
Introduction

MARY VINCENT

‘Certain things go inevitably with war and are war. The main thing is fighting, winning, killing and being killed, being masculine and aggressive and abnormally vigorous, violent and physical.’¹

The experience of total war dominated the history of Europe in the first half of the twentieth century. Not only did the First World War inaugurate a new era in warfare, but its memory, commemoration and image was also incorporated in a profound sense into the culture of the interwar period.² Combatants’ memories and cinematic images contributed to keeping the war ever-present, as much in the pacifist desires of those who abhorred it as in the militarist ambitions of those intoxicated by it. The spirit of the trenches was to be reborn in the new fascist man of the 1920s and 1930s.³ As the opening quotation suggests, soldiering was the quintessential masculine experience. Military service – repackaged as national service during peacetime – was a school for forging men from callow boys, a cultural supposition which spanned the political divides of left and right, democracies and dictatorships. The experience of war restated and exaggerated conventional expectations of men and women. Indeed, for some theorists, war in the twentieth century was men’s equivalent to women’s experience of child-bearing.⁴ The front was an heroic, male arena, explicitly contrasted to the home front where women, children

¹ Anonymous comment by a member of Britain’s Mass Observation team, April 1940. Cited in José Harris, ‘War and Social History: Britain and the Home Front during the Second World War’, *Contemporary European History*, Vol. 1, no. 1 (1992), 17–35 at 35.

² While it is not the focus of any of the articles in the current issue, commemoration has become hugely important in the historiography of war. Much stems from the classic study completed under the direction of Pierre Nora, *Les lieux de memoire*, 3 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1984–1992). See, e.g., Annette Becker, *Les monuments aux morts, Mémoire de la Grande Guerre* (Paris: Errance, n.d. but 1988), Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), and Daniel J. Sherman, ‘Monuments, Mourning and Masculinity in France after World War I’, *Gender and History*, Vol. 8 (1996), 82–107.

³ George L. Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990) and *The Image of Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

⁴ Nancy Huston, ‘The Matrix of War: Mothers and Heroes’, in Susan Rubin Suleiman, ed., *The Female Body in Western Culture* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1986), 119–36. See also the article by Luc Capdevila below.

and those 'unmanned' by age or injury provided support and succour for the soldiers.⁵

If war is, as contemporary opinion throughout this period had it, a masculine phenomenon, then its opposite, peace, must be feminine. The association between women and pacifism was maintained throughout the twentieth century by certain feminist voices. From the Congress of Paris to Greenham Common, various women's groups have claimed a particular affinity with the cause of peace. Such a claim may be based either on an ideological assumption that, as nurturers, women have no appetite for violence or, as in the example Jo Vellacott uses below, it may rest on an essentially humanitarian response to the dislocation and suffering caused by war. Women featured less heavily in the lists of war dead between 1914 and 1918, but they led the ranks of the bereaved.

The main purpose of war lies in fighting, yet, until recently, the experiences of men at the front had attracted relatively little attention from historians. Battles and strategy were the preserve of military historians and, while institutional studies of armies might also attract the attention of political historians, the actual experience of the fighting man remained curiously invisible. Only when historians began to look in the trenches for men, the inhabitants of sexed bodies, rather than numerical cannon-fodder, did the battlefield become a main site of historical enquiry.⁶ Until then, the preoccupations of social historians, in particular, lay with the home front rather than the front and with women rather than with men.

It is quite clear that the path of patriotic duty appealed to more women than did that of pacifism. Just as conscription made soldiering the norm for generations of young men, so war work brought women into the labour force as never before. Both phenomena changed accepted ideas of citizenship, effectively demolishing elite liberal notions of the citizenry. As the opening article by Barton Hacker and Margaret Viner demonstrates, mobilising nations for a new kind of warfare depended on the associations and traditions of voluntarism which had built up over the previous decades. Yet, if all men could fight for their country and all women work for it, how could they then be excluded from the franchise? With the notable exception of France, the franchise widened throughout both western and eastern Europe in the wake of the First World War.

