Cloaked in Courage

Women's Coats as Co-agents of Resistance: Transversal Realities in Central Europe, 1935–1953

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This study investigates the role of women's coats as active participants in various resistance movements across Central and Eastern Europe from 1935 to 1953, employing a posthumanist framework to reexamine issues of subjectivity. By integrating theories of material culture and new materialism, the research moves beyond traditional anthropocentric views to highlight the dynamic intra-actions between women and their coats within a resistance context. This approach demonstrates that the garments were not merely passive symbols of defiance but multifaceted tools that provided physical protection, facilitated the covert transmission of messages and materials and reinforced the wearers' resolve and solidarity. Through historical analyses, personal testimonies and cultural artifacts, this study demonstrates how coats functioned as co-agents in resistance activities, both shaping and being shaped by the social, cultural, and political landscapes of the time. The study underscores the importance of recognizing the agency of material objects in historical narratives, offering a nuanced understanding of women's resistance activities and the broader implications for posthumanist thinking on identity and subjectivity.

Keywords: agency, coat, posthumanism, feminism, resistance

DOI: 10.14712/24645370.4577

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> "Memory is not a record of a fixed past that can ever be fully or simply erased, written over, or recovered [...] like all intra-actions, they extend the entanglements and responsibilities of which one is a part. The past is never finished."
>
> Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*[1]

Despite forty years of research by historians in the fields of feminist history and gender studies, only now is the discipline of military history seeing a shift towards a shift towards a wider examination of the role of women in military conflicts and resistance movements and the wider relationship of this issue with resistance, politics, economy, society, and culture. Similarly, military historians have been slow to integrate the major philosophical and theoretical developments of recent decades into the fields of object-oriented ontology and other posthumanist theories, schools of thought which cast doubt on the prioritisation of the human over material objects.

This study attempts to address these shortcomings by examining social dynamics and historical events within the context of women's resistance to European totalitarianism between 1935 and 1953, emphasizing the themes of agency and co-agency, identity, and political resistance and applying the approaches of posthumanism, feminist research and critical theory to develop alternative perspectives on the relationships between human agents and material objects. The study looks at women's lived realities in armed conflicts from a unique frame of reference by exploring the function of civilian and military coats and their intra-actions with women in conflict situations from an object-oriented perspective.[2]

Integrating discursive analysis and case studies of reminiscences and accounts from human actors, the study aims to deepen our understanding of the relationships between individuals and material objects[3] and, in a Derridean manner, deconstruct our perceptions of the material world and its Baradian intra-actions.

1 *Intra-action* is the concept of the mutual entanglement of entities and their environment. See KAREN BARAD, *Meeting the Universe Halfway. Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Durham–London 2007, Preface.

2 The author is aware that various types of coats exist, but for the purposes of this study, the English umbrella term of coats will be used.

3 In this study, objects and things are considered as equivalent concepts to avoid a dualistic view of subject and object. Posthumanist approaches see these entities as interconnected phenomena which engage in intra-actions, the separation of which may lead to a reductionist interpretation of reality.

Women's resistance to totalitarian regimes is attracting growing academic interest, with researchers in different disciplines grappling with the analysis of the ethics and consequences of resistance.[4] Resistance has emerged as an essential element of moral discussions and ethical deliberations which seek to understand how individuals and societies respond to situations they perceive as unjust, amoral, or wrong. New theoretical perspectives[5] incorporate the legacy of post-structuralist anti-humanism, reject binary oppositions and advocate the concept of the material world as "a self-regulating system".[6] Posthumanist critical theories promote a radically different understanding of subjectivity through its intense degree of interdisciplinarity and boundary-crossing across a wide range of discourses. This approach has the capacity to alter our thinking and generates rhizomatic connections of theoretical diversity in academic research.[7]

4 The *GWonline* project publishes research on gender and war, including bibliographies, filmographies and online sources on gender and war since 1600 for public use. See KAREN HAGEMANN, *Welcome to GWonline*, https://gwonline.unc.edu (accessed on 1 August 2024). For more, see: *The Companion to Women's Military History*, (eds.) BARTON C. HACKER, MARGARET VINING, Leiden 2012; JELENA BATINIC, *Women and Yugoslav Partisans: A History of World War II Resistance*, New York 2015; KAZIMIERA JELENA COTTAM, *Women in War and Resistance: Selected Biographies of Soviet Women Soldiers*. Newburyport 1998; LARA R. CURTIS, *Writing Resistance and the Question of Gender: Charlotte Delbo, Noor Inayat Khan, and Germaine Tillion.* Cham 2019; MARGARET GOLDSMITH, *Women at War*. London 1943; ELIZABETH HARVEY, *Women and the Nazi East: Agents and Witnesses of Germanizations,* New Haven 2003; JULIETTE PATTINSON, *Behind Enemy Lines. Gender, Passing and the Special Operations Executive in the Second World War,* Manchester 2007; MARGARET L. ROSSITER, *Women in the Resistance*, New York 1986; MEGHAN. K. WINCHELL, *Women and World War in Comparative Perspective*, in: The Oxford Handbook of American Women's and Gender History, (eds.) Ellen Hartigan-O'Connor, Lisa. G. Materson, New York 2018, pp. 595–616.

5 JANE BENNETT*, The Enchantment of Modern Life. Attachments, Crossings and Ethics*, New York 2001; ROSI BRAIDOTTI, *Nomadic Subjects. Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory,* New York 1994; MANUEL DELANDA, *Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy*, London 2002; ELIZABETH GROSZ, *Volatile Bodies. Towards a Corporeal Feminism*, Bloomington 1994.

6 K. BARAD, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*.

7 Various onto-epistemological approaches, including new materialist, feminist, gender and queer studies, play a key role in analyzing the issue of subjectivity and its impact on critical theory. ROSI BRAIDOTTI, *Posthumanismus. Leben jenseits des Menschen* [*Posthumanism. Life beyond humans*], Frankfurt 2014; JUDITH BUTLER, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?*, London 2009; JUDITH BUTLER,

Women's military and civilian coats, the particular focus of this study, are objects which emerge as co-partners of women's resistance in extreme socio-political situations, shedding light upon women's struggles for their beliefs and freedom, transforming the reality of horror into a vital matter of solidarity and compassion.[8] They are examples of intra-active, decentralized, and vital subjectivity, a perspective which encompasses both human and non-human actors; this subjectivity is not an exclusive attribute of humans but rather one that depends on the mutual relations and immanence of entities.

The new materialist approach in this study offers a different and more expansive perspective on the relationships between humans and material objects, such as coats and uniforms, within the context of resistance against totalitarian and authoritarian regimes (and beyond), which is the main focus of this article. This approach also allows us to broaden the understanding of subjectivity to include the agency of material objects, opening new possibilities for understanding their roles in the processes of resistance. The study highlights not only historical events but also the ethical and political aspects of coexistence among different kinds of entities in the world of resistance.

The coat stands as an emblem of agency, simultaneously reflecting and transforming historical events and societal changes. In the context of wars and conflicts, it becomes a marker of protection, identification, and solidarity, expressing determination and courage in dangerous situations. Resistance against totalitarian regimes is not only a reaction to political and social conditions but also an expression of agency and solidarity within complex social intra-actions.[9]

Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity, New York 1990; JUDITH BUTLER, *Die Macht der Gewaltlosigkeit. Über das Ethische im Politischen* [*The Force of Nonviolence. An Ethico-Political Bind*]. Berlin 2020; MARIAM FRASER; SARAH KEMBER, CELIA LURY, (eds.), *Inventive Life. Approaches to the New Vitalism*, London 2006; DONNA HARAWAY, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, New York 1991; SANDRA HARDING, *Feministische Wissenschaftstheorie* [*A Feminist Philosophy of Science*], Hamburg 1990; BELL HOOKS, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center,* Boston 1984; GAYLE RUBIN, *Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality,* Chicago 1984; ISABELLE STENGERS, *Thinking with Whitehead: A Free and Wild Creation of Concepts*, Cambridge 2011.

8 R. BRAIDOTTI, *Posthumanismus*, p. 135.

9 The author is aware of the existence of many other co-agents than women and coats in this field and does not claim comprehensiveness. This study acknowledges

This study aims to fill in some of the historiographical gaps by avoiding political and military aspects in favour of expanding upon the overlooked issues of everyday realities of ordinary people, especially women. The stories of women who fought for their beliefs and values are a crucial element of contemporary discussions on power, identity and resistance to totalitarian regimes. The coat thus plays a significant role in the process of individual and collective subjectivity, embodying identity and solidarity that transcends national, class and ideological boundaries. The study contemplates these aspects, using posthumanist theories and oral history as its basis, reevaluating anthropocentric perspectives and favouring an inclusive approach to subjectivity that includes non-human aspects of existence.

