

When war disrupts gender

19th-21st centuries

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Abstract

Europe has experienced three wars on a continental scale since the French Revolution, along with numerous other conflicts. Far from being immutable, the role of women and men in war has changed. Initially a national masculinity was constructed, one that was virile and warlike, and that excluded women from combat. Women were all the same mobilized by their countries to support “their” men, take part in the war effort, and give birth to and raise the combatants of future generations. Like all civilians, they became military targets, and as women they were also the target of sexual violence. Women also came close to combat, integrated military or auxiliary formations, and engaged in movements of struggle and resistance. The military-virile model was weakened by colonial wars, the increasing sophistication of weaponry, and the absence of conflicts on the soil of most European countries. Military service was eliminated by most European countries at the same time as the professionalization and feminization of the military grew.

Article

Europe has experienced three wars on a continental scale since the French Revolution, with women playing different roles in each: an assisting role in the Napoleonic wars, at the rear in the First World War, and at the centre of the Second World War. How did women and men confront such events? How did these wars disrupt gender? While the formation of modern armies in Europe during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries kept women near soldiers (*cantinières*, laundrywomen, partners), during the nineteenth century a long process was implemented excluding women from military matters and warlike virility—a condition of masculinity in nation-states. The early modern period was characterized by a contradiction between the recruitment of increasingly supervised and professional soldiers, and the constant presence of women among the great many civilians—sometimes representing up to half of the numbers in a company—who accompanied armies both in their quarters and in the field. They were considered as being too numerous, even invasive, but also very useful in handling logistics, motivating troops, and preventing desertion. There were numerous policies with regard to this feminine presence: while in France marriage was forbidden and barracking was practiced (Order of 1692), elsewhere (Prussia, Bavaria, Wurtemberg, Austria) soldiers were authorized to marry in order to limit the number of women who regularly accompanied the troops, and to better control them.

War as First and Foremost a Matter for Men

With the French Revolution, the question of participating in combat was raised in terms of citizenship. During the debate in March 1792 on whether to go to war, numerous women followed the example of Pauline Léon or Théroigne de Méricourt and demanded to participate. The Assemblée refused, and a year and a half later, in the autumn of 1793, the Comité de sûreté générale renewed this prohibition at the same time excluding women from political citizenship. Between these two dates, on March 8,

1793, the Convention allowed military personnel to marry, thus increasing the number of women following the army and imposed on them the official mention of "military wife authorized by law" (law of April 30, 1793). The principle of reserving the defence of the country for men was opposed by the pragmatic need for women alongside armies. With the Revolution in France and the mobilization against Napoleonic domination in numerous European countries (Prussia, Spain), military service brought out the virtues of courage and endurance in young men. Within each community, a national and belligerent masculinity was formed. In the nineteenth century, the arming of citizens became a liberal demand throughout Europe. During the Hambach Festival, a major liberal event organized in the Palatinate in 1832, this principle was jointly defended by German, Polish, and French students.

Conscription in certain countries (France 1798, Prussia 1814, Italy 1861, the Austrian Empire 1866, Russia 1874, Sweden 1901), along with an education of young boys founded on toughening them up, gradually made men into bodies ready for war. Young bourgeois men, not without resistance, used multiple strategies to avoid service: the random draw that was in effect in numerous countries allowed the wealthiest to be replaced by men of more modest conditions. However, the militarization of European males only took effect at the end of the nineteenth century. Women were increasingly rare on battlefields. A few exceptions, in connection with independence revolts, were established as warlike icons: Laskarina Bouboulina (Greece, 1821), Emilia Plater (Poland, 1831) or Anita Garibaldi (Italy, 1849), who beyond their quite real action became genuine allegories for their nations, fighting for liberty.



[2]
Crimean war : Florence Nightingale with a lamp at the bedside of a patient. Coloured lithograph after H. Rae.

