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Reclaiming the feminine in cities at war: female agency, spatial subversion, and linguistic resistance in women-authored literature

Восстановление женственности
в городах, подвергшихся воздействию войны:
женская активность, пространственная субверсия
и лингвистическое сопротивление в литературе,
созданной авторами-женщинами

Abstract. This article examines the staging and coding of femininity in literary works focused on cities during wartime, authored by women. Drawing on Judith Butler’s reading of Luce Irigaray and Henri Lefebvre’s *The production of space*, the analysis centers on the works of Lidiya Ginzburg (*Zapiski blokadnogo čeloveka*, 1984), Anna Świrszczyńska (*Budowałam barykadę*, 1974), Zlata Filipović (*Le journal de Zlata*, 1993), and Yevgenia Belorusets (*Anfang des Krieges*, 2022). The article argues that these texts challenge abstracting, phallogocentric systems of meaning on two distinct planes. First, they subvert abstract spatial structures forced on urban space by masculine power dynamics, accomplishing this through a perspective that emphasizes the city ‘from below’ and underscores the private, as opposed to the institutional, dimension of urban life. Second, they contest the erasure of the feminine in linguistic structures, shedding light on the oppression experienced by women during war and showcasing narrative and linguistic practices that reclaim agency. The article contends that these four texts not only represent deviations from conventional war narratives but also stage their own female authorship as an appeal against phallogocentric linguistic, spatial, and narrative structures. Consequently, they provide a means to articulate the precarity and marginalization of the feminine within both cities during war and economies of significance wherein the female is subjected to obliteration.

Keywords: femininity in literature, urban war narratives, linguistic phallogocentrism, female agency, literary space

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“W czasach wojny zawsze chyba jest nawrót do matriarchatu” [In times of war there seems to be always a return to matriarchy], Polish writer Miron Białoszewski states in his influential war narrative *Pamiętnik z powstania warszawskiego* [A memoir from the Warsaw uprising] (Białoszewski 86)¹. In fact, during wars, the influence of women, who are normally less present in combat than men, increases in spaces away from the battlefield. So, while men dominate on the level of military and political conflict, women have their say in the private sphere of everyday life. This discrepancy is highlighted by the fact that when men voluntarily join the fighting or are drafted into the army they are ‘separated’ from women in spatial terms. As Jeffrey Hass notes in his article about the Blockade of Leningrad, this spatial segregation and the accompanying feminization of urban space lead to the emergence of new images (and imaginations) of the female, which hold the potential either to question or to affirm existing gender concepts (Hass 255–256).

Challenging the spatial and linguistic obliteration of the feminine in literary representations

Like Hass, I focus on urban spaces that become sites of military conflict. I examine images of the female in literary representations of these urban spaces and their potential to question, to affirm, or to comment on given gender orders. Drawing on Judith Butler’s reading of Luce Irigaray, my analysis is based on the understanding of the feminine as something not only constructed by male discourse, but also erased, absent from it (Butler 14). The female is thus something that within given linguistic conditions not only cannot be adequately represented. Rather, language cannot represent the female at all. This basic assumption has far-reaching consequences for the analysis of literary texts. For, in the context of the phallogocentrism that Butler suggests is inherent in language, how can the feminine be at all represented or discussed in literature?

My claim is that one way to circumvent this non-representability lies in the spatial perspectivization of a literary text. In *The production of space*, Henri Lefebvre suggests that in neo-capitalist society an understanding of space has prevailed that attempts to abstract space by mapping, rationalizing, and homogenizing it. This “abstract space functions ‘objectally’, as a set of things/signs and their formal relationship [...]. Formally and quantitatively, it erases distinctions, as much those which derive from nature and (historical) time as those which originate in the body (age, sex, ethnicity)” (Lefebvre 1991: 49). According to Le-

¹ All translations are prepared by the author – A.S.

febvre, this spatial mode implies something explicitly masculine, a “phallic formant” (Lefebvre 1991: 286). By promoting absolutisms, it stands for “force, male fertility, masculine violence” (Lefebvre 1991: 287). What the French sociologist formulates here in relation to spatial models reflects the mechanism that Butler (referring to Irigaray) notes on a linguistic level, namely that the masculine economy of signification not only homogenizes differences between genders, but also annihilates all things different from the hegemonic masculine discourse.

If abstract space is, according to Lefebvre, created by the absorption of the private level of urban space by the institution², and is marked by the tendency to influence how urban space is used, whereby active space producers are transformed into passive space users, then literature can point to the active role of women in urban space by emphasizing the private dimension of city life (Lefebvre 1991: 365). Thereby, on a structural level, it can form an antithesis not only to dominant institutional spatial orders imposed on urban space, but also to hegemonic economies of signification. In this way, it can enable the reader to understand and discuss the obliteration of the female on the level of both (urban) space and language.