Methodology

The methodological approach of this study draws upon the transdisciplinary models of thinking advocated by Rosi Braidotti. Her principles of cartographic care leading to ethical responsibility, transdisciplinarity, the fusion of critique with creative figures, and the principle of non-linearity (or rhizomatic ways of thinking), combined with memory, imagination and defamiliarization, form the pillars of posthumanist critical theory. These elements enable the development of alternative perspectives on the relationships between the humanities and natural sciences, fostering understanding based on mutual respect.[10] Braidotti's emphasis on nomadic thinking positions the subject as a threshold of unpredictable and dynamic acts which express life energy within an altered nonlinear existence. This study applies these theoretical frameworks to contemplate the realities of historical records. By integrating digitized historical materials, personal testimonies, and diverse artistic approaches, the study reflects on the intra-actions in which coats have played a role in the context of resistance. Supporting posthumanist, post-identitarian and transversal subjectivity, coats are seen as material expressions and manifestations of resistance against totalitarian regimes. Their significance extends beyond history into the present, providing tools for new (*other*) understandings of

the potential for further connections and diverse perspectives, offering only a single possible approach.

10 R. BRAIDOTTI, *Posthumanismus*, p. 167.

ethical values and relationships within the broader context of community and environment. By thinking transdisciplinarily, this approach can lead to more creative thinking, complementing traditional historical frameworks, and offering an expanded understanding of historical, cultural and socio-political contexts in the collective memory of resistance. This encourages reflection on our historical-cultural identity and enhances our historical awareness of the role of inanimate objects in both collective and individual resistance.

The field of new materialism rejects traditional anthropocentric and dualistic perspectives and offers a critical view of the dynamics of power structures and their relationships with material entities and the subjective experiences of women. It reveals the resistance and subversion which are implicit within these structures, including, within the context of this study, the ways in which women utilized their coats as tools to express their agency and resistance. The concept of materialism dates back to antiquity and was a key aspect of Marxist thought, but it is once again receiving wider academic attention.[11] New materialism emerged as a reaction to traditional approaches in the social sciences, focusing instead on dynamic and mutual relationships between people and inanimate objects, rejecting a passive view of material and emphasizing its active role in influencing subjective experiences. Adopting an intersectional approach which encompasses biology, culture, ecology and technology, the approach opens pathways for transdisciplinary research that focus on reflecting on the nature of material and its influence on power across various contexts.[12]

11 ARJUN APPADURAI, *The Social Life of Things. Commodities in Cultural Perspectives*, Cambridge 1998; DIANA COOLE, SAMANTHA FROST, *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency and Politics*, Durham/London 2010; TIM INGOLD, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill,* London 2000; BILL BROWN, *Thing Theory*, Critical Inquiry 28/2001, pp. 1–22; BRUNO LATOUR, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, Oxford 2005.

12 These theories encompass a wide range of approaches and disciplinary perspectives (KAREN BARAD, *Agential Realism: Feminist Interventions in Understanding Scientific Practices*, in: The Science Studies Reader, (ed.) Mario Biagioli, New York 1999, pp. 1–11. DIANA COOLE, *Agentic Capacities and Capacious Historical Materialism: Thinking with New Materialisms in the Political Sciences*, Millenium 41/2013, pp. 451–469; MANUEL DELANDA, *Philosophy and Simulation: The Emergence of Synthetic Reason*, London 2011; STACEY ALAIMO, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self,* Bloomington 2010; WILLIAM E. CONNOLLY, *A World of Becoming*, Durham 2011; ROSI BRAIDOTTI, *The*

Karen Barad's concept of agential realism posits relationships existing as "mutually conditioned entities"[13] between objects, subjects and their environment. Objects such as coats are perceived as part of a complex system of mutual relations in which they are constantly intra-actively shaping and transforming. Coats are thus more than a means of staying warm; they are active participants in creating and reconstructing women's identity and resistance to systemic inequalities. In the context of the concentration camp, for example, a coat becomes a co-agent of survival, determination and dignity amidst threats and dehumanization. Barad's theory helps us understand that all matter, including coats and women, is entangled in a continual network of mutual relations; their agency is not isolated but is intrinsically interconnected with the environment in which they exist.

This idea is echoed in Jane Bennett's concept of vibrant matter which emphasizes the active role of non-human objects in social and political processes, enabling the exploration of how the coats which feature in our narratives of resistance to totalitarianism are not merely passive items of clothing but agents with their own power and impact. "Objects have thing-power: the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle."[14] This active collaborative process is constantly in motion, constantly evolving, with human agency intricately involved in these processes, networks and assemblages.[15] In her work *Vibrant Matter* (2020), Jane Bennett points out the inherent "life force" or "agency" of material objects and their ability to influence social

Posthuman, Cambridge 2013, integrating phenomenology (GRAHAM HARMAN, *Guerrilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things*, Chicago 2005), modern vitalism (J. BENNETT, *Vibrant Matter*, Durham 2020), the postmodern ideas of Derrida (E. GROSZ, *Volatile Bodies*; V. Kirby, *Quantum Anthropologies,* Durham 2011), and Deleuze (ROSI BRAIDOTTI, *Metamorphoses. Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming*, Cambridge 2002), quantum physics (K. BARAD, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*), complexity research (M. DELANDA, *Philosophy and Simulation*) and evolutionary theory (W. E. CONNOLLY, *A World of Becoming*; E. GROSZ, *Volatile Bodies*; see also KATHARINA HOPPE, THOMAS LEMKE: *Neue Materialismen zur Einführung* [*New Materialisms: An Introduction*], Hamburg 2021).

13 K. BARAD, *Meeting the Universe Halfway.*

14 J. BENNETT, *Vibrant Matter*, p. 6.

15 Barad emphasizes *intra-actions,* while other thinkers see *assemblages* as dynamic networks of interconnected elements with emergent properties in which mutual connections are key.

processes.[16] For example, the quality of coat materials can affect their resistance to weather conditions, thereby contributing to the success of covert operations.

In the context of this study, the "politics of affirmation"[17] developed by Rosi Braidotti can force us to reassess the relationships between human beings, rapid technological advancements and environmental change of the contemporary environment. This approach can also lead us to understand that resistance-struggle-oppression (in the sense of an environment co-shaping situations in which women and coats acted together) is not solely a human affair but involves material objects that are part of a wider ecosystem of resistance. Coats can be understood as symbols of resistance and as material manifestations of posthumanist identity, where women and their coats together forge new forms of resistance and survival.[18]

While better known for her writing on gender,[19] Judith Butler and her work are also relevant within the context of new materialist approaches is justified by her theory of performativity, which examines how identity and agency are not predetermined but continually created through mutual engagement and repetition of certain behavioural patterns. Butler's perspective on power and norms can illuminate how coats and other material objects are embedded in social structures and how these structures influence their meaning and impact.[20] Butler criticizes traditional concepts of violence and nonviolence and notes that the manipulation of their definitions complicates our assessment of specific situations. At the same time, she encourages critical interpretations of power and the

16 J. BENNETT, *Vibrant Matter*, p. 21.

17 R. BRAIDOTTI, *Politik der Affirmation*.

18 Although these theoretical approaches offer different perspectives, they share a common emphasis on relationality and connectivity between human and non-human actors. Barad's agential realism focuses on the process of agency emergence through intra-actions, whereas Bennett's vibrant matter emphasizes the inherent vitality of material objects. Braidotti's posthumanism extends this view to a broader ecological and technological context, highlighting the need to reconsider humanity in contemporary times. Despite these shared characteristics, Barad, Bennett, and Braidotti's theories differ in their epistemological approaches and ontological implications.

19 J. BUTLER, *Die Macht der Gewaltlosigkeit.*

20 See also: J. BUTLER, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, London 2004; J. BUTLER, *Frames of War*; J. BUTLER, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, Cambridge (MA) 2015.

epistemic frameworks that influence how we determine self-defence and political resistance, emphasizing the need to recognize vulnerability and the mutual interdependence of life.

This study examines the significance of coats in resistance to totalitarian regimes through the lens of these theoretical interpretations. It is based on the analysis of a series of sources which relate women's narratives of struggle and resistance against totalitarianism, more specifically in Central and Eastern Europe during the wartime Nazi regime and the post-war communist totalitarianism Given the vast scope of materials on this topic, this study does not pretend to claim comprehensiveness, and our focus was limited to collections of women's personal testimonies, primarily in digitised form but also incorporating written sources,[21] and selected materials from various state archives. These materials were intensively surveyed to identify narratives in which coats played a key intra-active role, and the resulting selection was then refined to develop a structure of twelve inter-related women's narratives which reflect on the importance of a posthumanist approach to the issue of women's resistance to totalitarianism. The study also integrates poetry and artworks, both historical pieces and new creations, which were specially commissioned for this study. They are intended to broaden the artistic and creative implications of the research. The study will examine how the coat serves as a way of forging identity and as a means of protection, before looking at the significance of the white coat of the nurse and the black coat of the secret policeman. Attention then shifts to the coat as a means of organising and providing solidarity, before offering a contrasting significance in the role of the turncoat, in which many of these same perspectives of the coat can be inverted for treacherous purposes.

21 These materials were primarily taken from the Czech historical documentation project *Memory of the Nation* [*Paměť národa*] which compiles a wide range of testimonies of women involved in various resistance activities. Nonetheless, we acknowledge the limitations of this source; the testimonies cannot be considered purely as oral history because they were not obtained in a systematic manner and are based on interviews which were conducted over a broad period of time. However, we still believe that the narratives found in this collection are a valuable resource for research into this topic.