As the first two articles in this issue suggest, ideas of citizenship were crucial both to women's war work and to women's political lobbying. Patriotic service demonstrated not only that women had civic duties and responsibilities but also that they would carry them out. Women had rights, and would exercise these in all

⁵ Margaret Randolph Higgonet, Jane Jenson, Sonya Rose and Margaret Collins Weitz, eds., *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987). The concept of the home front was, of course, not a static one. Margaret Darrow, 'French Volunteer Nursing and the Myth of War Experience in World War I', *American Historical Review*, Vol. 101 (1996), 80–106, comments on the French use of the term 'the rear (*arrière*)', arguing that the war was to occur 'in a zone of pure masculinity', as French men expiated the defeat of 1870.

⁶ Mosse, *Image of Man*; Joanna Bourke, *An Intimate History of Killing: Face-to-face Killing in the Twentieth Century* (London: Granta, 1999); Mary Vincent, 'The Martyrs and the Saints: Masculinity and the Construction of the Francoist Crusade', *History Workshop Journal*, no. 47 (1999), 69–98.

spheres of political life, even, as Vellacott shows, in the elite world of international statesmen. Whether they used the language of equality or of difference, many of these activists were clear that they were acting both as individuals and as women. Debates over citizenship – which escalated and were in some ways even resolved in wartime – used gender as a category: men were conscripted because of their sex, not simply because of their anatomy but because of the cultural understanding that reserved to them the right to bear arms. Theirs was the stronger sex, with a scientifically mapped musculature and a Darwinist fighting instinct.

The use of gender as a category was reinforced in law codes – notably those modelled on the Napoleonic – scientific treatises and moral literature. Such discourses both reflected and influenced contemporary understandings of gender, but precisely how these ideological constructs interacted with individuals' lived experience is far harder to evaluate. Much of the classic historiography of women in wartime has itself used the notion of a sex as a category, just as wartime legislators and social commentators did, assuming a common wartime experience for women, one which centred on providing for families in times of scarcity but which also commonly included work outside the home. The experience of women then became a symbol not only of women's increasing emancipation but also of social progress and even, in the case of the Second World War, social democracy.⁷

Yet an important focus of much recent work is the diversity of individual experience under wartime conditions. In the familiar territory of women's work, oral histories of societies at war have opened up a far more fragmented past experience than the narrative of social progress might suggest.⁸ At least in the short term, war may have reinforced rather than subverted accepted gender roles: mobilisation rearranged women's employment patterns but did not restructure them. Even under avowedly socially progressive regimes, the mobilisation of women in wartime was commonly seen as an emergency response to an emergency situation.⁹

The dangers posed to the nation during wartime are not, of course, purely external. Patriotism demanded an almost total identification with the nation, its cause understood in either ideological or communal terms. While the language of patriotic service appeared to subsume previous distinctions of class or ethnicity, it also created the notion of the infiltrator or 'fifth columnist', those whose loyalty to the nation was uncertain and questionable. These did not have to be traitors, simply those who imperilled the nation by frivolity, carelessness or a lack of patriotic commitment. Given the disconcerting change in social mores which occurred in

⁷ Arthur Marwick, *Women at War, 1914–1918* (London: Fontana in association with the Imperial War Museum, 1977) and his *War and Social Change in the Twentieth Century* (London: Macmillan, 1974); James F. McMillan, *Housewife or Harlot: the Place of Women in French Society, 1870–1940* (Brighton: Harvester, 1981), Harris, 'War and Social History'.

⁸ Penny Summerfield, *Women Workers in the Second World War: Productivity and Patriarchy in Conflict* (London: Croom Helm, 1984) and, with Gail Braybon, *Out of the Cage: Women's Experiences in Two World Wars* (London and New York: Pandora, 1987).

⁹ Mary Nash, *Defying Male Civilisation: Women in the Spanish Civil War* (Denver, CO: Arden Press, 1995); Summerfield, *Women Workers in the Second World War*.

wartime, the sexual standards of young women were a common cause for concern.¹⁰ The well-documented reinstatement of conventional gender ideologies on the cessation of hostilities was thus not simply the result of war-weariness, although this may help to explain women's keenness to leave the workplace.¹¹ The return of a 'natural' order symbolised the end of the dislocations and anxieties of imperilled communities and represented a secure future when, as after 1945, the prewar system was not only unattainable but also undesirable.