Based on this assumption, I chose texts for my analysis that, on the one hand, were written by women and, on the other, imply a spatial perspective that focuses on the concrete, private everyday experience in different cities during different wars: Lidiya Ginzburg’s *Zapiski blokadnogo cheloveka* (*Notes of a blockade person*, 1984) describes the everyday life of Leningraders during the Blockade of Leningrad (1941–1943) and leaves out depictions of the battlefield completely³. In her poetry collection *Budowałam barykadę* (*Building a barricade*, 1974), Anna Świrszczyńska portrays the fates of fighting and non-fighting Warsaw citizens and thereby sheds light on the everyday of both insurgents and civilians during the Warsaw Uprising of 1944. In *Le journal de Zlata* (*Zlata’s diary*, 1993), written in Serbo-Croatian but first published in French, Zlata Filipović relates how the everyday life of a young girl is disrupted by the Siege of Sarajevo (1992–1995). Finally, Yevgenia Belorusets documents the changing everyday life in Kyiv after Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 in her diary entries, published in German under the title *Anfang des Krieges* (*The beginning of the war*, 2022). Despite these different contexts, all four texts portray their respective cities from a private perspective and thus reveal the influence of war on the concrete everyday life of city dwellers.

² Lefebvre defines urban space as being shaped by three levels: the global or institutional level, where power is exercised; the private level or level of habiting; and the mixed level, where the other two levels meet (Lefebvre 2003: 78).

³ I use a literal translation of this work’s title, because that of Alan Myers’s published translation, *Blockade diary*, suggests a purely autobiographic reading, which is not implied by the original, as has been pointed out by scholars such as Van Buskirk (2010) and Gruszka (2012).

Reading these four texts against the background of the conventional (Western) war text opens up further interpretative dimensions. According to Martin van Creveld, literary representations of war often position the woman as an object of male sexual desire who either incites men to war or prevents them from joining the fight by mocking belligerent activities (van Creveld 44–46). This mainly Western literary tradition constitutes an overarching, conventional war text that, as Helen Cooper et al. note, abstracts the feminine into a homogeneous concept (Cooper et al. xiii–xv). For, whether as trophy, victim, or cause, women, in this war text, are positioned far away from the battlefield and function as a counterpoint to military combat. The conventional Western war text tends not only to abstract the feminine, however. It also codes it as something passive: Not being active combatants, women can indeed cause or instigate wars. But it is men, at least according to these conventional Western literary representations, who execute the acts of war.

Since none of the texts discussed in this article comes from a Western European context, the question arises not only of how they discuss Irigaray's 'absent feminine other' by means of language that per se obliterates the female. One must also ask how these texts position themselves vis-à-vis Western and other literary traditions. This question is relevant not least because the events referred to in the texts are described as heroic battles for the existence of a nation or national identity in the respective regional literatures and memory narratives⁴. These stagings foreground the role of fighting and, by shifting women into the private sphere, thus not representing them at all, they also perpetuate phallogocentric structures, as the Western European war texts do.

In the following, I will discuss which functions women take on in the literary texts discussed in this article and analyze how the feminine is thereby staged and coded. I will examine whether the texts transgress abstracting, phallic spatial structures through their spatial perspectivization of the respective cities or whether they support masculine, abstracting economies of signification, despite their focus on concrete everyday life. Building on this, I will consider whether the texts

⁴ Regarding the Warsaw Uprising, in her essay *War and form* (2014) Maria Janion shows how literary texts about this event perpetuate the paradigm of the brave (male) *ulan* who fights for the survival and independence of the Polish nation – a heroic topos originating from Polish Romanticism and present also in memory narratives about the uprising, as Erica L. Tucker (2011) notes. Tetyana Bureychak and Olena Petrenko (2015) point to the role of the masculine hero in Ukrainian discourse. Stephen M. Norris (2021) and Ulrich Schmid (2011) show that heroizing narratives dominate cultural representations and the politics of memory concerning the blockade of Leningrad. Finally, Ozren Kebo and Xavier Bougarel (2007) show that in political and literary narratives the siege of Sarajevo is seen as an attack on the core aspect of the Bosnian nation, multiethnicity, for whose struggle the city of Sarajevo, as a paradigm of that multiethnicity, sacrificed itself.

can be read as subversions of conventional war texts and assess to what extent they reflect their own female authorship as an appeal against phallogocentric narrative structures.