CUT FROM THE SAME CLOTH: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE MILITARY UNIFORM

The symbolism of the military uniform[22] is inseparable from the identity of the military profession and its hierarchy, vividly evoking the concepts of discipline, unity and structural hierarchies. In situations of resistance against totalitarian regimes, the military uniform acquires various meanings. In a more negative interpretation, it can reflect subjugation and the erasure of individual identity, perhaps even reflecting or reinforcing fascist or totalitarian mindsets.[23] However, it can be seen as a symbol of strength, resilience and solidarity for women facing political reprisals while also emphasizing collective strength in the fight against oppression. In the context of the concentration camp, coats shape the life stories of women and their resistance to injustice. Wearing a uniform also refers to cultural heritage, the shaping of identity and military service, thereby acknowledging the opportunities and limitations faced by women in the military.[24]

In line with Butler's concept of performativity, the act of wearing the uniform can be a subversive and politically charged move that transcends mere external representation and signals active participation in political movements and collective efforts for justice.[25]

Building on this thinking, this study proposes that women's narratives reveal some possible ways by which donning a uniform can influence their identity and their perception by society. The case of Lieutenant Jiřina Bajborová illustrates how the uniform reflected her ability to withstand the challenges of military life and assert herself in areas once

22 In this study, uniforms are seen as instruments of power, authority, and oppression within totalitarian regimes. They differ in formality, restriction, and external control. Uniforms serve a wide range of various social functions and can represent either the need to conform or to reject conventional society. However, the key point is that their meanings can be interpreted and shaped by both their wearers and observers. For a fuller analysis of the various semantic aspects of military uniforms, see CARRIE HERTZ, *The Uniform: As Material, As Symbol, As Negotiated Object*, Midwestern Folklore 32/2007, no. 1–2, pp. 43–56.

23 For more, see JENNIFER CRAIK, *Uniforms Exposed: From Conformity to Transgression*. Oxford–New York 2005; SUSAN SONNTAG, *Fascinating Fascism*, The New York Review of Books 6 February 1975.

24 CYNTHIA ENLOE, *Globalization and Militarism: Feminists Make the Link*, Lanham 2007; NIRA YUVAL-DAVIS, *Gender and Nation*, Thousand Oaks 1997.

25 J. BUTLER, *Frames of War*, pp. 172f.

reserved for men. The story of the Kozáková family reveals the significant influence which uniforms exert on the individual and their social relationships and family structures. The partisan Johanna Sadolšek-Zala redefines gender roles and equality on the front lines. These examples document women's ability to change the social gender norms of the military environment and transcend traditional boundaries.

Lieutenant Jiřina Bajborová

> "Do you know the joke where a soldier comes home and asks his wife: What will you lie under? 'A military coat.' And what will you cover yourself with? 'A military coat.' And what will you put under your head? 'A military coat.' And how many coats do you have? 'Only one.'"[26]
>
> Jiřina Bajborová

> "For four days, interrogations went on day and night; I slept on the floor in the cell, covered with my own coat. On the fifth day, I received a prison uniform."[27]
>
> Margita Zimanová

Fig. 1 Jiřina Bajborová, right[28]

26 LENKA KOPŘIVOVÁ, *Jiřina Bajborová (1925–2011)*, https://www.pametnaroda.cz/cs/bajborova-jirina-1925 (accessed 3 January 2023).

27 LUDMILA ADAMOVÁ, *Margita Zimanová (1942)*, https://www.upn.gov.sk/sk/pribeh-pamatnika-margita-zimanova-1942/, (accessed on 5 January 2024).

28 L. KOPŘIVOVÁ, *Jiřina Bajborová (1925–2011).*

Jiřina Bajborová (1925) was born into a Volhynian Czech family in Zdolbuniv in Poland. The occupation of the town by the Red Army in 1939 changed her family's fate dramatically, but the subsequent German invasion in 1941 brought its own horrors; in 1943, she witnessed the massacre of the local Jewish population by German forces:

"Once I was at the cemetery and heard gunfire. The Germans were shooting Jews [...] They always shot a group of people, covered them with some powder, and then another... The Jews were naked or in their underwear. Those who were shooting were all in uniform."[29] These experiences motivated her to become involved in resistance to the Nazi regime, and after the Red Army recaptured her town in early 1944, she joined the exiled Czechoslovak Army Corps which were being recruited by the Soviet Union: "On May 16th, I walked twelve kilometres to Rovno with Marie Halámková to enlist. Then we travelled by train, a full wagon of girls."[30]

Jiřina Bajborová's enlistment showed her determination and collective solidarity during the period of Nazi reprisals. Her memoirs indicate that her military uniform was not a superficial visible symbol but one that bore a deeper significance as an expression of her military resistance. It became a symbol of her active rejection of passivity in the face of oppression, expressing her discipline, determination and solidarity with the military collective. This understanding of the decision to wear a uniform on a regular basis emphasizes its active role in shaping and transforming subjectivity; this subjectivity is not static but is instead created through repeated acts and intra-actions in society.

The decision to regularly wear a military uniform transcended anthropocentrism by emphasizing the active role of clothing in shaping and transforming subjectivity. The uniform emerges as a manifestation of her active rejection of passivity in the face of oppression, expressing her discipline, determination and solidarity with the military collective and transcending anthropocentric limitations.

29 L. KOPŘIVOVÁ, *Jiřina Bajborová (1925–2011).*
30 L. KOPŘIVOVÁ, *Jiřina Bajborová (1925–2011).*

W/O Anastázie Kozáková and Captain Emílie Kozáková

Fig. 2 Anastázie, Jaroslav and Emílie Kozák, their friend Lída Réblová and her uncle Jaroslav Prokůpek[31]

The wartime photograph of another family of Volhynian Czechs, the siblings W/O Anastázie Kozáková (1927), Captain Emílie Kozáková (1925) and W/O Jaroslav Kozák (1929), offers some insight into the family dynamics in wartime. All three, regardless of gender, are in khaki, a scene which would have been unthinkable prior to the Second World War.

Standing as more than a visual record, the photograph is a profound reflection of the family's history, embodying their determination, adaptability and unity in wartime. At the same time, it reflects the cultural framework that determines the dehumanization and norms shaping human depiction. In the *ethics of nonviolence*, Butler emphasizes that

31 L. KOPŘIVOVÁ, *Jiřina Bajborová (1925–2011).*

photographs create a frame that explicitly delimits the political background and determines what is excluded from the image. Analysing the normative background of the image is essential because the entire arrangement of the photograph is part of an operational force that is not explicitly visible. This force transforms individual subjectivity in society; surrounded by norms, individuals can identify power differentials that should be critically reevaluated in order to identify paths of resistance. Butler's *ethics of nonviolence* promotes the recognition and respect for the vulnerability and mutual dependency of life forms. Braidotti's concept of *the ethics of belonging* advocates for a broader understanding of solidarity and the inclusion of various kinds of beings in ethical and political decisions. Butler and Braidotti share an interest in the critical examination of power structures and normative frameworks that influence our understanding of identity and the possibilities for political resistance against systemic inequalities.

Anastázie Kozáková's reminiscences of the family's involvement in the exiled Czechoslovak Corps of the Red Army show how social norms influenced women's experiences on the front line, defining their solidarity and their responses to opportunities and threats: "First, my father had to go. My sister was supposed to go to work in Russia, but she was saved from this by enlisting in the army. [...] Mother constantly wrote to Father that she was sad at home, that she didn't want to stay there alone with her brother, that she wanted to join us... [...] And so, we all eventually met up in the army."[32]

Emílie adds another dimension in her description of their experiences during the training in Sadagura, Romania in 1944. "On the way to the training centre, we were repeatedly bombed; the train would stop in the field, and we scattered. When the attack was over, we reboarded and continued. [...] However, we had training like men: crawling, jumping. We even had a corporal who punished us for not doing jumps like men, for not being able to 'lie down' like them."[33]

The sisters' training was essentially the same as that given to male recruits but revealed differences in terms of the mutual expectations and attitudes towards women. Although some tasks were different for women and for men, they were accompanied by similar expectations. The

32 LENKA KOPŘIVOVÁ, *Svobodník v. v. Anastázie Barteisová (1927)*, https://www.pametnaroda.cz/cs/barteisova-anastazie-1927 (accessed on 1 February 2023).

33 L. KOPŘIVOVÁ, *Svobodník v. v. Anastázie Barteisová (1927).*

women's ability to adapt to new responsibilities attests to the abandonment of traditional female roles and their active involvement in military operations, which shaped their new identity and perception of war. The camaraderie and unity which arose from shared dangers blurred gender differences within the unit, although societal norms in the military environment were still evident, as is shown by Lieutenant Novák's security concerns: "There were many girls in the unit, so we stuck together more. I remember that during the first deployment to the front, Lieutenant Novák urged us: 'Girls, dig, get into the foxholes. What if there's an air raid?' But we didn't take it too seriously. [...] Our cousin was there with her husband, [...] and unlike us, our brother-in-law dug diligently. They made a dugout [...] Suddenly, mortars began to fall. [...] From then on, when we moved, I no longer waited."[34]

The Partisan Johanna Sadolšek-Zala

Fig. 3 Johanna Saldošek Zala with other partisans[35]

34 L. KOPŘIVOVÁ, *Svobodník v. v. Anastázie Barteisová (1927).*
35 Image © Karin Berger, Photo: Sammlung Österreichisches Filmmuseum.

