

## Conference 1

### **Gender, War and Culture: From Colonial Conquest, Standing Armies and Revolutionary Wars to the Wars of Nations and Empires (1650s-1910s)**

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#### **Comment on**

#### **PANEL V: GENDERING THE HISTORY OF THE WARS OF NATIONS AND EMPIRES**

1. **Gender, Imperialism and Militarism in Western Societies, 1870s-1910s**  
Michael Geyer, The University of Chicago, Department of History
2. **Imperial Conquest, Violent Encounters and Changing Gender Relations:  
The Social Impact of Colonial Warfare, 1830s-1910s**  
Angela Woollacott, Australian National University, School of History
3. **White Warriors? Imperial Struggle, Race and the Making of 'White Men'  
During the Long Nineteenth Century**  
Marilyn Lake, The University of Melbourne, The School of Historical and  
Philosophical Studies
4. **New Modes of Warfare, the Violated Body and the Gendering of  
Professional Military Medical Care**  
Jean Quataert, Binghamton University SUNY, Department of History

It is a privilege to offer comments on this quartet of thought-provoking papers. Even in their current preliminary form they engage with overlapping themes and questions; the authors are already in conversation with each other.

Taken together, these papers prompted me to recall Max Weber's argument that one of the characteristics of a modern state is the state's monopoly on violence. These papers clarify the relationship between modern states and violence by underscoring that states don't so much monopolize violence as they possess the capacity to legitimate some its forms while delegitimizing others. The papers also reveal how this taxonomy of violence was bound up in the 19<sup>th</sup> century ideologies of civilization and of gender. That is, concepts of civilization and gender were integral to distinguishing and calibrating the legitimacy of diverse forms of state sponsored or state tolerated violence.

At first glance, it may appear that westerners simply viewed their violence as legitimate/civilized and the violence of others as illegitimate and uncivilized. But these essays make clear that no such simple dichotomy existed. Instead, as Prof Quataert's essay explains, the confluence of medical technology, humanitarian activism, and legal and military developments influenced westerners to attempt to constrain and channel military violence. Profs. Geyer, Woollacott, and Lake's papers simultaneously offer illustrations of the logic that defined legitimate from illegitimate violence, or violence that had to be acknowledged from violence that could be ignored or sublimated. Prof. Geyer observes that the "peace" of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries coincided with widespread "overt and subterranean violence," including colonial wars and an accelerating arms race on the European continent. And the "atrocities" that aroused comment were events on the colonial periphery perpetrated by the colonized or those who needed to be colonized. Prof. Woollacott highlights the discourses surrounding reputed violence of colonial and indigenous subjects and the contrasting tolerance for the enacted violence of European conquest. The threat posed by Aborigines, indigenous peoples, and the colonized from the Australian outback to the hinterland of the British raj was consistent and pervasive. Strikingly, Prof. Lake stresses that settler violence, particularly Australian settler violence, was "completely omitted from subsequent national histories." The conundrum confronting western societies, then, may perhaps be summarized as "who has the sanction of legitimacy to enact violence on whom and in what fashion?"

Prof. Woollacott and Lake remind us that the states in settler societies tolerated settler violence that, from another vantage, might have been interpreted as both a threat to the state's authority and a breach of civilized behavior. To the contrary, such violence was simultaneously elevated in the abstract yet denied in its particulars. Thus, in Australia, the bushman came to be seen as the bedrock of the nation's civilization, while the Sydney tradesman was dismissed as the mere avatar of effete urban civilization. [I might point out here, reflecting my parochial interests as an American historian, that white southerners similarly justified their practice of lynching of alleged black rapists as a manifestation of their defense of civilization against savagery and as a testament to their tradition of robust masculinity.] Subsequently, the Great War would provide a context in which this virile colonial manhood would substantially define national identity for much of the twentieth century.

With a focus on what might be called embodied metropolitan militarism, Prof. Geyer's draws our attention to flamboyant displays of state sanctioned gendered militarism. He clarifies, for example, why extravagant military uniforms appeared even while simultaneously the simplification and mass production of civilian work attire accelerated. As he points out, the peacockery of military uniforms suggests a tension between the states' need to mobilize populations and to distinguish those who legitimately defend the state against illegitimate insurgents or, I would think, mere poseurs.

This brings me to my last point, the subject upon which Prof. Quataert focuses. Prof. Geyer refers to the "discourse of humanitarianism on the inviolability of the body" and also notes the concern that "the norms and values of civilized discourse" might be broken apart from within and from below. Prof. Quataert's paper transforms abstract humanitarian discourse about the body into practice. And here the centrality of gender to the structuring of violence and the laws surrounding military violence is striking. The particular facet of this paper that I would like to draw our attention to diverse and sometimes contradictory concerns of the advocates of codified rules of war and professional military medical care. Clearly, men anxious to protect their own interests were crucial to the movement. But so too were

women activists whose concerns over time sometimes complemented and sometimes challenged the evolution of western militarism.