Selfless protector or self-confident fighter? Stagings of female agency in urban spaces during war

Upon scrutinizing the coding of the feminine in the discussed texts, it becomes evident that all four situate it on a spectrum between self-affirmation and self-denial. Ginzburg's *Zapiski blokadnogo čeloveka*, for instance, recounts how reluctant the Leningraders were to visit the air-raid shelters after a certain point during the Blockade. They either preferred to continue on their way to the nearest canteen or grocery store, in the hope of satisfying their omnipresent hunger, instead of protecting themselves from bombs, or they continued working, guided by a sense of responsibility that may appear unconventional to external observers. This indifference to death by bombing is conveyed primarily by female voices. For example, the narrative of M., a middle-aged woman, shows that her fear of not completing a work assignment trumps her fear of death, leading M. to continue her work during a bombing raid, rather than to go to a bunker (Ginzburg 330–331). Elsewhere, a young girl describes how she would go out into the street under fire, were it not for the threat of punishment at the hands of the militia (Ginzburg 341–342). Both passages point to the subordination of the female urban individual to institutional regimes. Moreover, in the first example these regulations have masculine connotations: When M. wants to go to the air-raid shelter, she is told to return to her post by her (male) superior (Ginzburg 330). This passage thus reveals not only a woman's passivity in the besieged city, imposed upon her by an institution, but also underscores the subjugation of her practice to phallic power structures.

The suppression of women becomes more evident in Ginzburg's descriptions of the queues at the grocery stores. Despite indications in the text that the authorities allocate an equal quantity of bread to all individuals and that all city residents are required to wait in queues for their rations, there is a discernible distinction in the way the saleswomen treat men and women in these queues. Men cut in line and receive the bread allocated to them without queuing, because they are convinced that "очередь – это бабье дело" (Ginzburg 334) [queuing – that's women's stuff]. In this way, they perpetuate existing gender roles. The narrator points to this when stating: "Блокадные очереди вписались в многолетний фон выдаваемого, доставаемого, в привычную раздражительность и привычное женское терпение" (Ginzburg 334) [Queuing during the Blockade fit into the context of many years of allocating and scavenging,

into the usual petulance and the usual female patience]. The saleswomen, who act as executors of the authorities' regulations, that is as representatives of the institution, confirm this gender order, thereby further underscoring the subjugation of women to a masculine institutional system.

In contrast to the passivity imposed upon women through their subordination, Ginzburg illustrates a process of self-affirmation evident in conversations in the queues, where women discuss strategies for preparing and procuring food in the besieged city: “Удовлетворение разговором о себе дублируется удовлетворением от интеллектуальных процессов. [...] У рассказа о том, как раньше ели, есть подтекст самоутверждения” (Ginzburg 338) [The satisfaction of talking about oneself is replicated by the satisfaction gained from intellectual work. [...] Talking about how one used to eat has an implication of self-affirmation]. In private conversations, therefore, typically with other women, women reclaim their agency within the social dynamics of the city and the family. This is achieved through their deliberate (self-)presentation as resourceful survivors confronting the challenges of famine.

As in Ginzburg's text, in *Anfang des Krieges*, Yevgenia Belorusets largely includes the statements and experiences of women. It is they who stand in queues and go shopping. They are the ones to whom the diarist mainly talks. We can thus detect an indirect feminization of urban space, which is manifested not least in the female voice that announces the end of the air-raid alarm (Belorusets 65). Moreover, in this text, too, women oscillate between self-affirmation and self-denial. Women are described, on the one hand, in their function as selfless protectors, such as the receptionist who covered her granddaughter with her own body for several hours during a bombing raid (Belorusets 160) or Elena, who, despite shelling, fed the animals in the zoo until early March (Belorusets 138).

On the other hand, Belorusets's diary shows women's attempts to continue their individual, 'normal' life and actively resist the invasion of the Russian army and the order this attack imposes on urban space. This self-assertiveness becomes evident not only in the author's continuation of photographic documentation, discussed in more detail below. It is also expressed in the photo shoot that Belorusets and her friend organize in the streets of Kyiv (Belorusets 50). By continuing a practice that was normal for the two women before the beginning of the full-scale invasion, they actively resist the rules imposed on them by the military – rules that, in Lefebvre's words, imply a “phallic brutality” (Lefebvre 1991: 287), as they signify violence enforced by the army and the police. This female resistance should therefore not merely be interpreted as an opposition to some institutional order; rather, it is a form of resistance against explicitly phallic spatial structures. Consequently, it can be interpreted as a deliberate re-appropriation of masculinized urban space.