Source: [Wellcome Library, London](https://www.wellcome.org.uk/) [3]

Another female face in war emerged in the middle of the century during the Crimean War (1853-1856): Florence Nightingale, a nurse and director of a medical centre, received authorization to go there in November 1854 with approximately forty nurses, at a time when the losses, which were essentially due to illness, moved public opinion. She left her mark not only through her sense of organization and the effectiveness of her team, but also through her actions after her return to improve the living conditions of soldiers. She was a pioneer, and became the symbol of feminine humanitarian intervention at the side of men in war. Known as “the white angels,” nurses would henceforth stay on the battlefield. In Saxony, Marie Simon, a nurse in civilian hospitals, had already worked during the battle of Sadowa in 1866, which opposed Prussia and Austria. Because of her experience, she was entrusted with the task of supervising nurses working during the war against France in 1870. On the French side, Victorine Autier, the daughter of a top doctor, helped her father as a nurse during the battle of Villers-Bretonneux. Nightingale’s work had left a mark on people everywhere, with the end of the nineteenth century seeing the emergence of a genuine women’s organization movement for medical treatment in war. In the United Kingdom, the Women Army Nurses Corps was created in 1881. These nurses quickly took action in the Empire, first in Egypt and Sudan, and then during the Second Boer War (1899-1902) in southern Africa. The French army did not establish the status of military nurse until 1908. At the same time, Italy created the *Corpo delle Infermiere Volontarie*, which took action for the first time in the Italo-Turkish War of 1911-1912.

Mobilizing Unarmed Women

The First World War was firstly the experience of the most radical separation between men of fighting age and women. The duration of the conflict, and the unfolding of combat in a masculine military zone distinct from the rest of wartime society, maintained this separation. Nevertheless, the needs of a mobilization that was unprecedented and especially long at the rear, along with situations of occupation (Belgium, Serbia, Romania, Poland and Western Russia, northeastern France) or mass slaughter (Armenia, 1915), involved civilians more directly. This involvement included women, whether it was to support combatants, ensure war production, maintain society at the rear, or as direct victims of war (bombardment, retaliation against civilians, rape, mass murder), or more rarely as auxiliaries (the United Kingdom) and even exceptionally as combatants (Serbia, Russia). Where feminist movements had been organized at the turn of the century, women, like most of the worker’s movement, joined the *Union sacrée* [Sacred Union] specific to each country, at least at the beginning of the conflict.

One of the most enduring images of the engagement of women is therefore their mobilization in the war economy. However, contrary to what has often been said, women did not begin to work in the field, shop, workshop or factory on this occasion. The “munitionette” embodied rather the expansion of salaried work, the arrival in new sectors such as metallurgy or chemistry, and a new visibility through images as well as statistics, which before the war had quite often lost sight of women behind their husbands. As the conflict continued with no end in sight, there were numerous strikes

and demonstrations by women protesting against shortages, difficult working conditions, and low salaries: these included German women during the *Steckrübenwinter* (the rutabaga winter) of 1916-1917, textile workers in Petrograd in February 1917, employees of Parisian sewing shops known as *midinettes* in May, women in Torino in August 1917, and later female bus and tramway conductors in London in August 1918.



[4]

Statue at the Champs-Élysées of a French woman with a child giving a laurel to a French soldier, Paris, March 20th 1919.

Source: NARA (National Archives and Records Administration)

Whatever the ultimate role of women in the First World War, all of the countries at war were confronted with the length of separation and demographic imbalance due to high mortality among men. They sparked disruption in the gender order (marital status, transformation of professional sectors, demands for greater independence in relation to the body, access to political citizenship in most of the new states created by the war, etc.), which were sometimes absorbed by the appearance of a return to the pre-war situation, but which also created precedents with lasting effects.

The bloodletting that Europe experienced at a time when the demographic transition was coming to a close heightened fears of depopulation and sparked, to use Françoise Thébaud's expression, a genuine nationalization of women. Whatever the form of government—from newer or older democracies to Nazi and fascist totalitarian states, from the Stalinist Soviet regime to nationalist and conservative dictatorships in Portugal, Hungary, and Francoist Spain—maternity became a state matter. Throughout Europe, pro-birth policies encouraged or forced women, according to the place and the time, to be firstly, especially, and uniquely “Mothers.”