The concern to reconstruct gender in peacetime stems from the gendered uncertainties imposed by war. Rosie the Riveter may have been a progressive icon of patriotic womanhood, but she sat alongside cartoon images which lampooned women's supposed assumption of masculinity by, for example, depicting lacy underwear escaping from the confines of military uniform.¹² Young women in uniform inevitably challenged conventional masculinity, both in their social position and their utilitarian dress. Even in wartime, women had a duty – and often a desire – to be decorative. Glamorous images, often advertisements, were part of life at the home front, whether they appeared in British austerity publications or the Falangist women's magazines of Francoist Spain. Consumption was part of the ordinary life, still represented, albeit often precariously, by the home front. Yet, every aspect of everyday life was affected by the experience of total war. During the Second World War, bereavement and destruction, shortage and privation meant domestic ingenuity, ration coupons and queuing in Britain and mainland western Europe, displacement, starvation and disease in the devastated areas of occupied eastern Europe.

In a popular mythology undoubtedly coloured by victory, the British home front has assumed iconic status, immortalised as a time of common endeavour against overwhelming odds.¹³ Characterised by the 'Dunkirk spirit', this home front has a nostalgic quality, not least because of the sense of 'pulling through'. But the inescapable fact of war is its violence. The bombing of civilians during the Spanish Civil War blurred the distinction between the battle front and the home front, just as it did to a far greater extent during the Second World War. Despite its political importance, not least to the radical right, combatant status was similarly blurred. Not all men had fought at the front and, of those who had, not all had served with distinction or honour. Uniforms were worn by all, their sartorial lexicon for women signifying service rather than soldiering.¹⁴ Some women, principally nurses, had

¹⁰ Sonya O. Rose, 'Sex, Citizenship and the Nation in World War II Britain', *American Historical Review*, Vol. 103 (1998), 1147–1176; Angela Woollacott, "'Khaki Fever' and its Control: Gender, Class, Age and Sexual Morality on the British Homefront in the First World War', *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 29 (1994), 325–47.

¹¹ Mary Louise Roberts, *A Civilisation without Sexes: Reconstructing Gender in Postwar France, 1917–27* (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1994); Susan Kingsley Kent, *Making Peace: the Reconstruction of Gender in Interwar Britain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

¹² Deborah Montgomerie, 'Reassessing Rosie: World War II, New Zealand Women and the Iconography of Femininity', *Gender and History*, Vol. 8 (1996), 108–32.

¹³ See further Harris, 'War and Social History'.

¹⁴ See, as well as the article by Hacker and Vining below, Susan R. Grayzel, "'The Outward and

even seen active military duty. As civilian mobilisation became a recognised part of warfare, it became impossible to exclude women from militarisation and increasingly hard to deal with the problematic status of combatant women.¹⁵

This is, perhaps, partly why war in this period is associated with a crisis in masculinity, a theme tackled directly in Luc Capdevila's article on France after 1940. If war was indeed an heroic, masculine experience, then it posed the problem of replicating belligerent values and mores in peacetime – as *squadristi*-style movements demonstrated all over Europe. How was this violence to be contained if such values were lauded as the bedrock of the political and social order? The exaltation of the heroic and the manly may also have revealed the fragility of masculinity in this period, not least in the intensely problematic status of the emasculated. Most of the victims of the First World War were combatants, and how injury, mutilation and mental illness affected their lives, not only as soldiers but also as citizens and as men has proved a productive form of enquiry for historians.¹⁶

Such investigations of war trauma make extensive use of medical records, often incorporating psychoanalytical insights into their analyses.¹⁷ This work is represented here not only by Luc Capdevila but also by Michael Richards, who focuses on defeated women and their treatment by male psychiatrists. With defeat, invasion and occupation, military violence came from the battle front into the streets and marketplaces of the home front. Now, and again at liberation, violence was omnipresent and, in contrast to the man-to-man combat of the front, was often wielded by men against women. As Richards's article suggests, the process of trial and punishment in a land of victors and vanquished was gendered as well as politicised. Certain types of offences were associated with women, while some punishments were reserved for them. Most famous is the wave of head-shavings for 'horizontal collaborators' that accompanied liberation throughout Europe in 1944 and 1945, but a substantial body of prison memoirs from the Spanish Civil War also speaks eloquently of sexual humiliation and assault.¹⁸