This female agency and the subversion of phallic, abstract space in Belorusets's text becomes evident on a narrative level in the reference to two female volunteers for the territorial defense army. Here, the Ukrainian writer begins with the description of male soldiers, whom she describes as a crowd, without distinguishing between the male individuals. In contrast, shortly afterwards the text focuses on two women and their beautiful, laughing faces ["zwei schöne Gesichter junger Frauen, die mir lachend erzählten" (Belorusets 66)]. Although the women are presented within the context of the (male) military forces, a notable distinction is made, portraying them as individual entities.

The concrete description of women, juxtaposed against the homogeneous assembly of male soldiers mentioned earlier, deviates from the spatial abstraction that Lefebvre asserts characterizes the military domain (Lefebvre 1991: 286–287). Here, the woman subverts abstracting, phallic structures in two distinct ways: firstly, as an active participant in military affairs, she transcends the passivity imposed upon her by the institution during wartime. Secondly, the text suggests a subversion of this masculine order through spatial-aesthetic concretization. Similar to Ginzburg, Belorusets depicts women in wartime as navigating a delicate balance between self-denial and self-affirmation. This portrayal extends beyond casting them merely as self-sacrificing helpers or self-serving warriors; it encompasses an exploration of the constraints these women encounter in their daily lives and an illustration of their capacity to surpass such limitations.

This dichotomy is also recurrent in Świrszczyńska's descriptions of the female experience during the Warsaw Uprising in her poetry collection *Budowałam barykadę*. On the one hand, women are involved in the fighting and are thus active participants in the military conflict, as for example in the poem *Harcerka (Girl scout)* (Świrszczyńska 54). On the other hand, the function of the lyrical I – that is, as I will show, explicitly coded as feminine, as a nurse – points to the role of women as peaceful protectors and caregivers. In Świrszczyńska's poems, the two roles overlap time and again. A striking example of this is *Mój mężczyzna (My man)*, where the lyrical I longs to hide her husband in her womb, thus keeping him away from the fighting, and to go into battle in his place (Świrszczyńska 67). The conclusion of the poem clearly illustrates the fusion of the protective and combative aspects of the feminine in *Budowałam barykadę*: the active, self-determined walk into death is staged as a means to protect her own husband ["Ja zamiast niego / pójdę na śmierć, on przeżyje" (I instead of him / will go and die, he will survive)], whom the woman tries to hide in her womb like a baby and thereby save ["To jest mój mężczyzna / moje dziecko. / Ja go ocalę" (This is my man / my child. / I will save him)].

Świrszczyńska characterizes female agency by yet another dualism: women in her poems are either driven by their own will to survive or sacrifice themselves

for the survival of others. If *Mój mężczyzna* and also *Żyje godzinę dłużej* (*It lives an hour longer*) (Świrszczyńska 41), in which a mother desperately searches the city for milk to feed her child, are to be read as examples of the latter impulse, the poem *Pan Bóg ją ocalił* (*Lord God saved her*) (Świrszczyńska 37) presents a different picture. Although here the woman waits until another woman has died before leaving her, it is suggested that she does so primarily to take the dying woman's money, revealing the motive of the female survivor to be unaltruistic.

Women in Świrszczyńska's poems thus oscillate between their roles as warrior and protector, on the one hand, and their urge to survive and an inclination to sacrifice themselves for the survival of others, on the other. The poems introduce a third dualism, however – one that centers around the female body: the poems either emphasize the specificity of a woman's body or they negate it. In *Mój mężczyzna* the former tendency is evident: the poem highlights the woman's ability to be pregnant, albeit in an unconventional way. In *Dziewczyny z noszami* (*Girls with stretchers*) (Świrszczyńska 26), however, the specificity of the female body disappears entirely. Here, only the tired eyes [“Bezsenne oczy”] and thin fingers [“Wychudłe palce”] of the women carrying injured people on stretchers are described. Thus, if the former poem addresses both the image of women as protectors and women's sexuality, the connotation of women as objects of sexual desire or subjects with sexual needs disappears from the latter completely. This tendency is further supported by *Harcerka*, in which a female soldier asks her friends to dress her in a pretty dress with lace after her death (Świrszczyńska 54). For once, even if in death, she wants to dress up and highlight her sexuality, which has been eclipsed by her function as a soldier.

In addition, the use of the masculine *żołnierz* in combination with the Polish feminine personal pronoun “ona” [she] makes the disappearance of the feminine, and thus of women's sexuality and corporeality, particularly apparent. Świrszczyńska's poems thus not only mirror the coding of the female already identified in Ginzburg's and Beloruset's texts. They also illustrate the fighting woman's renunciation of her femininity (by disguising or feigning masculinity), which is noted by van Creveld as a topos of the fighting woman in the conventional Western war text (van Creveld 50). Consequently, her poems reinforce established narrative paradigms while also illuminating the “phallic formant” (Lefebvre 1991: 286) inherent in institutionally dominated abstract space. Simultaneously, they manifest the woman's endeavor to preserve, recapture, or even employ her own sexuality for the purpose of combat (or protection). In so doing, the poems diverge from conventional literary portrayals of women in wartime and challenge phallogocentric structures that, in the words of Irigaray, efface the feminine (Irigaray 22).