Women were a vital component of the Yugoslav partisan movement, integrating combat aspects with support tasks such as the mobilization of civilians in the face of German reprisals. Women like Johanna Sadolšek-Zala (1923–2010) and Maria Lipuš (?–1945) played a vital role in motivating other women to join the resistance and spreading the movement's goals among the population: "Lipuš Maria, my sister-in-law, and I were the first. We had the task of organizing other women. [...] It went from woman to woman. One already knew, she went to another and told her that there were partisans who want to drive out Hitler, that Hitler would be defeated, and we all must help otherwise we will all perish."[36]

Women were a vital element of the efforts of the Yugoslav partisans, and around two million women were believed to be actively involved in the movement by 1945. More than 100,000 women fought in armed units of the National Liberation Front alone, with about a quarter of them falling in battle and 40,000 being wounded, including 3,000 suffering permanent injuries. Around 2,000 women served as officers.[37] As Sadolšek-Zala reflects: "At first, I thought I couldn't stand it at all. [...] But because we organized everything well with those who stayed at home, [...] the daughters of farmers washed everything for us, they supplied us with all the materials. Truly, around 90 to 99 percent of the people sympathized with the partisans."[38]

The testimonies of Bajborová, the Kozáková sisters, and Sadolšek-Zala reveal the involvement of women both in combat roles and in organizing resistance movements.

HIDDEN IN SAFETY

The importance of solidarity and support among soldiers and the civilian population in times of conflict is discussed frequently in women's wartime memoirs, revealing the determination of individuals to overcome the perils of war and involve themselves in historic events. Coats acquire

36 KARIN BERGER, ELIZABETH HOLZINGER, LOTTE PODGORNIK, LISBETH N. TRALLORI, *Frauen im Widerstand. Der Himmel ist blau. Kann sein. Österreich 1938–1945* [*Women in Resistance. The Sky Is Blue. Perhaps. Austria 1938–1945*], Leipzig 1985, p. 91.

37 K. WILFLINGSEDER, *Der Widerstand der Kärntner Partisaninnen gegen Hitler*.

38 K. BERGER et al, *Frauen im Widerstand*, p. 97.

Fig. 4[39]

a symbolic significance of protection and express identity and courage in fraught socio-political situations.

Dagmar Ostermann (1920–2010) was born in Vienna to a Jewish father and a Gentile mother who had converted to Judaism after her marriage. As a result, the family were subjected to the discriminatory anti-Jewish legislation introduced after the 1938 Anschluss: "[M]y uncle was in a Wehrmacht uniform; the uniform was always something revered, and he [...] said to my mother, 'Watch out, nothing could happen to you until now because according to the Aryan paragraph, you're Aryan, so it didn't concern you, but Dagmar is of Jewish faith, moreover, she has a Jewish father; I won't leave her here; I'll take her with me.' He dressed me in a military coat and military cap, sat me in his sidecar, and we set off towards Passau. [...] That was in April 1938."[40]

The decision to don a Nazi uniform and flee reconstructs Ostermann's identity through acts of resistance that simultaneously challenge

39 Author's image.

40 *Dagmar Ostermann: Nach den "Nürnberger "Gesetzen" "Geltungsjüdin"*, https://www.doew.at/erinnern/biographien/erzaehlte-geschichte/ns-judenverfolgung-ausgrenzung-entrechtung/dagmar-ostermann-nach-den-nuernberger-gesetzen-geltungsjuedin, (accessed on 1 September 2023).

the racial categorization imposed by the Aryan laws. This action interweaves material objects with human agency aimed at defying oppressive norms, reflecting the shared interests of Braidotti and Butler in activism, identity and resistance within the framework of power structures. From a Baradian standpoint, we might ponder the relationship between the subject and the political environment. The coat, cap and uniform become "protective" agents, objects which transcend their physical status to actively participate in the creation of political intra-actions, where material entities both shape and are shaped by their context.

Bibiana Wallnerová (1932–2014) depicts the coat as an unusual but effective means of physical protection for unarmed civilians, offering a surprising perspective on the direct agency of material objects in political conflict; the coat is not just a means of physical protection but an active element in the entanglement between personal safety and power structures: "We lay down when the shooting started. We were unarmed, and they were shooting at us. I had one bag in front of my head, and there was a coat in it. That bag hit me in the head. Later, a piece, a bullet, was found in it. It was stuck in that coat."[41]

In Ostermann's confrontation with the Gestapo, the coat is a symbol of resistance and strategy in the context of identity and control; Wallnerová develops this theme further, showing that the coat can serve as a tool for protecting secrets, an improvised shield in times of danger: in all cases, an active participant in conflict situations. These examples underscore the fact that the coat is not a passive garment but an important actor in shaping human experience and identity in the context of history and violence.

Coat as a Code

The symbolic inter-actions[42] of coats can also be seen in the use of the garments as a means of non-verbal communication between resistance agents in wartime Budapest. Signals using coats allowed agents to coordinate activities, secure safe escapes and minimize risks for residents

41 MARTINA FIAMOVÁ, *Bibiana Wallnerová (1932–2014)*, https://www.upn.gov.sk/sk/bibiana-wallnerova-1932-2014/ (accessed on 4 June 2024).

42 HERBERT BLUMER, *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method*, Berkeley 1969.

threatened with deportation. An open coat signalled a safe situation: "The handover can be made, I will approach you now." A closed coat indicated imminent danger: "The situation is dangerous, you will be contacted later." Holding the coat in the right hand was a signal to await further instructions: "Stay where you are, I will find you once I have made sure things are safe."[43]

Fig. 5 Raoul Wallenberg's coat at the Army Museum, Stockholm[44]

Raoul Wallenberg (1912–1945), Valeria 'Vali' Racz (1919–2010), Perla Szabo (1900–1954) and Miklós Magasdi demonstrated the effectiveness of such techniques in their resistance to the Hungarian fascist

43 ARMY MUSEUM STOCKHOLM, Rockens hemliga budskap / The secret messages of the trenchcoat, https://digitaltmuseum.se/011024446719/trenchcoat (accessed on 15 January 2024).

44 Author's image.

authorities. Magasdi was a key figure in issuing Swedish protective passports which granted their bearers temporary citizenship in neutral Sweden. The documents would be passed to their intended bearers in crowded public places hidden in a folded newspaper. Approaching the individual, Magasdi would lean forward and ask for a light, with the coat masking the documents as they were passed to their new owners.

WOMEN ONLY

> "I actually could have travelled to America. [...] It wasn't primarily about saving my own life, but I wanted to fight against fascism; I wanted to do something."
>
> Antonie Lehr [45]

Antonie Lehr (1907–1997) was actively involved in the French resistance. She worked on strategies to counter Nazi influence, including engaging German soldiers in political discussions and activities, thereby garnering interest in spreading accurate information and exposing Nazi propaganda: "Later, it became as easy to me as if I were putting on a coat. But at the beginning, it was terrifying. I thought everyone must see that I'm afraid, that my heart is pounding [...] I was covered in forms. [...] I always carried everything close to my body, and then I met a woman with these forms [...] Very often we had to go to a café to exchange material. We went to the restroom and exchanged material there. It was always women, otherwise, it wouldn't have been possible."[46]

Lehr's metaphor of donning a coat to describe how she would slip into her secret life turns this mundane act into something living and powerful. Bennett's concept of the power of things develops this idea that the coat possesses its own vitality and power, blurring the boundaries between the object and the subject. For women, involvement in the Resistance became a model of active participation, deconstructing propaganda and strengthening their resolve against the Nazi regime. Lehr avoided the fate of so many of her comrades and evaded capture during her time in the French Resistance,[47] but she took little consolation in this: "What was also so terrible during this period was isolation, that personal

45 K. BERGER et al, *Frauen im Widerstand*, p. 124.
46 K. BERGER et al, *Frauen im Widerstand*, p. 128.
47 K. BERGER et al, *Frauen im Widerstand*, p. 200.

isolation."[48] Rosi Braidotti examined the deeper layers of identity and its connection to the collective and universal, and this can perhaps prompt us to consider what shapes individuals as subjects of resistance. Antonie Lehr and her comrades demonstrate that we do not exist in isolation but as part of a constantly changing network of mutual intra-actions. Is identity shaped through cultural codes, political context or contemporary technologies? The leitmotif is the dynamics of the "constant flow of vital energy",[49] where action becomes part of the resistance to oppression. The ability of these women to influence the thinking of their enemies is an example of active resistance and shows how individual activities can merge into a larger network of resistance.