Women and Men in the Turmoil of War

World War Two not only extended the “military zone” to all of Europe, but also gave rise to an incredible mixing of men and women: soldiers, refugee civilians, volunteer or forced labourers of both sexes and deportees. Although the differences between feminine and masculine experiences of the war were profound, some experiences were similar: living under bombshell, confronting shortages or famine (Greece, Holland, ghettos), fleeing from battles and the arrival of the enemy, during deportation or mass murder.

Aerial bombing, which had been experimented with in the preceding world war, became, right from the beginning of the war, a weapon that targeted civilians. From Warsaw (September 1939) to Dresden (February 1945), a long list of cities were targeted as strategic goals, which is to say to break the population's morale in order for it to turn against its government. It was precisely because women and children lived there that urban centres became military targets. One of the signs of this shift from the combatant to the civilian was the gas mask, which was given to soldiers during the First World

War and mass-distributed to inhabitants of European cities in 1939. 600,000 died from bombing. If we believe the rare surveys taking gender into consideration, a little less than half of them were women.



[5]

Mother and baby in gas masks, London 1941.

Source: [Imperial War Museum](#) [6]

The planning of the murder of Europe's Jews by the Nazis and their allies included differences between men and women, with variations between the East and the West of the continent. The first

massacres in the East, beginning in July 1941, or the convoys in the West in March 1942, initially involved predominantly men. Then, beginning in mid-August 1941, women in the East were killed by a bullet to the back of the neck by the Einsatzgruppen, then throughout occupied Europe women were rounded up and sent to the gas chambers of the various death camps (Auschwitz-Birkenau, Treblinka, Belzec, Chelmno, Sobibor, Majdanek). In 1942, the Nazi tally of the destruction of Lithuanian Jews indicates an overrepresentation of women: 54%. The mobilization of men in the Red Army in 1941 and their retreat before the Wehrmacht provide a local explanation for this difference. Regardless, for Nazis, all Jews—whatever their gender or age—had to be murdered.

Although men were more frequently the victims of combat, and both sexes suffered bombardment and massacres in similar proportions, sexual violence for the very large part involved women. In the great turmoil of war, which weakened civilian populations, contributed to the loss of bearings, and gave men who were both armed and far from home a dual feeling of omnipotence, numerous soldiers escaped the control of their hierarchy or took advantage of its indifference to commit rape on women from both allied and enemy countries, such as GIs, first in England and then in France and Germany. According to the situation, these crimes were sometimes punished by death, or were ignored by their armies. In other cases, rape was part of a process either of control and submission of a territory—with its women being associated with the conquered nation—or of terrorizing civilian populations. It was thus one form of violence among others (pillaging, fires, massacres, mutilation), and inflicted in much higher numbers. Rape was massively perpetrated by the Wehrmacht, initially on the Eastern front but also in France as part of the fight against the *maquis* in 1944. Shortly after the battle of Cassino in June 1944, colonial troops from the French expeditionary force in Italy were guilty of multiple thousands of rapes in southern Latium. Finally, during the collapse of the Reich, the terror of German women in the face of rapes committed by Red Army soldiers is well known, this time numbering in the hundreds of thousands.

The extraordinary growth in the number of victims should not make us forget that the engagement of women in combat, or very close to combat, was far more extensive than previously. The most numerous were in the Red Army, but also in the different auxiliary and paramilitary formations that were common since World War One (Finnish Lottas, Wehrmachtshelferinnen, Auxiliaries of the Italian Social Republic, British Auxiliary Territorial Service, Servizio Ausiliario Femminile of the Republic of Salò, Arme féminine de l'Armée de Terre française, etc.). In a Europe almost entirely occupied by Axis armies, women also engaged on the side of the Resistance. At the beginning of the occupation, anyone of good will was welcome, given the rarity of volunteers. Women were all the more welcome given their value to a network that had to maintain secrecy, because they were less suspect in the eyes of Germans or the police, and it was thus easier for them to operate in secrecy. A few women nonetheless directed networks: Andrée De Jongh in Belgium (Comet), Marie-Madeleine Fourcade (Alliance) or Germaine Tillion (Musée de l'homme) in France, Anne Sofie Østvedt in Norway (XU). The Italian Carla Caponi, Hannie Schaft in the Netherlands, or the Frenchwoman Marie-Claude Vaillant-Couturier were important figures in the communist resistance. This is not to forget Soviet or Yugoslav partisans, or those with the Greek ELAS or the Italian Partigiane. Yet aside from a few exceptions, gender assignments were generally quickly reestablished in both urban networks as well as the *maquis*.