Złata Filipović also counteracts the obliteration of women in war in her diary. Like the girl scout in Świrszczyńska's *Harcerka*, the young diarist writes

about glamming herself up. However, she does this not to regain her sexuality, so much as to counter the siege routine that consists mainly of hiding in cellars. The practice of getting dolled up thus fulfills a similar function to the birthdays that are highlighted frequently in Filipović's diary. Both remind the girl of peacetime (Filipović 125–126). Thereby, the Bosnian diarist shows how she as a girl opposes the rules that war imposes on urban space. This holds particular significance, considering that she is not only a woman who – as per the preceding argument – is subject to phallic oppressive mechanisms, but also a child whose existence becomes precarious in times of war, given that her rights are curtailed by the armed conflict⁵. Zlata's opposition to the constraints imposed on her by war can thus be interpreted as integral to the emancipatory process of women and girls.

This emancipatory tendency is mirrored in the descriptions of other women in Filipović's text. For example, Zlata's mother, unlike her father, goes to work (Filipović 71). Likewise, other women are described as being employed somewhere and going to work regularly (Filipović 86–87). Consequently, these women navigate the besieged city, despite the efforts of the besieging army to impede such movement. In so doing, they again resist the spatial order imposed upon them by the military conflict. This feminine mobility is also evident in passages in which the diarist describes how she receives food from her mother or other women (Filipović 127), how her mother fetches water (Filipović 83, 116), or how her (female) friends provide her with other essential items (Filipović 129). In fact, the diary entries of the young girl from Sarajevo reveal a female supply network where women help other women in order to navigate the challenges of everyday life during the siege. While this makes the diary's women appear active, the men remain in a passive position. They stay at home, do not go to work, and are depicted as physically fragile. This male vulnerability becomes apparent when Zlata's father suffers a hernia (Filipović 82) or gets frostbite while chopping wood (Filipović 119), and it is reinforced by the fact that the dead referred to in the diary are mostly men, such as a boy from theatre class (Filipović 87) or her teacher's husband (Filipović 120). In contrast, women remain mostly physically unharmed and thus capable of continuing to cope with everyday siege life.

This suggests a female position of power and authority in everyday urban life. However, it becomes clear that, on the political level, the feminine has no influence whatsoever. Filipović refers to the political decision-makers as “chers bambins” [dear boys] (Filipović 178) or “seigneurs de la guerre” [lords of the war] (Filipović 179), thereby coding politics as inherently masculine. By simul-

⁵ When addressing children's rights in the context of armed conflict, I refer to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Specifically, this encompasses their right to protection from war, including their right to education, the curtailment of which is exemplified in Filipović's diary.

taneously describing the everyday as predominantly feminine, the text implies an understanding of the female which oscillates between agency (in everyday life) and inability to act (at the political level). Consequently, woman in *Le journal de Zlata* is both protector and leader, passive and active. This extracts her from the submissive position assigned to her by the conventional war text and connects the images of the feminine in Filipović's text to those in the other texts discussed.

Challenging and resisting phallogocentric structures: spatial perspectivization and linguistic modalities of female testimony

Filipović positions other women, but also herself, between passivity and activity, between the inability to do anything about the situation surrounding her and the ability to influence it. She refers frequently to her helplessness regarding the fighting and attempts to change the situation through recurring appeals for peace (e.g. Filipović 52, 106, 115). These calls remain unanswered, however, making the girl's powerlessness more apparent.

Zlata's (forced) passivity toward political decisions is supported by her parents. Although she shows interest in the political changes taking place in Yugoslavia and Bosnia at the beginning of her diary, her parents want to keep the news away from her: "Papa et maman ne veulent pas que je regarde la télé quand ce sont les informations, mais on ne peut pas nous cacher à nous, les enfants, toutes les horreurs qui se passent" (Filipović 36–37) [Dad and Mom don't want me to watch TV when the news comes on, but you can't hide all the horrible things that are happening from us children]. Consequently, the experiences reflected in Zlata's diary are based not on media representations of war but on the concrete lived day-to-day experience during an urban state of exception. The young diarist does not focus on the political dimension of the conflict, but on its effects on everyday urban life and, in contrast to a view that abstracts the city, adopts a bottom-up perspective on urban space. Filipović's text can therefore be understood as a literary re-appropriation of urban space that war has transformed into a battlefield, but also as an attempt to oppose a political view of the city that, as the author herself puts it, ignores the consequences of political decision-making for urban life and understands the city and its population as pawns in political power struggles: "Et pendant ce temps, les «chers bambins» discutent [...]. C'est vraiment à se demander s'ils pensent à nous quand ils discutent ou s'ils se fichent de nous et nous abandonnent à notre triste sort?!" (Filipović 93) [And in the meantime, the 'dear boys' are negotiating. [...] One really has to wonder if they think about us at all when they negotiate, or if they don't care about us, leaving us alone to deal with our sad fate?!].