WHITE

This part of the study reveals the co-agency of women and white coats, a garment which is intrinsically connected with the idea of the provision of medical care, and which also plays a role in clarifying the intra-actions in resistance and survival activities during wartime conflicts.

"A hero is someone doing extraordinary things. What I did was not extraordinary. It was a normal thing to do. I was just being decent."[50] These reflections lead us to the story of Irena Sendler (1910–2008), a Polish Catholic social worker and nurse whose white coat gave her access to the Warsaw Ghetto. Working under the pseudonym Jolanta, Sendler played a key role amid the challenges of the Ghetto. Her story offers an insight into the significance of coats in rescuing children amidst political pressure and violence.

Working in the Warsaw Ghetto as a member of the resistance group Żegota, Sendler demonstrated adaptability and creative thinking in transporting children beyond the walls of the Warsaw Ghetto. Agents used coats to smuggle children to freedom, a means of transportation that not only reveals the ingenuity of their efforts but also the symbolic significance of the garment. Sendler recalls the story of one rescued child named Stefanek: "He told me how he hid under the coat of an adult man

48 K. BERGER et al, *Frauen im Widerstand*, p. 129.
49 R. BRAIDOTTI, *Posthumanismus*, p. 92.
50 JACK MEYER, *Life in a Jar: the Irena Sendler Project*, Middlebury 2011, p. 294.

and tucked his bare feet into the man's boots. Holding onto the man's belt, he made his way out of the ghetto."[51]

Fig. 6 Käthe Kollwitz, *The Mothers*, 1922[52]

When asked about the motivations behind her humanitarian work, Sendler quoted her father, physician Stanisław Krzyżanowski: "It is always your first duty to extend a helping hand to a person in need."[53] Sendler introduced a registration system, which recorded the details and locations of the rescued children, which became a key tool for their protection and subsequent integration into families.[54] More than a mere re-

51 ANNA MIESZKOWSKA, *Die Mutter der Holocaust-Kinder. Irena Sendler und die geretteten Kinder aus dem Warschauer Ghetto* [*The Mother of the Holocaust Children. Irena Sendler and the Children Rescued from the Warsaw Ghetto*], München 2004, p. 133.

52 Kollwitz returned to the motif of mothers defending their children in a closed circle in her famous sculpture *Tower of Mothers* (1937–8). Image: KÄTHE KOLLWITZ MUSEUM KÖLN, *The Mothers, sheet 6 of the series "War", 1921/1922*, https://www.kollwitz.de/en/sheet-6-the-mothers (accessed on 16 August 2024).

53 A. MIESZKOWSKA, *Die Mutter der Holocaust-Kinder*, p. 135.

54 A. MIESZKOWSKA, *Die Mutter der Holocaust-Kinder*.

cord, the card index became a symbol of courage and perseverance in the resistance against the Nazi regime. As a Gestapo raid in October 1943 showed, there were major risks associated with maintaining such records, but the use of a coat as a hiding place symbolized not only a practical approach but also a metaphor for security, determination, and an inviolable shield that protected lives while expressing resilience against oppression: "Janka Grabowska, whom she could always rely on, concealed [the list] under her armpit because she wore a wide morning coat [...] She put it in the pocket of my coat, which I was wearing at the time. I knew they would definitely strip-search me. Quietly, I tore the piece of paper into small pieces and discreetly threw them out of the partially open window of the moving car. It was six o'clock in the morning and dark, and the very tired Germans were almost falling asleep."[55]

Sendler endured days of torture and interrogation, but she never betrayed her fellow fighters, even when sentenced to death. She ultimately escaped captivity in February 1944 after Żegota arranged to bribe one of her guards. She reached a nearby pharmacy, where the owner, upon seeing her condition and prison clothes, asked no questions and offered her help: "I asked her for a coat (it was cold!) and money for the tram. She gave me both."[56]

The posthumanist framework provides space for reflection on the importance of mutual interconnectedness and responsibility towards exclusion and inclusion in the process of shaping meaning. The coat which the pharmacist donates to Sendler offers more than the physicality of warmth; it is an active participant in the entanglement of human history.

Herta Soswinski recalls the aftermath of a British bombing raid on an SS telephone exchange in Auschwitz, in which injured SS men were forced to seek assistance at the prison infirmary: "Polish prisoners later told us that the SS men would stop every doctor, every white coat: 'Comrade, help!' Poles laughed that SS members were asking prisoners for help."[57] The white coat, the "uniform" of the medical profession and protection, acquires new symbolic meanings within the prison environment, transcending its original purpose. It becomes not only a physical barrier and a symbol of hope but also a source of solidarity and power

55 A. MIESZKOWSKA, *Die Mutter der Holocaust-Kinder*, p. 156f.
56 A. MIESZKOWSKA, *Die Mutter der Holocaust-Kinder*, p. 166.
57 K. BERGER et al, *Frauen im Widerstand*, p. 243.

in the inverted situation, in which the captors implore their prisoners for help.

Margit Czernetz: "For security reasons, I was advised to come to the hospital [Rothschild-Spital] dressed as a nurse. And it was good because otherwise, I wouldn't have made it to the hospital alive. People felt that a nurse shouldn't be attacked."[58]

Ivan Leftkovits' mother: "And my mother was extremely surprised that the wife of a doctor who has access to any medication would come to the pharmacy for a box of aspirin. But she said, 'Mrs. Lefkovitsová, leave immediately [...], the Gestapo will come in a while, a few minutes.' Then my mother went to the back, hung up her white coat, and said, 'I'll be back in a moment.' [...] The Gestapo were just entering the door, and she went out, and she heard, 'We're looking for Mrs. Lefkovitsová.'"[59]

Here too, coats become entangled with the themes of personal security and power structures, generating their own meanings and revealing the dynamics of subject delineation in the context of resistance. The concept of responsibility and intra-active entanglements allows us to analyse how power structures shape individual and collective responses to aberrant situations such as torture being carried out in a hospital or individuals being subject to arrest while serving the sick in a pharmacy. The stories from Rothschild-Spital, the pharmacy, and the concentration camp show that the white coat is not just a practical garment but also an object that can project power, courage and hope in a hostile environment.

BLACK

In contrast to the white coat of the nurse, black leather coats are inevitably associated with threats, discomfort and trauma, more specifically as represented in cultural depictions of the secret police forces of the repressive regimes of 20th century Europe, such as the Gestapo, NKVD, the Stasi, or the ŠtB (Štátna bezpečnosť, the Czechoslovak State Security).

58 *Margit Czernetz: Eine katastrophale Nacht*, https://www.doew.at/erinnern/biographien/erzaehlte-geschichte/anschluss-maerz-april-1938/margit-czernetz-eine-katastrophale-nacht#krankenschwesterntracht (accessed on 2 September 2023).

59 *Ivan Lefkovits (1937)*, https://www.upn.gov.sk/sk/ivan-lefkovits-1937/ (accessed on 4 February 2024).

Fig. 7 Katarína Balúnová, *Coat*, 2024

Jarmila Rychlíková: "Men in leather coats stood at the door and asked about my brother. That night they arrested and took him away; he returned home ten years later..."[60]

Marie Tobolková: "Men in leather coats came. They didn't lay a hand on us, but they were terribly cruel."[61]

Iva Bejčková: "To this day, I have an aversion to leather coats. 'Don't worry! I haven't done anything, and I'll be back soon.' These were the

60 HANA LANGOVÁ, *Jarmila Rychlíková (*1938)*, https://www.pametnaroda.cz/cs/rychlikova-jarmila-20220830 (accessed on 5 August 2023).

61 MAGDALÉNA SADRAVETZOVÁ, *Marie Tobolková (*1940)*, https://www.pametnaroda.cz/cs/tobolkova-marie-20220616-0 (accessed on 5 January 2024).

last words Bohuslav Kořínek reportedly said to his family when, around five in the morning on November 30th, 1953, two men from the State Security entered their house in long leather coats."[62]

Amalija Blajs: "I was completely on edge at the beginning. I felt constantly persecuted. When I saw a guard in uniform, I immediately lost my nerve. I can't stand uniforms."[63]

Lotte S.: "All of us prisoners were taken to the so-called infirmary, and many died very quickly. Later, we found out that they were also being murdered. There was a nurse in black, Vera Salvequart. She was very kind and very nice; from her, the sick received a white powder. It was Luminal, I learned after the war. Many people were killed with it every day. Vera led me around the barracks, which was actually a place of extermination. I saw how the women there were suffering miserably. 'Vera', I said, 'how could you? Don't do this, Vera, how could you do that?' She then explained to me, 'Well, what am I supposed to do? I was chosen by the SS because the sick people refuse to accept injections or the white powder from them, from the SS. So that's what I do.' Since that day, I couldn't talk to her, I kept my distance."[64]

These testimonies of political repression show the political significance that the coat acquires within the context of systemic oppression. The embodiment of the coat penetrates to a psychological level, embodying the totalitarian regime and its oppressive apparatus. However, the associations that the garments evoke are by no means the same uniform; while many of the women share Blajs's traumatic response to military uniforms, the presence of the nurse in Lotte S.'s account suggests a kind of moral inversion, in which the care which she offers the sick is in fact their death. The shocking nature and variation of these testimonies underscores the need to record and collect a wide range of perspectives in order to broaden the collective memory and reveal a more nuanced historical understanding.

