

# Conference

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

UNC-Chapel Hill • September 11-13, 2014

### **Panel II: Gendering the History of the Age of the World Wars**

#### **COMMENT**

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Gender in my judgment is one of the most important and least studied aspects of war, certainly by military historians. And war—here I must speculate—is probably one of the most important and least studied aspects of gender. This handbook promises to begin to remedy the scholarly deficiencies on both sides, and perhaps to do more than just begin.

Let me begin by I applauding very much the framing of this project, most importantly by the questions raised by the plan of the volume and by Stefan's explication in our first hour this morning. Focusing upon the impact of gender (as defined in the plan of the volume) on war over time, and reciprocally, of war on gender, are exactly the central issues and the goal of the study. I raised the question earlier today about keeping a consistent goal so that authors don't become uncertain just how to focus their efforts.

The four papers offered in this first session—and it's impossible to make in ten minutes (though I took fifteen) all the comments needed—certainly meet the standard of top quality: in research, clarity, conceptualization, and interpretation. These papers address key—indeed indispensable—topics in war and gender, and the relationship between the two.

Annegret demonstrates how music emphasized the masculine and reinforced cultural notions of the feminine. She then goes further to connect these tropes to the propaganda of the wars, provoking us to think about other examples in our own scholarly experience and opening up, by example, all sorts of research possibilities. Her smooth shifting between music and propaganda, and to analysis of how both reflected the gender assumptions of the era, are models of the analytical art of the particular to the general.

My one real suggestion for her is to connect, as far as she is able, her fascinating work to the large questions of the volume; she should attempt that in the longer version for the book. What impact did the gendering of music and propaganda have on the wars themselves, and how did they affect gender understandings in the various countries that are the subject of her analysis? And, if she can step back from this work, she might address the larger questions of the volume: how did gender in music and propaganda shape war itself, and gender understandings, across western society in these two wars? Are there possibilities for comparisons: of the countries, and the wars? Answers to these questions, if they are possible, would advance not only the study of music and propaganda, but of these wars and of culture itself.

Likewise Susan's study of "total warfare" in World War I sparkles with shrewd insights and provocative generalizations. I have to disagree with her disclaimer about the task being too large for her. Her presentation this morning was a commentary on her paper, not the paper itself. Indeed I have nowhere else seen such a concise and focused discussion of the home front's role in warfare. It

will be an indispensable introduction to the subject, and the impact of total war on gender, for many years to come. She summarizes the larger impact while at the same time suggesting areas for further investigation and analysis, even adding a praesee for the subject for World War II.

If there is one criticism I have, it's that she should lessen her claims at the beginning that this war was a first for the indispensability of the home front for the waging of war. Certainly the civilian sector and civilians, and women, were critical long before, say in the Thirty Years War, in the siege warfare of the Middle Ages and early modern era, and certainly the wars of the French Revolution, not to speak of the American Civil War. Listen to this declaration (in 1793) of the *levee en masse*:

The young men shall fight; the married men shall forge weapons and transport supplies; the women will make tents and clothes and will serve in the hospitals; the children will make up old linen into lint; the old men will have themselves carried in the public squares to rouse the courage of the fighting men, to preach hatred of kings and the unit of the Republic.<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, European nations practiced economic warfare in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, particularly by means of naval blockade and other efforts to disrupt their enemies' economies. So I would recommend a modified introduction that takes into account continuities while still emphasizing the dramatic expansion of "totality" (though I dislike that term and think it misleading since there are always shirkers, areas of life untouched, and the like even in large, existential wars) in World War I with the result of greatly expanded impact on women and gender roles. And I would encourage her to extend her generalizations even further, to include the impact on war itself.

Is it possible that the expansion of the importance of the home front, and the availability for utilization of the "other half" of the population, made war more lethal, more disruptive, and more destructive in western societies? The airpower parts of the paper suggest this. Did the role of women in peace movements pose enough of a threat to the state's ability to wage this kind of war by magnifying the suppression of civil liberties that went along with the mobilization of the civilian population and its indispensability in waging total war? In other words, did women's efforts for peace diminish civil liberties?

This is suggested (but not explicit) in Kimberly's more specific and focused study of citizenship, civil liberties, and gender in World War II. Her excellent, and tight, analysis reviews the suppression of those liberties in that conflict but adds significantly to our understanding by including the gender roots and implications. She is most convincing in her interpretation and is actually more suggestive than she might realize. It turns out that the addition of gender norms and definitions of citizenship to the analysis makes women's roles into a setback for women's rights and quality. The state, while using women and expanding their economic opportunities, insisted that it was temporary and took steps to assure that, as she points out. This is a real change in our perception that the wars pushed progress and equality and full citizenship.

My suggestion for her is to expand the scope of the paper, but if not that, provide more breadth on the issue of civil liberties in war. Her analysis is so tight, so convincing, and so suggestive for what it does do, and what it does say, that the reader, at least this one, wants more: particularly the larger implications for civil liberty, citizenship and gender in war. The implications for US society and for other societies are enormous: militarization by its nature collides with democracy and liberty; what it does to gender norms and understandings, I can only guess.

Karen's paper strikes us right away: she is correct on her two main points, that gender perspectives and comparative perspectives are absolutely necessary for military history. She provides

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Walter Millis, *Arms and Men: A Study in American Military History* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1956), 54.

both in synthetic terms and this volume as whole will do so, perhaps dramatically. The paper is a model for both: wonderfully detailed as well as clearly, and sophisticatedly, conceived. The statistics alone grab our attention and have a power to persuade that is hard to overestimate. The numbers for World War II suggest that the more threatened a country, the larger numbers and percentages of women will be in the military; she might pursue that generalization by looking at Israel in its short history.

When she addresses memory, the analysis and interpretation are even more provocative.

The paper has a comprehensive character and a boldness of interpretation that we can only applaud—and envy. My only suggestion for her is the same for all four papers: connect your subject and conclusions to the broad purposes of the volume. Be bold. Stretch yourself. Take risk. Go as far as you can with your analysis to the broader challenge of explaining how gender has affected war, and war, gender. *Then go further.* These are only essays for a handbook, not your own monographs; you can afford to be bold and take risks. And this advice goes for the editors, too.

Remember that you are all military historians, whether you like that appellation or not. The field has very loose, blurry borders. You are writing military history whether you like it or not. Help the field expand its horizons, ask new and more intriguing questions, and modernize as it has been doing for the last fifty years. Your contribution will then be methodological as well as substantive.