Thus Filipović does not present the city as an abstract, homogeneous entity, a spatial concept that, as Lefebvre states, is the result of masculine, phallic institutional dominance (Lefebvre 1991: 286). Rather, she reveals the immediate, concrete spatial reality of Sarajevo during the siege and subverts the abstracting political view of the city. Her diary can be construed as a form of resistance against the power structures engendered by war, which seek to eradicate the feminine. This opposition is discernible not only in the practices of the autobiographical ‘I’, but also in the spatial perspective delineated in the text. By presenting a child’s perspective on the political facets of the conflict, Filipović challenges the marginalization of young people’s experiences in the discourse surrounding the siege. In so doing, she subverts the suppressive mechanisms of war impacting the urban population in multiple ways.

The silencing of young, especially young female, voices is also addressed by Belorusets when she mentions young girls who are either barely able to speak due to their traumatic experiences (Belorusets 170) or whose voices are eclipsed by an adult’s narration and thus cannot be heard by the diarist (Belorusets 142–144). Moreover, Belorusets’s text shows the powerlessness of the individual in relation to political decisions: it is evident in the numerous but ineffective appeals to the international community to close the skies over Ukraine and to take action against the Russian aggressor (Belorusets 171). However, Belorusets’s diary can also be understood as an appeal against the abstraction of the concrete urban experience through political discourse – an aspect she directly addresses:

Die Konzepte der großen Politik, die abstrakten Diskussionen über die Frage, was zum “Westen” gehört und welche Rollen Russland und die Ukraine im Theater der Kriegshandlungen spielen, dienen als gedankliche Zufluchtsorte innerhalb der Unerträglichkeit des Krieges. Man erholt sich in den bequemen Räumen des analytischen Denkens, wo ausschließlich größere Zusammenhänge diskutiert werden und wo es nicht mehr um konkrete Menschenleben geht, sondern um Staaten, deren Strategie oft als biografische Entscheidung beschrieben wird (Belorusets 116).

[The concepts of big politics, the abstract discussions about what belongs to the “West” and what roles Russia and Ukraine play in the theater of warfare, serve as mental refuges within the intolerability of war. One recuperates in the comfortable spaces of analytical thinking, where only larger contexts are discussed and where concrete human lives stand behind states whose strategy is often described as a biographical decision].

By depicting and documenting the concrete everyday reality of Kyiv’s residents in contrast to the “abstract discussions” foregrounded by politics and the media, Belorusets, like Filipović, provides a counterpoint to the abstracting discourse about urban space in times of war. In so doing, she positions herself as a mediator, navigating between a perspective on urban space from above and one from below.

As mentioned, Belorusets's diary foregrounds women's voices and thus focuses on the female urban war experience. Her diary is a mouthpiece for female voices, in which a feminine narrative voice echoes several other female narratives. However, the author's function as a witness to the female experience frequently becomes her undoing. This is shown when the diarist is suspected of treason because of her photographic activity and is taken to a military checkpoint by an elderly couple (Belorusets 64). While Belorusets does not, as Filipović does, connote the political, institutional level with masculinity, the necessity to justify her documentary activity to the institution (the checkpoint is instituted by the city authorities) points to the restrictions imposed by the political regarding – in this case – female testimony.

In Belorusets's text, the female witness is thus shown to have access to knowledge that implies a bottom-up perspective on urban space – a knowledge unavailable to political discourse which by contrast seeks to abstract space and homogenize the diversity of female urban experience. However, or maybe therefore, the female witness is positioned as suspicious. Belorusets thus points to the marginality of her own female testimony, which manifests itself on multiple levels, and thus seems to be inscribed in the female view on the city in war.