62 ROSTISLAV ŠÍMA, *Iva Bejčková (*1947)*, https://www.pametnaroda.cz/cs/bejckova-iva-20200819-0 (accessed on 5 January 2024).
63 K. BERGER et al, *Frauen im Widerstand*, p. 32.
64 K. BERGER et al, *Frauen im Widerstand*, p. 233.

> "We are all humans, but some of us are just more mortal than others."
> Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman*[65]

In her work *Post-Humanism: Life beyond the Self* (2013), Braidotti criticizes humanistic concepts of humanity and their Eurocentric paradigm, the binary which divides identity and alterity and introduces subjectivity as consciousness and moral self-determination; she argues that alterity is often marginalized and reduced to a useless body stripped of human status. The history of the Others which are encompassed by the concept of alterity is often a story of exclusion, and therefore questions of power and exclusion arise. Braidotti calls for a more ethical approach to the humanistic legacy; citing Tony Davies's dictum that "all Humanisms, until now, have been imperial,"[66] she emphasizes the need for a more inclusive understanding of human experience which includes all people regardless of their social status. The anxiety experienced by women during the Nazi and Communist regimes, when black coats arrived to take them to prisons or concentration camps, heightened their sense of isolation and uncertainty, engendering a sense of insecurity, in which they felt less human and less protected. Braidotti emphasizes the need for new posthumanist forms of thinking that recognize the diversity of subjectivity, transcend the boundaries of humanism and acknowledge the mutual dependence between people, technology, and the environment while opposing anthropocentrism and Eurocentrism.

THE DEHUMANIZING ACT

Maria Ehmer: "Do you know why you're here? No one has explained it to me yet. Smack! I got a slap. They took off my coat and wanted to know everything possible. But I knew nothing."[67] Women who endured the dehumanization perpetrated by the Nazi regime emphasize the loss of freedom, rights, and dignity, to which they were subjected, crucial elements of identity and subjectivity.

65 ROSI BRAIDOTTI, *The Posthuman*, Cambridge 2013, p. 15.
66 TONY DAVIES, *Humanism*, London 1997, p. 141; cited in R. BRAIDOTTI, *The Posthuman*.
67 K. BERGER et al, *Frauen im Widerstand*, p. 171f.

Fig. 8[68]

Feminist antihumanism rejects universal identifications based on the normative ideal of humanity in favour of diversity and internal contradictions of subjectivity. The political economy of difference weakens entire groups of people and portrays them as worthless *Others*, creating a hierarchical normative subject and enabling inequality and dehumanization:

Maria Bures

"Suddenly, the door opens, perhaps it was the boss, he asks, well, what will you say? Damn, she isn't talking. I thought to myself, ah, it's okay now, I won't say anything at all. I was then sentenced to four years in a correctional facility and six years of loss of honour [which] means that if I ever really come to freedom, anyone can beat me, anyone can take my money, can take my food, anyone can do whatever they want with me. I have no rights over myself."[69]

The experiences of Ehmer and Bures and others highlight the capacity of structures and hierarchies to subjugate and degrade an indi-

68 Author's image.
69 K. BERGER et al, *Frauen im Widerstand*, pp. 50, 317.

vidual. Critical posthumanism rejects the idea of "man as the measure of all things," a formulation which is common to all forms of humanism that are not reducible to linear narratives: "The romantic and positivistic Humanisms, through which the European bourgeoisies established their hegemonies over (modernity), the revolutionary Humanism that shook the world and the liberal Humanism that sought to tame it, the Humanism of the Nazis and the Humanisms of their victims and opponents, the antihumanist Humanism of Heidegger."[70] Historically, ethically, and politically, there is a need to explore this concept "in the light of its history of unfulfilled promises and unacknowledged brutality."[71] Posthuman subjectivity is materialistic, vitalistic and rooted in space and time. Bures's experience with the coat expresses a rejection of dehumanization and shows the resilience of unexpected sources of power in difficult times. Even in conditions of freedom, the act of wearing a coat shows a determination to seek new forms of subjectivity beyond conventional boundaries and normative structures.

FALL

Fig. 9[72]

70 T. DAVIES, *Humanism*, p. 141.
71 T. DAVIES, *Humanism*, p. 51.
72 Author's image.

Partisan movements relied heavily on women in their activities on various fronts. Women gathered intelligence and secured supplies, while those working in offices, who were privy to information about forthcoming Gestapo and SS raids, could provide advance warning to partisans. Yugoslav resistance organizations such as the Women's Antifascist Front (AFŽ) or the National Liberation Front (NOF) attracted more activists to resistance and involved them in political life:[73] "While in custody, I wanted to commit suicide, I thought to myself: Suicide is the best thing for me because I won't be able to hide everything. [...] I studied, studied. One day I took the belt from the coat and put it on the door handle – it was an old handle, an old one - I put the belt from the coat on this door handle and around my neck. I jumped and pulled the belt, but the buckle broke and wham!, I fell to the ground. My belt broke too."[74]

Ultimately, the partisan Helena Kuchar-Jelka (1906–1985) survived through her unyielding conviction and will, but her suicide attempt can be seen as an ethical statement on suffering and the search for maintaining one's identity in difficult times, illuminating the challenge of navigating uncertainty and transforming pain into a threshold of sustainability. One crucial approach to such challenging situations is to emphasize empathy towards other forces and acknowledge the complexity of life. Braidotti notes that life is constantly evolving and moving from individualization to diversity, with even death forming an inseparable part of this dynamic process. This approach allows us to perceive life as a continuous landscape of change, in which death is more of a condition than an obstacle. An awareness of our proximity to death requires constant vigilance and serves as an ethical way of coming to terms with the essentially provisional nature of our existence.[75]

73 DIJANA SIMIĆ, *Erinnern an die Antifaschistische Frauenfront* [*Remembering the Antifascist Women's Front*], https://fernetzt.univie.ac.at/20191015-2/ (accessed on 2 February 2024).

74 K. BERGER et al, *Frauen im Widerstand*, p. 113.

75 R. BRAIDOTTI, *Posthumanismus*, p. 135.

UNYIELDING

"Not to fight means not to live"
Mali Fritz[76]

Fig. 10[77]

Mali Fritz (1912) came from a poor background in Vienna, but she received a good education and worked in the archive of the Information Office of the Spanish Republic in France. After 1940, she dedicated herself to helping refugees from France and in May 1942, she was imprisoned and spent time in Auschwitz and Ravensbrück. Together with Hermine Jursa, she returned to Vienna on foot, a journey which took her six weeks: "Although it may seem completely insignificant, when everything is falling apart, when it seems that everything is lost, you must persevere, continue. [...] But then, there are often small things, it seems, seemingly insignificant things that have an unprecedented impact. [...] Another form of support was when another inmate handed me her coat. It was a thin coat, but I didn't have any, and it was during the Stalingrad winter. When she was released, she managed to do it quickly."[78]

76 K. BERGER et al, *Frauen im Widerstand*, p. 198.
77 K. BERGER et al, *Frauen im Widerstand*, p. 154.
78 K. BERGER et al, *Frauen im Widerstand*, p. 158.

Anna Wundsmann: "I've already finished with life. I never believed I'd be free one day. Others were much more optimistic. A friend organized something for my clothes; otherwise, I would have been almost naked. 'I'll give you a coat,' she said, 'so you can wear it when you're free again.' I looked at her: 'Is she living on the Moon? Wearing a coat when you're free! That was the wildest optimism you could imagine."[79]

In Wundsmann's case, the coat is not merely a passive object but embodies the possibility of freedom and individual expression even in extreme circumstances. For a subject facing dehumanization and despair, the offer of a coat as a symbol of freedom expresses solidarity and support, enabling the overcoming of existential limitations and transcending normative boundaries. This process of intra-action transcends individual and collective identities and is perceived as an active expression of resistance against oppressive structures and hierarchical norms that dehumanize individuals.

Fig. 11[80]

79 K. BERGER et al, *Frauen im Widerstand*, p. 5.
80 Author's image.

Hermine Jursa (1912–2000) joined the Communist Youth League (KJV) in 1936 and actively disseminated illegal educational materials. Imprisoned in August 1939, she spent the entire war in captivity, including time in Ravensbrück:[81] "You know how bitter it is when you are in prison, you don't receive any mail, and others occasionally get some cards [...] And you get nothing. That's the hardest thing in such a situation. For me, comradeship solidarity was everything. My friends were my sisters."[82]

Hermine Jursa, Mali Fritz and the countless thousands of others who shared the same fate (or worse) evince a resistance subjectivity which individuals form to protect themselves and others from the dehumanizing conditions imposed upon them, thereby rejecting oppressive power structures. The ability of these women to organize and express solidarity shows that collective action can succeed. Real resistance is not simply a case of rejecting existing conditions but also of transforming negative experiences into sources of healing and understanding. This confirms the core of Braidotti's post-humanistic ethics, which seeks alternative forms of confronting evil and trauma.[83] Life is a continuum that persists even after death, and it is essential to harness the generative forces of life even in extreme situations.