Visible Sign of Her Patriotism': Women, Uniforms and National Service during the First World War', *Twentieth-Century British History*, Vol. 8 (1997), 154–64 and Mary Vincent, 'Camisas Nuevas: Style and Uniformity in the Falange Española, 1933–43', in Wendy Parkins, ed., *Fashioning the Body Politic: Dress, Gender, Citizenship* (Providence, RI, and Oxford: Berg, forthcoming).

¹⁵ See, in particular, the work on front-line nurses, Anne Summers, *Angels and Citizens: British Woman as Military Nurses, 1854–1914* (London and New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1988); Darrow, 'French Volunteer Nursing'; Penny Starns, 'Fighting Militarism: British Nursing during the Second World War', in Roger Cooter, Mark Harrison and Steve Sturdy, eds., *War, Medicine and Modernity* (Stroud: Sutton, 1998).

¹⁶ See especially Joanna Bourke, *Dismembering the Male: Men's Bodies, Britain and the Great War* (London: Reaktion, 1996) as well as the voluminous literature on shell-shock. See, e.g., on Germany, Paul Lerner, 'Hysterical Cures: Hypnosis, Gender and Performance in World War I and Weimar Germany', *History Workshop Journal*, no. 45 (1998), 79–101, and 'Psychiatry and the Casualties of War in Germany, 1914–1918', *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 35 (2000), 13–28.

¹⁷ But see the recent work of Catherine Merridale, 'The Collective Mind: Trauma and Shell-shock in Twentieth-century Russia', *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 35 (2000), 39–56, and *Night of Stone: Death and Memory in Russia* (Granta: London, 2000).

¹⁸ E.g. Tomasa Cuevas, *Cárcel de mujeres*, 2 vols. (Barcelona: Ediciones Sirocco, 1985). See also Shirley Mangini, *Memories of Resistance: Women's Voices from the Spanish Civil War* (New Haven and

Among the most brutal forms of such violence was rape, a subject which is hard to approach historically despite its ubiquity in, for example, the Red Army's march through eastern Germany.¹⁹ Far more accessible is the rhetorical strategy which depicted the invasion and occupation of sovereign states in gendered images of violation, prostration and rape. As well as making an immediate appeal to patriotic manhood, such images speak of the unutterable brutality of war, calling women to war service so that their own physical bodies may escape the fury vented on the metaphorical body of the nation. Nationalist discourses have to emphasise certain kinds of cultural identity at the expense of others. Gender, class position, religious confession, even certain ethnic identities are secondary to the national one. But patriotism and ethnicity had a complex interrelationship and one which was thrown into stark relief by the rise of Nazism.

Dominant nationalisms, rewritten as patriotism during wartime, invariably contain an ethnic identification. For the imperial powers of western Europe this was the 'whiteness' of the empire-builders. In multi-ethnic eastern Europe, however, it was a shifting and contested hegemony, the result in part of the redrawing of national maps in 1918 in such a way as to make them almost unrecognisable to their citizens. Forging cohesive national identities in such circumstances is extremely difficult, and the rise of the radical right made it even more so. Once the Second World War broke out and the Wehrmacht marched east, these ethnic identities, understood by many as 'racial', became the foundation of the brutal politics of occupation and war. As the pieces by Elizabeth Harvey and Katherine Jolluck show, ethnic identities were asserted both as part of Nazi aggression and as a mode of defence by the victimised. The multi-ethnic liberal politics of urban elites came under almost unbearable strain after 1918 in eastern Europe, and the cleavages inherent in an already antisemitic culture were compounded as the Nazis reintroduced slavery to Europe and the policies of resettlement and, eventually, genocide began.

