

# The Feminization of European Armies

## 19th-20th centuries

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### ABSTRACT

Nineteenth-century Europe for the most part refused the presence of women in the military, believing that bearing arms was incompatible with femininity, reserving it only for men who possessed the political power from which it was inseparable. Women made their demands in vain, and transgressions of this gender norm were rare. The feminization of the military began in the twentieth century, but initially involved only medical care and auxiliary logistics. The two world wars along with the wars of decolonization amplified the mobilization of women and forced the military in most European countries to establish a lasting legal framework enabling women to become soldiers like anyone else, that is to say like men.



Soviet partisans during World War Two

Bearing arms is inseparable from military power, which was dominated by men and excluded women on the grounds that they had a so-called fragile nature destined for maternity which would become more virile if they were armed. Resorting to arms to defend one's country against an external enemy, or defending one's ideas in a fratricidal conflict, are political acts, and beginning with the French Revolution have also served as an assertion of citizenship, two positions which were denied to women. Such is—and will remain—the central issue in the feminization of official armed forces. On March 25, 1792, Théroigne de Méricourt called for French women's right to bear arms, an expression of the full citizenship they were demanding; the age-old presence of cantinières or laundrywomen, or even occasional female combatants who were most often dressed as men, were of little import

to her, for they had no political impact. The revolutionaries nevertheless refused a subversion of the gender order, as the decree of April 30, 1793 discharged “unnecessary women” from the military, authorizing only vivandières.

The exclusion of women from the army continued throughout the nineteenth century, while their mobilization in inter-state war was limited, except in rare cases, to providing medical attention. The Frenchwoman Annette Devron was the first woman decorated with the *médaille militaire* for killing two Austrian soldiers in order to recapture her Zouave regiment's flag during the battle of Magenta (1859), thereby transgressing gender norms. For the lack of formally constituted armies, wars of national independence or revolutionary wars enabled women to take up arms (Greece, 1827).

Beginning with the Great War, nurse corps were included in the military, such as the Women's Auxiliary Army Corps (WAAC), created in 1917 and composed of 105,000 women operating essentially in the United Kingdom. In the east, however, some women took part in combat. In Serbia, Milunka Savić, who was promoted to the rank of sergeant, was wounded and decorated numerous times. In Russia, Maria Botchkareva, who by special dispensation was already enlisted in the Imperial Russian Army, founded the 1st Russian Women's Battalion of Death after the revolution of February 1917. In all, approximately 5,000 women followed her example.

During the interwar period, women's auxiliary corps were created, such as the Lottas in Finland in 1920 or the Lottornas in Sweden in 1924, but they were still deprived of arms. In Russia, women joined the army reserves in 1925. In July 1936, Spanish women spontaneously took up arms against nationalist troops, who refused the presence of any women. Some of them briefly joined the Republican Army, but were disarmed at the end of the summer despite their protests, and sent to the rear with the watchword: “men to combat, women to work.” In France, the Paul-Boncour law of 1938 on national organization during times of war renounced mobilizing women, but authorized voluntary enlistment. At the same time, Great Britain diversified auxiliary services: Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS), Women's Auxiliary Air Force Service (WAFS) and Women's Royal Navy Service (WRNS).

World War Two prompted recourse to women to enable men to dedicate themselves more to combat. On May 21, 1940, a first status of female auxiliary to military formations was created in France. In December 1941 in the United Kingdom, the National Service Act no. 2 enlisted single women and widows without children: in 1945, 72,000 of them served in the WRNS and 190,000 in the ATS, representing 8.2% of personnel in uniform. In contradiction with the Nazi feminine ideal, approximately 500,000 German women served as auxiliaries (*Wehrmachtshelferinnen*) in the army in 1945 as telephone operators, secretaries, or as part of anti-aircraft defence.

In response to the wishes of the women who had come to London, Free France first created the *Corps des volontaires françaises* on December 16, 1941, which numbered 400 auxiliaries on November 8, 1942. Then the French Committee of National Liberation in Algiers authorized, through the decree of January 11, 1944, the individual enlistment of single, widowed, or divorced women aged 18-45 who did not have children. However only volunteers could serve in units engaged in operations. The measure was little used due to opposition from the population. The emotion sparked by the death of a French medical woman chauffeur in Italy in 1944 serves as a reminder that the presence of women at the front was seen as a heresy. In September 1945, after the internal resistance was combined with (that is to say integrated into) the army, the *Armée féminine de l'armée de terre* (AFAT) numbered nearly 14,000 women. The USSR distinguished itself in March 1942 by arming women, with a total of 800,000 who fought as partisans, elite snipers, or aviatrices, and who were celebrated in propaganda as war heroines. Six elite snipers, including Nina Petrova, received the highest distinction, that of “Hero of the Soviet Union and the Order of Lenin.”

World War Two thus made the permanent establishment of female military corps in France possible (the AFAT became the *Service des femmes des forces armées* in 1946) as well as in the United Kingdom (the Women's Royal Army Corps was created in 1949). Since then, feminization of the military has steadily grown, doing so at an accelerating rate with the professionalization of the armed forces. In France, the decree of October 15, 1951 defined a status for female cadres, and the law of July 13, 1972 established equality of the sexes in theory. Yet even though the competitive entrance exam for the *École polytechnique* was opened to women in 1970, the *École spéciale militaire de Saint-Cyr* did not welcome the first female student-officers until 1983. Women were authorized to enlist in Irish defence forces in 1979, and had to wait until 1989 in Spain and 1999 in Italy. In Germany, only the decision of the European Court of Justice opened up the *Bundeswehr* to women in 2001, although the country has

led a proactive policy since then through the implementation of quotas for women. In the early 2010s, the French army was one of the most feminized with 15% of its troops being women, behind Hungary (20%) but ahead of Spain and Portugal (12%), as well as the United Kingdom, Norway, and Germany (10%). Women represent only 3 and 4% of military personnel in Poland and Italy respectively.

Although all forms of gender discrimination in the military were abolished in 1989 in Sweden and in 1999 in Spain, legal distinctions remain elsewhere in Europe. Certain military corps remain closed to women. In Great Britain, only 67% of positions in the army are open to them, 71% in the navy, and 96% in the air force. They are present in theatres of operation, but cannot participate in missions involving enemy contact. In 2014, Michael Fallon, the Secretary of State for Defence, announced an end to this prohibition, for "armed forces roles should be determined by ability, not gender." In France, the *Corps des officiers de la gendarmerie mobile* remains closed, but the French navy has provisionally opened up positions as submarine crewmembers to women beginning in 2017. In reality, many differences persist. The participation of women in external operations is limited. They made up 7% of OPEX troops in France in 2013. Despite its slow speed, the feminization of the military seems irreversible, although women are still confronted on a daily basis with forms of ordinary male chauvinism, and even sexual harassment.

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