"auschwitz ist mein mantel
du hast angst vor der finsternis?
ich sage dir, wo der weg menschenleer ist,
brauchst du dich nicht zu fürchten.
ich habe keine angst.
meine angst ist in auschwitz geblieben
und in den lagern.
auschwitz ist mein mantel,
bergen-belsen mein kleid
und ravensbrück mein unterhemd.
wovor soll ich mich fürchten?"

Ceija Stojka[84]

81 *Hermine Nierlich-Jursa*, https://www.wegenachravensbrueck.net/current/en/nierlich/1.html (accessed on 2 February 2024).

82 K. BERGER et al, *Frauen im Widerstand*, p. 53.

83 R. BRAIDOTTI, *Posthumanismus*, p. 135.

84 CEIJA STOJKA, *Auschwitz ist mein Mantel* [*Auschwitz is My Coat*], https://www.doew.at/neues/archiv-2013/ceija-stojka-1933-2013#ceija%20stojka (accessed on 6 January 2024).

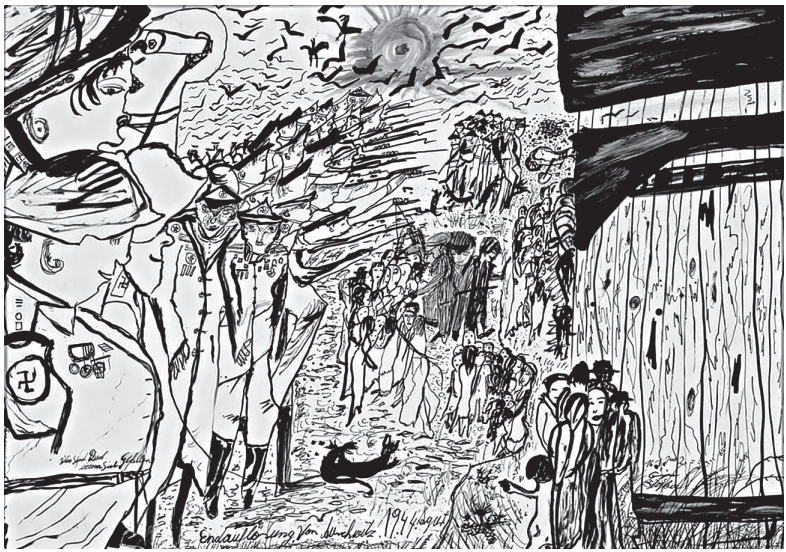

Fig. 12 Ceija Stojka, *Final Liquidation of Auschwitz*, 2011[85]

A survivor of Auschwitz, Ravensbrück and Bergen-Belsen, Ceija Stojka (1933–2013) was among the first Austrian Roma women to shed light on the Romani Holocaust perpetrated by Nazi Germany. She reflected on her experiences in her art and also through her autobiography, *Aus dem Leben einer Rom-Zigeunerin* (1992).

In the poem *Auschwitz ist mein Mantel* (2008), Ceija Stojka reveals the trauma and resistance suffered under the Nazi regime. The camps are not just places of horror; they are an intrinsic part of her identity. She metaphorically describes these places as parts of her personal clothing (Auschwitz: "my coat", Bergen-Belsen: "my dress", and Ravensbrück: "my undershirt"), transforming her experiences into something which is intimate, yet fundamental. The poem thus opens the potential for alternative visions, allowing the exploration of new forms of self-assessment and survival. Stojka transforms the experiences of the Holocaust into something that transcends expressions of suffering and calls for the creation of other possibilities of resilience and survival through the *materialism of life*. Perhaps we should consider Ceija Stojka's plea of *What*

[85] Image © Ceija Stojka, Wien Museum, Photo: Birgit und Peter Kainz, Museum.

should I be afraid of? in a more affirmative light; death can be seen as a generative aspect of existence, behind which lies a strong woman who refuses to accept the role of a victim which has been imposed upon her.

UNDER THE GUISE OF EQUALITY

Fig. 13[86]

Ester Tencer (1909–1990) was born into a rabbinical family in Galicia but moved to Vienna in 1914. She was actively engaged in illegal communist activities from 1934 to 1938 before fleeing to Belgium where she joined anti-Nazi efforts. Arrested in March 1943 and deported to Auschwitz, she was later imprisoned in Ravensbrück and evacuated to Sweden in April 1945. Upon returning to Vienna, she volunteered at the Documentation Archive of Austrian Resistance (DÖW):[87] "In the first days, they put a prostitute in my cell. However, we already knew that in case of arrest, we do not confess and do not speak to those who are put into the cell with us. I had a winter coat on, it was March, and at

86 Photo: Estera Friedel, State Archives, Brussels, via the Documentation Centre of Austrian Resistance.

87 *Ester Tencer: Man kann sich das gar nicht vorstellen.*

the headquarters, I was severely beaten [...]. When I arrived in prison, I didn't want to undress, so I sat there, and there was the prostitute asking me. 'Why are you here? You don't look like a street girl at all.' I replied: 'But I am.'"[88]

Tencer's experience reveals the dynamics of survival in the prison environment, in which the ability to resist relies on adaptation and the protection of one's own identity under extreme conditions. The significance of the coat as a protective shield and personal boundary reflects the processes of identity and power dynamics. Her mutual intra-action with another prisoner demonstrates how the coat co-constructs subjectivity – an experience shaped not only by individual factors but also by social and cultural norms. Tencer challenges binary norms by forging a connection with the shared experience of a street girl, a subversive act within the context of Nazi imprisonment. The use of formal language by the fellow prisoner may be seen as an effort to maintain personal dignity and autonomy through the subversion of normative expectations.

LITTLE RED RIDING HOOD

> "What big teeth you have! [...] The girl burst out laughing; she knew she was nobody's meat. She laughed at him full in the face, she ripped off his shirt for him and flung it into the fire, in the fiery wake of her own discarded clothing."
>
> Angela Carter, *The Company of Wolves*

Anna and Eliška Uherková (1927–2002; 1923–2012) were involved in political activities in postwar Czechoslovakia as unofficial members of the Slovak anti-communist group the White Legion. They opposed the communist regime by cooperating with the US Counterintelligence Corps (CIC), organizing escapes and obtaining information about aviation fuel. The sisters saved the lives of at least six people,[89] but the naïve nature of their actions quickly attracted the attention of the authorities,

88 *Ester Tencer: Man kann sich das gar nicht vorstellen.*

89 Ústav Pamäti Národa, Bratislava, f. 385, ŠtB Praha, Zápis z 13.8.1953 podpísaný č. a-s 60-taj.-1953, mjr. Kralka, v-z.kpt. Lohner.

Fig. 14 Anna Uherková (above), with her sister Eliška and friends[90]

and both were convicted of espionage. Anna received a life sentence and Eliška 22 years, although these sentences were later reduced. Anna had been detained in April 1949 in an ŠtB sting operation, in which she was sent abroad with a typewriter and other documents by an undercover agent named Fialka. After being detained at the border, she found herself in an uncomfortable situation while under interrogation by an ŠtB

90 Family Archives, ca. 1943; see also ZUZANA KRIŽALKOVIČOVÁ, *Československo-rakúske kuriérske a spravodajské záležitosti 1948–1960. Protištátny prípad Eliška* [*Czechoslovak-Austrian Intelligence Services 1948–1960. The Antistate Case of Eliška*], in: Politický exil zo Slovenska po februári 1948 v československom a východoeurópskom kontexte Studenej vojny, (ed.) Marek Syrný, Turany 2021, pp. 285–299.

agent Dietrich[91] who: "[...] covered the window, took off his coat [and] started harassing me again. Then the light went out [...] and he ordered me to kiss him. At that point, I started running around the room, and Dietrich chased me [...] I went to turn on the light. [...] I note that I did not call for help during this, because I was amused by Dietrich's behaviour, and I was glad that I had led him into such a situation."[92]

Anna does not call for help; she courageously devises her own strategy, using her own agency to reject the role of victim, demonstrating strength and resilience against violence. The agent takes the coat off and loses his agency and authority, debasing himself in front of his victim. Does the act of shedding the coat also entail a stripping away of his identity as an agent? Does it reveal his true essence, a consciousness of the termination of the power he once wielded? Or does it signify a liberation from his former identity, a quest for renewal? The agent's disrobing and Anna's resistance may be construed as manifestations of individual freedom and autonomy, transcending protracted control and manipulation.

THE LIGHTNESS OF BEING

A series of currency reforms introduced by the Czechoslovak Government on June 1, 1953, were met with strikes and demonstrations by many workers, with the largest unrest occurring in Plzeň. Jana Němečková (1936–2022), a student nurse, and her classmates joined the procession of Škoda factory workers who were protesting in the main square. During the protest, she and her classmates were sprayed by water cannons, but Jana was wearing a coat and was not left soaked like the others.