Although women were far less numerous than men in the Resistance, they were all the same subject to repression. Vaillant-Couturier, who was deported to Auschwitz and then to Ravensbrück, testified to this during the Nuremberg trials. The Ravensbrück concentration camp was actually the Third Reich's primary camp for women: 130,000 women from over Europe were detained there from 1939 to 1945, with 90,000 of them dying there.

Everywhere in the mid-twentieth century, the gradual sharing of political citizenship, the end of male

exclusivity over war, and the temporary gaps in male control over feminine sexuality manifested themselves in a violent reaction of reappropriation by men of women's bodies. Throughout Europe in the aftermath of the war, just as with the Spanish (1936-1939) and Greek (1946-1949) civil wars, women accused of being "with the other side," of having betrayed the nation, had their heads shaved. With this readjustment of masculine domination, the question of the emancipation of women's bodies was put off until the 1960-1980s with legislation on contraception, abortion, divorce, and violence committed against women.

The End of Warlike Virility?

On the masculine side, the second half of the twentieth century brought continued distancing between men and soldiers. Military service is no longer mandatory at the beginning of the twenty-first century in the vast majority of European countries (with the exception of Norway, Finland, Switzerland, Austria, Greece and former members of the USSR). The military, which is now professional, has for the most part begun a slow but real process of feminization. Finally, on the one hand there are fewer and fewer combatants in the armed forces, the bulk of whose members are involved with logistics, and on the other hand, killing in modern war has increasingly lost its reality. In fact, at first artillery and aerial bombardment and later missiles and drones distanced the enemy, making direct confrontation an unusual occurrence. A male European no longer has to prepare himself either to kill or to die for his country.

Europe, however, did not finish with war in 1945. Numerous European armies were deployed beyond the continent, although only the engagement of contingents in Algeria (1954-1962) and in Angola, Mozambique and Guinea Bissau (1961-1974) were of a nature to deeply trouble French and Portuguese society. These colonial wars, which were long and controversial, further dispelled the image of a masculine surpassing of oneself in combat, and instead became "dirty wars": "to not go" became a higher preoccupation than "returning a hero."

Other conflicts took place on the continent; on its margins were those of Cyprus (1973), Nagorno-Karabagh (1988-1994), more recently in the Ukraine (2014), and in the heart of the continent in the former Yugoslavia (1991-1995). Part civil war and war of independence, the conflict involved a regular army (Yugoslav People's Army, JNA), two multinational forces (UN and NATO), armies in the process of formation (Croatian and Bosnian), numerous paramilitary groups, as well as the entire population. Battles on either side of a stabilized front (Mostar) or sieges of cities (Sarajevo, Dubrovnik) perpetuated traditional forms of conflict in the former Yugoslavia. However, this war quickly stood out through the violence committed upon civilians: men and women shot down in Sniper Alley in Sarajevo, the massacre in Srebrenica of thousands of captured men aged 15 or older (July 1995), the organization of the systematic rape of Bosnian women in certain areas that fell to Serbian militias (Foca camp). Sexual violence and forced pregnancies left a mark on contemporaries. Since then, rape committed in wartime has been recognized as a crime against humanity (International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, Kunarac case, 2001), and the international community (international institutions, governments, NGOs) are more attentive to the occurrence of sexual violence. Yet the mobilization against rape in wartime raises the question of Europe's implication in this violence, and of the means committed to responding to or preventing it: shelters and support services for refugee women who were victims of sexual violence in their country of origin, policies of prevention within European armies, whether they are acting in or outside of the continent, and finally more broadly, the fight against all forms of violence committed against women, in times of peace as well.

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