Harvey's article directly addresses the question of women's participation in Nazi racial policy, making the point that they had a definite, though auxiliary, part to play.²⁰ While the assumption that women were unsuited to violence allowed some to shelter from the full knowledge of what resettlement actually involved, they still participated in the actual implementation of racial cleansing. The female agenda was still primarily domestic, but in this context even house-cleaning had both a political and a belligerent significance. In Poland as in London, total war transformed everyday life, thereby changing the boundaries between public and private.

London: Yale University Press, 1995). On shaven women see Luc Capdevila and Fabrice Virgili, 'La depuración y el rapado de las colaboracionistas ¿es antifeminismo?', in Christine Bard, ed., *Un siglo de antifeminismo* (Madrid: Biblioteca Nueva, 2000), 217–26. The original French edition of this work is reviewed by Denise Davidson below.

¹⁹ But see Atina Grossman, 'A Question of Silence: The Rape of German Women by Occupation Soldiers', *October*, Vol. 72 (1995) and Marlene Epp, 'The Memory of Violence: Soviet and East European Mennonite Refugees and Rape in the Second World War', *Journal of Women's History*, Vol. 9 (1997), 58–87.

²⁰ See further Atina Grossman, 'Feminist Debates about Women and National Socialism', *Gender and History*, Vol. 3 (1991).

Shopping, cooking and cleaning all took on new meanings in war-ravaged Europe, even though in occupied Poland these encompassed a level of brutality which would have been inconceivable in blitz-torn London. As Poles were displaced, imprisoned and killed by both Nazi and Soviet troops, so those to whom the war had left little clung onto what remained. As Katherine Jolluck's evidence shows, national identity, the retention of sexual honour, and maintaining some semblance of bodily hygiene were strategies used by Polish women in Soviet camps. This mixture of the noble and the mundane served not only to retain a sense of dignity in appalling circumstances but also to stigmatise others, who lay outside respectable Polish womanhood.

In degrading and difficult circumstances, the romance of home was powerful. Symbolising both past and future, it could serve as emotional shelter for the war-torn, both the men who would head such homes and the women who would create them. There was certainly little support for women to bear arms. Republican Spain's famous *milicianas* were sent back from the front within weeks of the outbreak of civil war. Among institutional fighting forces during the Second World War, only the Red Army used women as combatants, although partisans and resistance groups did so regularly.²¹ After the invasion of Italy in 1943, as the Nazi new order gradually collapsed and the war in Europe was transformed into a series of civil wars, armed women finally featured in battle.

The fact that women fighters were confined to guerrilla groups in some ways confirms their marginal status. But they were immensely important to the myth of resistance, both at the time and in the postwar reconstruction. Women's resistance finally earned them the right to vote in France; their presence among the Italian partisans confirmed the new republic's anti-Fascist roots. If women were fighting, it was a people's war. Yet, as Margaret Poulos Anagnostopoulou suggests in her discussion of the Greek Civil War, the multi-faceted resistance struggles lend themselves to no such easy analysis. In Greece, as in Yugoslavia, Italy or France, women soldiers faced similar expectations and provoked similar disquiet as did their counterparts in auxiliary military roles.²² The egalitarianism of the partisans was to be a potent myth, both within and outside the ranks of resisters, but it was a short-lived experience. The politics of the postwar and of the Cold War demanded a reconstructed normality which demobilised men and women, reasserted traditional gender roles, and set the scene for the consumerist prosperity of the late 1950s and 1960s. As the articles collected here show, however, the experience of total war had affected every area of life, both the behaviour and beliefs of women and men and the relationship between them. Peace may have brought a desire to forget the exigencies of war, but its unintended effects were impossible to escape.

²¹ For the Soviet case see Katharine Hodgson, *Written with the Bayonet: Soviet Russian Poetry of World War II* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1996).

²² See further Paula Schwartz, 'Partisanes and Gender Politics in Vichy France', *French Historical Studies*, Vol. 16 (1989), 126–51; Jane Slaughter, *Women and the Italian Resistance, 1943–1945* (Denver, CO: Arden Press, 1997); Barbara Jancar-Webster, *Women and Revolution in Yugoslavia, 1941–1945* (Denver, CO: Arden Press, 1990).