Upon returning home, she and her classmates were detained under suspicion of participating in the demonstration, but Jana was not interrogated, which led her classmates to suspect that she had informed upon them. Subsequently, a stranger stopped her at the station and showed her a newspaper photograph of her placing flowers at a memorial, in which she was wearing the leather coat; he warned her not to wear it again: "We arrived at the square. Because I was in the front, the crowd [of people] pushed me back behind the town hall [...] And there were

91 The agent is also named in the official report; Ústav Pamäti Národa, Bratislava, 455/75, 19.8.1953, *Secret - Urgent!*

92 Ústav Pamäti Národa, Bratislava, f. 385, 22.

already water cannons. They sprayed me from about two metres away. I was wearing a nurse's uniform with a leather coat over it. They poured water on me from hoses from two meters away, it was a terrible stream. [...] The girls were then interrogated in various ways, but nobody asked me, nobody called me for interrogation. The girls came from internships to school, and they locked them up there so they couldn't leave. And the girls were jumping out of the window. [...] Everyone was interrogated, but still nobody questioned me. It seemed to me that the girls were thinking that I had betrayed them. [...] Then I went around the city, still wearing the same coat. At the station, a gentleman stopped me, showed me a photo of me laying flowers at the Masaryk memorial and he said, 'Don't wear this coat anymore!' I don't know who he was, some kind soul. So, I came out of it, and they expelled the other girls from school. That really disappointed me."[93]

The coat as an expression of individual identity and resistance to authority is confirmed once again in Němečková's protest against the communist regime. As we shall see in the case of Anna Kuheilová, newspaper photos allowed her to visually identify and inform on a freedom fighter with negative consequences; in Němečková's case, however, the image in the newspaper served as a means of protection, the sense of identification among citizens, and a warning against the risk of reprisals from the regime and its repressive security authorities.

TURNCOATS

The term *turncoat* is always used in a pejorative sense, indicating those who betray their own comrades by shifting their allegiance from one side to another; the phrase comes from the practice of soldiers in the past who would turn their coats inside out to hide the colours of their real uniform. This type of betrayal often occurs in social, political, or historical contexts, where the perception of actions can be manipulated. The change in identity or image can be understood as a form of rebranding the past, affecting not only the perception of the individual but also the collective memory of the community. Psychological flexibility, allowing an adaptation and changes in roles and beliefs in line with the

93 EVA PALIVODOVÁ, *Jana Němečková (1936–2022)*, 2016, https://www.pametnaroda.cz/cs/nemeckova-jana-1936 (accessed 3 February 2024).

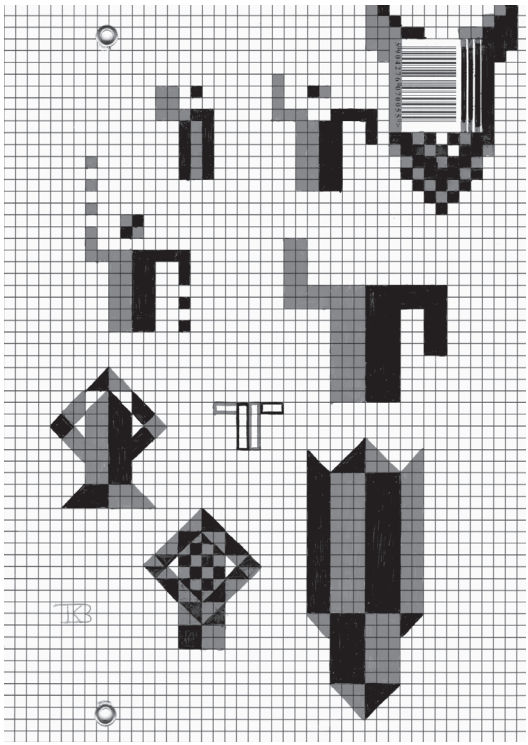

Fig. 15 Ka Te Blažová, *Turncoats*, 2024

current circumstances, is also apparent in the cases of Anna Kuheilová (1912–1945) and Marie Rittichová (1923–1945). Kuheilová became an informer during the Nazi reprisals after the assassination of Reinhard Heydrich. She reported Jaroslav Benda to the Gestapo after recognizing his coat in a newspaper photo; Benda was subsequently arrested and executed together with Maria Krausová. Kuheilová received a reward for informing but she claimed to have donated it to the German Red Cross.

Marie Richterová worked for the Gestapo as an interpreter and was an active participant in anti-partisan operations although she later claimed to have been acting as a double agent for anti-Nazi groups: "Many witnesses described how, in a leather coat and with a pistol in hand, she helped arrest and question patriots involved in resistance. The Porčový brothers, the miller's sons who both perished in a concentration camp, clearly remembered that during the raid on their mill, Richterová

Fig. 16 Anna Kutheilová before the Extraordinary People's Court, České Budějovice 1945[94]

not only had a pistol but was also holding a typical German hand grenade in her other hand."[95]

Both women were convicted and executed. Their stories reflect how changes in identity can ensure preservation of an individual's interests; also apparent is the willingness of some to resort to denunciation for selfish reasons, a decision which many can feel forced to make in wartime. Reprisals against former German collaborators were widespread in postwar Czechoslovakia; while there were significant regional differences in how the reprisals were implemented, they were generally marked by high numbers of executions. These events open discussions about the ethics of self-identification, the responsibility to history and society but also the issues of power and guilt. In contemporary society, it is important to analyse how this phenomenon of the turncoat manifests itself in globalized

94 Jihočeské muzeum v Českých Budějovicích, S 1 199.

95 IVO PEJČOCH, JIŘÍ PLACHÝ, *Ženy na popravišti: Tresty smrti vykonané v Československu na ženách v rámci retribučního soudnictví v letech 1945–1948* [*Women on the Gallows: Women Executed in Czechoslovakia As Part of Retributive Justice 1945–1948*], Cheb 2006, pp. 152–155.

conflicts and military strategies, where the wearing of other coats can become an important tool for masking true intentions and carrying out violence under the pretext of providing humanitarian aid or protection.

Conclusion

> "There are no solutions; there is only the ongoing practice of being open and alive to each meeting, each intra-action, so that we might use our ability to respond, our responsibility, to help awaken, to breathe life into ever new possibilities for living justly. The world and its possibilities for becoming are remade in each meeting."
> Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway* [96]

In examining the narratives of individuals entangled within the oppressive structures of totalitarian regimes, this study reveals the profound interplay between material objects and human identity within posthumanist thought. By exploring the symbolic and practical significance of the coat, we uncover how objects not only reflect but actively contribute to shaping human experiences and strategies of resistance. The coats emerge as sites of agency, embodying the possibility of freedom, individual expression, and solidarity in the face of dehumanization and despair. They transcend their materiality to become dynamic participants in the entanglement of personal safety and power structures, challenging hierarchical norms that seek to dehumanize individuals. This perspective reconfigures our understanding of resistance, emphasizing how non-human entities are co-agents and co-creators of lived realities, contributing to the formation and enactment of political agency. As Braidotti suggests, "We need to learn to think of ourselves differently [...] critically and creatively about who or what we actually are in the process of becoming."[97] This insight can perhaps encourage us to recognize the fluidity and multiplicity of identity, advocating for a reconsideration of how material objects and human subjects co-evolve. In the context of globalized conflicts and military strategies, the phenomenon of the turncoat underscores the complexity of identity and intention. The strategic use of disguise and symbolic objects in contemporary warfare reflects deeper ethical considerations related to self-representation, historical re-

96 K. BARAD, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, Preface.
97 R. BRAIDOTTI, *Posthumanismus*, Preface.

sponsibility, and the dynamics of power and guilt. Ultimately, this study advocates for a nuanced appreciation of the interdependence between humans and objects, highlighting the importance of recognizing material agency in the broader discourse of resistance and identity formation. Through this perspective, we can better understand the multifaceted nature of political conflict and the innovative ways in which individuals and communities navigate and resist systemic oppression.[98]

98 With heartfelt gratitude, I extend my immense appreciation to Gavin Cowper for his meticulous proofreading and creative collaboration. My sincere thanks are due to Petr Wohlmuth from Charles University for providing me with the opportunity to contribute to this publication. Additionally, I am grateful to Ingrid Kolozsiová for providing the family photographs; to Karin Berger; to Michael Achenbach and Ursula Schwarz from the Documentation Centre of Austrian Resistance; to Olivier Antoine from the State Archives in Brussels; to Christoph Etzlsdorfer and Marcus Weber-Eberhardt from the Austrian Film Museum; to Christian Nitz from the Käthe Kollwitz Museum in Cologne, to Jiří Petráš from the South Bohemian Museum and to Helmut Selzer from the Wien Museum for their assistance with photos. I am deeply grateful to my friends, Katarína Balúnová and Ka Te Blažová, and I would like to thank them for creating the illustrations for this study, and to Aglika Trethan for the spontaneous trip to Stockholm. To Jiří Sýkora of the Visegrad Funds, I express my gratitude for inspiring my participation in this research endeavour. Finally, I would like to thank all the serendipitous encounters that have enriched this research journey.