While the narrators of both Belorusets's and Filipović's texts are clearly identifiable as female, such a definite statement regarding the narrative voice is not possible in the case of Ginzburg's *Zapiski blokadnego człowieka* and Świrszczyńska's poetry. It is true that in some poems and, indeed, in the title of the collection itself, *Budowałam barykadę*, the feminine verb ending in the first-person singular, past tense (*-łam*) points to the lyrical I being a woman. For the most part, however, there are no gender-specific connotations. Yet, based on the poem *Do mojej córki* (*To my daughter*), which stands as a foreword to the poetry collection, it can be concluded that the lyrical I present in the poetry collection is female. After all, Świrszczyńska writes in that poem: "Córeczko, ja nie byłam bohaterką, / barykady pod ostrzałem budowali wszyscy. / Ale ja widziałam bohaterów / i o tym muszę powiedzieć" (Świrszczyńska 10) [Dear little daughter, I wasn't a heroine, / barricades under fire were built by all. / However I saw heroes / and about that I have to speak].

Besides referring to the femininity of the lyrical I, this short poem reveals the importance of testimony in Świrszczyńska's poetry collection. The female lyrical I feels obligated to report on her experiences, which posits the poems that follow as female testimonies. Despite the reference to heroic deeds in this introductory poem, which is also addressed to a woman (the daughter of the lyrical I), in the other poems the female perspective on Warsaw during the uprising reveals above all the downsides and brutality of the military conflict. In *Pali się* (*It's burning*), for example, burning houses and a screaming, fleeing crowd of people are de-

scribed – a crowd from which only one person survives in the end (Świrszczyńska 15). Likewise, in *Kradnie futra* (*Stealing furs*), there is little heroism to be found when a man tries to steal furs under fire only to die at the end (Świrszczyńska 25).

In some poems, Świrszczyńska deconstructs the heroic concept of the (male) Warsaw insurgent. In *Po pijanemu* (*Drunk*), for instance, a Polish soldier becomes inebriated and, ascending a barricade under enemy fire, meets his demise while attempting to sing the Polish national anthem (Świrszczyńska 40). The poem ends with the words: “Powiedzieli matce: / zginął jak bohater” (Świrszczyńska 40) [They told the mother: / he died like a hero], transforming an unheroic death into a heroic death through language. The Polish author underscores the ambivalence inherent in dying during the Warsaw Uprising, showing how death is simultaneously deemed necessary for the struggle for the city’s independence and futile in light of the uprising’s anticipated defeat. Świrszczyńska further demonstrates how language can obfuscate this ambivalence, by contributing to a homogenized interpretation of events. In exposing this mechanism, she unveils the absolutizing tendency of language, as asserted, according to Butler, by Irigaray (Butler 14). Simultaneously, by exposing this tendency, the poet subverts the mechanisms intrinsic to the masculine economy of signification.

Consequently, Świrszczyńska exposes the concept of the hero [bohater] as a construct which by idealizing – mostly male – military deeds and concealing their banality tends to consolidate patriarchal power structures. Świrszczyńska’s lyrical I, staged as a female witness, thus breaks with the heroic code of the Warsaw Uprising – a code that, based on the tradition of Polish Romanticism, stages the insurgents as selfless, predominantly male national heroes (Janion 2014). Moreover, the poems cast women in the role of heroic figures, demonstrating a will to sacrifice themselves not for the nation but for their loved ones. The dissonance between ‘grand’, national, institutional heroism and ‘small’, private heroism is particularly pronounced when the military intersects with the private, urban level. In *Zapomniał o matce* (*He forgot about his mother*), for instance, the military ‘hero’ forgets his mother, who is compelled to face her demise in isolation, forsaken by her son (Świrszczyńska 33). Here, the insurgent is depicted not as selfless but as selfish, prioritizing the abstract idea of a nation over the concrete, personal dimension of urban life.

In Świrszczyńska’s *Budowałam barykadę*, the female witness thus deconstructs the concept of the male hero and becomes an advocate for female heroism – a heroism that lies less in the fulfillment of military duties than in sacrifice for one’s own family. By contrasting the private with the military, the Polish poet adopts a perspective on urban space that is slightly different from Belorusets’s and Filipović’s texts, since she includes both combat and civilian life in her poems. Through juxtaposing these two aspects, however, she, too, points to problematic aspects of the conventional heroic code and thereby deconstructs it.

In contrast to Świrszczyńska, Ginzburg omits the front as a setting for her narration completely. Her text focuses exclusively on civilian everyday life in Leningrad during the Blockade. Thus, her text also takes a perspective on the city from below. Unlike the other three writers, who do not conceal the femininity of their narrating voice, Ginzburg in *Zapiski blokadnego człowieka* attempts to de-feminize her own experiences by placing a male protagonist, N., at the center of her text. However, as Beata Pawletko notes, this masculinization of the narrative does not lead to a masculine perspectivization of the urban experience depicted in the text (Pawletko 73). Rather, by blurring gender boundaries Ginzburg attempts to create narrative objectivity, which enables her to portray not only the experience of a specific blockade person, but of the whole community of besieged Leningrad (Pawletko 74).

