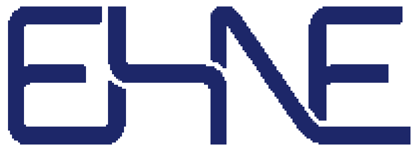

WHEN WAR DISRUPTS GENDER
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Is war emancipatory for women?

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ABSTRACT

The complex question of the emancipation of women by war, which has been raised for conflicts of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, calls for a nuanced answer somewhere between “yes, however” and “no, however.” War, which requires the mobilization of women for work and combat, blurs gender and modifies certain individual trajectories, but is also synonymous with terrible ordeals. It is not, or is rarely, the direct cause of egalitarian transformations, such as European women’s acquisition of civil and political equality, or the feminization of the military.

Women’s football team made up of female laborers from the AEC Munitions Factory in Beckton, London, during the First World War. Source : [Impérial War Museum, Londres]

While during the nineteenth century women were excluded from combat, and also saw those women—numerous during the Napoleonic wars—who had accompanied the military disappear, the question of whether war is emancipatory or not can only be asked for twentieth and twenty-first century conflicts. It is a subject of debate among historians, who provide different answers that are always nuanced with a “yes, however” or a “no, however.” Women do not represent a homogenous group, and the effects of war differ according to the period, social status, nationality, and place of residence, in addition to political engagement. In addition, the term emancipation itself has multiple meanings. One can speak of legal emancipation, and ask whether women acquired new rights. One can also observe everyday life, and ask whether the role of women in the family or the workplace changed, and if so how, and even ask whether the image of “the” woman was transformed.

The position that women were emancipated in the aftermath of the Great War is based on three arguments that call for nuance: war represented an experience of independence; war created “flappers,” women with liberated mores; women acquired new rights, notably that of voting. Most belligerent states of course called on women to participate in the war effort—and rarely to swell the ranks of the armed forces (auxiliary female corps in the United Kingdom, female combatants in Serbia and Russia)—most often to replace men at work. In the strategic sector of arms production, salaries were higher than in traditionally female occupations, and women laborers were sometimes seen as profiting off of war. But working was first and foremost an experience of being overworked, notably for working-class mothers and peasant women from rural areas in France, Germany, and Russia, where the requisition of livestock made agricultural work heavier. Women were subject to other ordeals: solitude and grief, great shortages and hunger in the central empires subject to maritime blockade and in areas occupied by German troops (Belgium, Northeastern France, Central Europe), in addition to gender and sexual violence during invasions. Following the conflict, women were invited to retake their “true” place as housewives and mothers, despite the fact that the massive death of men had created professional opportunities. In both France and authoritarian states,

a natalist policy combined incentivizing and repressive measures.

Popularized by the novel *La Garçonne* by the Frenchman Victor Margueritte (1922), the phenomenon of the flapper only had an effect in Western European cities with regard to new fashions in clothing and hairstyles (short hair, visible calves), as well as in matters of sexual liberation within very small circles. These flappers, or *garçonnes* as they were known in France, listened to music from America and practiced new dances, while some of them took up cigarettes, with the most well-off climbing behind the wheel. They voted in the United Kingdom and Germany, but not in France. Despite British activists using the slogan *"Votes for Heroines as well as Heroes"* starting in 1915, there was no direct causation between the Great War and the acquisition of political rights on the part of European women. Since the creation of the International Woman Suffrage Alliance (1904), the right to vote has been the central demand of feminists on a national, European, and international level. Finnish women began voting in 1906, and Norwegian women in 1913. Both states that were neutral during the conflict, Denmark granted political rights in 1915 and the Netherlands granted eligibility in 1917 and suffrage in 1919, while in Russia the February Revolution gave way to pressure from women. Following the war, British women became citizens (over 30 years of age), as did German women and those from the new states resulting from the dismemberment of empires (Austria, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Poland), but not French women (due to obstruction by the Senate) and Italian women. All Belgian women could vote in municipal elections, but only war widows could vote in legislative elections, an instance of the "death suffrage" that the French poet Maurice Barrès called for beginning in 1915. Greek women, who experienced a decade of war (1912-1922), with some facing trying population displacements, obtained the suffrage for municipal elections in 1930.

1945 was long presented as the achievement of women's emancipation, especially in France, where they became citizens (article 17 of the order from 21 April 1944), one year before Italian women. However, the civil emancipation of Frenchwomen came later (1965-1985), as the postwar years saw strong repression of abortion. Even more so, the acquisition of political citizenship was concurrent with a specific form of punishment for collaboration, namely the public shearing of approximately 20,000 women, a humiliating practice that had been used on female Republicans during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), and was also frequent during the Greek Civil War (1946-1949). Characterized by its violence toward civilians, the Second World War created terrible ordeals for many women: bombardment of cities, deportation and murder throughout Europe of Jewish women and men as well as Romany, medical experiments conducted by the Nazis in death camps and the sterilization of Romany women at Ravensbrück, malnutrition and hunger in countries occupied by Nazi Germany, massive rape by Allied or enemy soldiers, exodus to flee the advance of enemy troops or after the reconfiguration of borders in 1945. While the mobilization of women in war factories raised concerns especially in the United Kingdom, the Allied arsenal fighting alongside the United States and Canada, their engagement in combat or the Résistance was nevertheless more extended than in 1914-1918. Most armed forces henceforth had auxiliary female corps, the Red Army incorporated female combatants (including fighter pilots), and the politicization of everyday life in occupied territories prompted many women to resist, with the same consequences as men in case of arrest (torture and deportation). Across occupied Europe, other women engaged on the side of collaboration, once again demonstrating that their domain was not simply the household.

War indisputably blurred gender, and modified certain individual trajectories of women. But was it an emancipation? The documentary essay by the Belorussian writer Svetlana Aleksievitch, published in 1985, offered powerful nuance to the heroization of the "patriotic Great War," and similar to its title stressed that "war does not have a woman's face." The Algerian War showed the often temporary nature of gender transgressions, as the courage of female mujahideen did not prevent the affirmation of renewed traditionalism after the country's independence. More recently, the series of atrocities that accompanied fighting in the ex-Yugoslavia (1991-1995) emphasized that women are firstly the victims of war, a privileged target of ethnic cleansing (rape, sexual slavery). Finally, the recent feminization of European armed forces, including as combatants—promoted by the professionalization that helps dissociate masculinity from war—is in keeping with the egalitarian transformations of

recent decades, in which feminists have succeeded in deconstructing the feminine. Currently the French army includes a little over 15% women all corps included, making it one of the most feminized in Europe.

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