help building tents) (Zurné, 2021: 61).

Veronika and Terezie joined *The Warriors* few years after it became an association. Terezie’s narrative suggests that she was at first opposed to a female-only association because of prejudices concerning the female dynamics in a small social group: “And actually I never wanted to join a girls’ club, I was always so scared of it. I mean, I was used to being around just guys and I was scared of... petty disagreements and similar things.”²⁸ Until she joined *The Warriors*, she had been the only woman in her father’s association which reenacted a *Nachrichtenhelferin*. Then, she decided to join *The Warriors*. Veronika’s story of joining was also telling. She had already been active in a reenactment of a different period and was frustrated by forced inactivity. She looked up *The Warriors* on social media and contacted them. She described what being in a uniform meant to her:

24 OH interview with Anežka, 14 July 2022.

25 OH interview with Anežka, 14 July 2022.

26 OH interview with Anežka, 14 July 2022.

27 OH interview with Anežka, 14 July 2022.

28 OH interview with Terezie, 16 August 2022.

[Raising] awareness of the ... overall involvement of women in the army ... There is a deeper value in not just focusing on the male history, because history is not just written by men... Moreover, it is great that we can spread it [the female message] here in our own way, to spread awareness.²⁹

Her motivation to join *The Warriors*, therefore, primarily means to play an active role in keeping stories of female WWII soldiers alive. I came to see these women as wanting to overcome the dominant historical narrative, to search for their role and position within their reenactment of female military experiences. Their subjectivity sees performing WWII reenactment without women as damaging to the idea of authenticity (Baraniecka-Olszewska, 2022) and, as Magelssen (2020) points out, to the production of historical meaning.

Safe space elements and patterns

The concept of women-only spaces is based on the idea of establishing a safe environment where women have opportunities to express themselves and participate without being limited by traditional gender roles or expectations. Safe spaces seek to promote gender equality, as well as foster a sense of community and support. Female-only reenactment associations serve as safe spaces exactly in this regard. The emergence of such associations in the context of WWII reenactment has played a crucial role in enabling women to navigate within the male-dominated environment. For example, Zurné examines how the shared experience of hardship in reenactments can spark a strong sense of community among reenactors (Zurné, 2021: 64). Similarly, I argue that women-only associations allow women to express themselves authentically and develop a strong sense of community and camaraderie:

In the end, it was actually a pleasant surprise because I met many great friends... Sometimes there are disagreements because in such house full of girls, I do not think it would be right if everything was perfect... But we always come to an agreement in the end... and it's really cool... I thought I would never get along with Anežka (laughs) but now we are probably some of the best friends, and that goes for Veronika too, we call each other "ducks" sharing the same pond...³⁰

Terezie's narrative captures the transformative impact of women-only associations. Initially hesitant to join due to preconceived notions, she found the experience to be a pleasant surprise that actually negated the stereotypical view that women-only collectives could be competitive and toxic. She was grateful not only for a safe

29 OH interview with Veronika, 14 September 2022.

30 OH interview with Terezie, 16 August 2022.

space, but also for the camaraderie and the opportunity for personal expression. The narrators' emphasis on the regularity and beauty of their uniform's tailoring, the playful self-identification as "ducks", and the dedication to crafting authentic uniforms demonstrates the significance of these spaces in empowering women to assert their identities within the historically male-dominated sphere of WWII reenactment.

Moreover, the narratives of the women involved often challenge stereotypical gender norms and reveal how they were raised with a level of freedom typically associated with males. For instance, Terezie, a self-proclaimed "daddy's girl",³¹ recounts being "raised more like a boy"³² due to the absence of a male sibling. Her upbringing, marked by the wearing of camouflage pants and blouses, laid

the foundation for her immersion in military reenactment. In all of the interviews, the narrators mentioned how they perform hard drills done in the same way as in male associations. Their winter outdoor training, done using only period equipment, especially challenges many gender-normative stereotypes: "Among men, I was like a delicate flower... and here nobody gives a f**k [laughs]. Here, we're all just equal."³³

Their feeling of emancipation, as expressed in the narratives, also comes from having a safe and friendly environment to learn to use period military-grade firearms, exactly like male narrators do – as evidenced by recent presentations on *The Warriors* social media account. Few women carried weaponry during WWII (e.g. with the exceptions of Soviet female soldiers or resistance movements), but handling guns is now a standard part of their reenactment training.

The feeling of emancipation found in a female-only safe space may also be seen in the acceptance of femininity, and the comfort the narrators experienced using certain gender-normative cultural forms, and their comfort in "owning them".



Figure 6: One of The Warriors during firearm training (Photo: FB)

31 OH interview with Terezie, 16 August 2022.

32 OH interview with Terezie, 16 August 2022.

33 OH interview with Terezie, 16 August 2022.

An illustration of their acceptance of femininity is manifested in the pronounced emphasis on vintage aesthetics. In all of the interviews, the narrators articulated the beauty and the appeal of the uniform, and its flattering effect on the female figure. The acceptance of femininity and sexuality could be exemplified in several photographs the association posted on social media showing *The Warriors* with make-up and stylish clothes, posing with a military truck. Lastly, the establishment of a female-only safe space allowed them to use gender-normative language among themselves, most notably describing themselves as “ducks”, which in the Czech language often carries a negative connotation, as it refers to chatty women in a stigmatising way. In one of the stories, the narrator used the expression “our pond”, as a place where ducks live, to characterise their association, claiming the power within their own space. Their safe space works on many different levels through the empowerment of their own agency and ability to have a control over how they perform and construct their bodies, femininity, and narratives.

Conclusion

Women reenactors from *The Warriors* (and similar women-only military reenactment associations) expressed in their narratives the feeling of “making it”. The narrators consider themselves winners in a two-decade-long battle with male prejudice in the Czech reenactment community. This is the central meaning in their “native point of view”. Apart from their characterisations of rough beginnings at the start of their participatory journey in reenactments, the women’s narratives convey jubilant feelings of emancipation regarding the shift in women roles in historical military reenactment. From the perspective of the narrators, their experiences changed from being previously overlooked in their roles as cooks, laundrywomen, and sutlers, to now wearing proper military uniforms in their own association, with their own commanders, ranks, medals, and distinctions – i.e. their own agenda. Our narrator Heinrich noted that during the 1990s there were “simply no women” in military reenactment. Today, *The Warriors* receive invitations for all major events, both public and private, co-organised by Axis Germany military reenactors. Their newfound agency significantly contributed to the historical change in the cultural content within Czech WWII military reenactment, including the process of redirecting the focus from combat performances to more inclusive representations of military experiences, and the process of the promotion of women’s perspectives.

At the same time, the analysis and interpretation of the OH narratives of *The Warriors* shows that Baraniecka-Olszewska is right in postulating that the presence of women in military reenactment represents both an increase in historical authenticity as well as a challenge to it. This necessitates further research. In the case of *The Warriors*, the future of their association is heading in two parallel ways. On

the one hand, their emancipatory success in founding a women-only association prompted them to “go further”; as evidenced by their social media, they have begun to train for reenactments of WWII fighting women (resistance fighters and/or secret service agents). The women reenactors recently began their firearms training, as mentioned above, exactly with this goal in mind. On the other hand, some could argue that their reenactments may go in the subversive direction: towards cross-dressing and the representation of historically inauthentic impressions of combat soldiers. In this case, the authenticity would be exchanged for an even stronger production of historical meaning. For now, the narratives of the women reenactors in *The Warriors* suggest that they are comfortable with their historical subjectivities, and that their composure is quite strong. As said in military parlance, the women feel they are on the side of the victors.

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