The literary operation of de-feminization corresponds with the oscillating relationship between individuality and collectivity in Ginzburg's text, which manifests itself in the narrative's alternation between individual anecdote and typifying observation (Seidel 57–59). This allows the text to show, on the one hand, how individual fate is related to that of a collective. On the other hand, it exposes history as a conglomerate of individual, human biographies and thus points to the relevance of the experiences of each individual person in the historiography of the Blockade of Leningrad.

Both mechanisms – the blurring of boundaries between male and female and between individual and collective – have the effect of creating a distance between the text and the autobiographical experience and thus are aimed at generating objectivity. Strictly speaking, then, Ginzburg attempts to conceal the aspect of female witnessing in her text in order to achieve universality. Nevertheless, her text points to the difference between a male and a female Blockade experience, as already discussed. Despite the implication of a Blockade experience that transcends gender boundaries, Ginzburg's text thus points to breaks in its own typification. Here, too, parallels to the text's inherent oscillation between the collective and the individual can be identified. For, if the text describes an experience that all *blokadni* can refer to, in anecdotes it demonstrates that the individual fates differed from a generalized Blockade experience (Seidel 58).

Ginzburg thus suggests the possibility of an objective depiction of a cohesive urban experience during times of war, while concurrently demonstrating its impossibility. Thereby, her text reflects the problematic of testimony itself. For a witness can indeed testify to an event, but only by drawing on his/her own experiences. Inferring a general historical experience from those individual testimonies, i.e. the attempt at objectification, will always imply reduction and selectivity. As a result, Ginzburg's text comments on language and literature as perpetuators of absolutizing mechanisms. However, by exposing the selectivity inherent in her

own writing and allowing this aspect to emerge in passages addressing the distinct experiences of men and women during the Blockade, her text acts as a corrective against the erasure of the feminine that it engenders itself.

Conclusion

Notwithstanding the heterogeneity of the four texts in terms of both context and genre, commonalities among them can be discerned. All four texts elucidate the manifestation of phallic spatial structures and the imposition of passivity on women during times of war. Simultaneously, they underscore the pivotal role played by women in resisting these very structures. In Ginzburg's work, female conversations about the function of women in the private sphere serve to emphasize female agency during war. Świrszczyńska's poems subvert phallogocentric structures that tend to obliterate the feminine by showing the woman's striving to retain, reclaim, or even use her own sexuality for combat. And Filipović and Belorusets show how women resist the "phallic brutality" (Lefebvre 1991: 287) of war by continuing their (female) practices from before the military conflict started.

Moreover, the four texts refrain from presenting urban space through an absolutizing, homogenizing lens that accentuates its institutional dimension, as commonly observed in conventional war narratives. Instead, they focus on the private everyday urban life. In this way, they adopt a bottom-up perspective on the city – a perspective that resists spatial abstraction and the homogenization of both the urban experience and traditional gender-specific concepts.

Against this background, female testimony in the texts discussed assumes a dual character – both mediatory and transgressive. All four authors delineate the other of the urban experience in times of war, expounding on the problems of linguistic (and literary) representation as a reproductive means of patriarchal structures. Simultaneously, they highlight the potential of female testimony to unveil and subvert these structures.

Filipović's and Belorusets's texts challenge the predominance of phallic, abstract space by directing attention to private everyday life, casting politics as a (male) abstraction detached from concrete urban reality where the female presence prevails. In Świrszczyńska's poems, the military and politics feature more prominently. Yet, through their juxtaposition the Polish poet deconstructs the conventional heroic code – a code rooted in a literary tradition that portrays insurgents as selfless sacrifices for national independence, neglecting the private, predominantly female, experience of the Uprising.

On a linguistic level, Ginzburg's narrative illustrates the obliteration of the female in testimonies of urban war experience, as she recounts her autobiographical

experiences using a male protagonist to ostensibly achieve narrative objectivity. However, her text unveils significant gender-specific distinctions in navigating urban everyday life during war, as evident in the accounts of the male and female Blockade experiences.

Collectively, these four texts demonstrate the marginalization of women during war, while concurrently pointing to female resistance against the male, phallic spatial order that emerges. They engage in a discussion about how this resistance can manifest or be mirrored on a linguistic level without perpetuating phallogocentric structures and economies of significance to which their female narratives are also subject. The texts achieve this delicate equilibrium not merely by presenting their narratives as repositories of female testimony and affording prominence to female voices. They also accomplish it through their spatial perspective, their emphasis on concrete everyday life, and the concurrent spatial-aesthetic subversion of military masculine space and narratives. In so doing, these texts effectively elucidate the nuances of female agency during wartime.

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