

Conference

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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Panel III: Gendering the History of the Age of the World Wars

COMMENT

Sonya Rose (University of Michigan, Ann Arbor and Birkbeck College, University of London)

Thomas Kuhne's paper focuses especially on the fluidity of military masculinities that he proposes was a consequence of the totalization of war. He suggests that the uncertainties around what it means to be masculine – or the so called turn of the century 'crisis of masculinity' was, if anything more characteristic of masculinities during and in the aftermath of the two world wars. His paper, then, addresses two of the topics of the Handbook, 'Gendered representations of the military and war' and 'gendered experiences' particularly on the battlefield. He focuses especially on what he terms 'hegemonial or hegemonic diversification' of military masculinity and suggests that this was a consequence or the culmination of the affect of war on men's lives and on what it meant to be a man on the battlefield. He seems to suggest that while the public discourse or representations of military masculinities that grew out of the masculinist and militarist movements of the turn of the century focusing on the male body eventually became epitomised in the Third Reich, and to some modified extent in the United States in WWII, the experiences of soldiers did not conform to the stereotypes. Yet, experience and performance were not as rigidly masculinist. He speaks of pre WWI masculinity as a 'state' or 'property' whereas post WWI masculinity was understood as a process – alternating between feminine-like characteristics and over-coming those same characteristics to become 'a man'.

While I like the complexity of Kuhne's analysis, I think it would be important for him to discuss and make clear the distinctions and possible overlaps or interactions between experience and representation. Was the fluidity of masculinities equally true in both wars and on both sides or for all participants at both the experiential and rhetorical level. I missed any discussion of the significance of heroic sacrifice especially for European countries involved in World War I – something John Horne argues was a general motif across European societies during the war. This is mentioned briefly in Richard Smith's essay as it relates especially to colonial troops. Kuhne makes clear the importance of male bonding during wartime and in its aftermath, but might address how male bonding before the war (in youth clubs and associations) was important in mobilizing both volunteers and conscripts. I agree with Kuhne that he needs to account for differences between elite and drafted troops (in the British case, volunteers and conscripts) at least in WWI, and deserters. He might also take up conscientious objectors and men on the home fronts – or rather home-front masculinities although he focuses on military service and combat as his title indicates.

Richard Smith's essay addresses colonial soldiers participation in war, its association with masculinity and post war political repercussions. He addresses the topic of military masculinities and post-war memory. He also importantly discusses the paradoxical visions of subjugated men, masculinity and military service, and the efforts to control or police the sexuality or sexual encounters of colonial troops stationed in Europe. Most importantly, he makes the connection between soldiery, masculinity and desire or expectations for improved post-war imperial standing – self-government and then independence.

He focuses on West Indian and African soldiers, primarily it seems of from the British Empire. But, in my opinion, he should include soldiers from the Indian sub-continent as they were a significant presence in all theatres of the First and Second World Wars. In contrast to African and West Indian men (as well African-American soldiers) who, as Smith argues, were not 'privileged' to fight and die on the front lines in battle, this was not the case for Indian soldiers (not all of whom were of the martial races), although the prevalence of Sikhs and Pathans might explain why they were given that privilege. Also, it is important to include French colonial soldiers – the Senegalese Tirailleurs who did fight on the Western Front in WWII and who had an important role in the French occupation of the Rhineland after the war. His written comments did not mention them although he did so briefly in his presentation. He might also include, perhaps briefly, some discussion of black Germans in Hitler's forces. In his general discussion of masculinity there is some overlap with Thomas Kuhne's essay. Smith might limit his discussion of masculinity to those aspects that were especially critical for recruiting, policing, and the consequence of service for colonial soldiers in the aftermath of war. I agree with his addendum that it would be important to include some discussion of commemoration and post-war remembrance.

Regina Muhlhauser's essay focuses on sexuality and sexual violence in the period of the world wars. She provides an interesting discussion of how sexual violence was approached in historical research and also how it was understood at the time and in the wars' aftermaths. Her chapter covers not only violence, but argues that it is important to consider various forms of sexual engagement and encounters and suggests that when considering occupiers and the occupied, the boundaries between forced and consensual sexual practices were fluid. She also discusses the restrictions the armies attempted to impose on troops and how troops actually behaved, especially in the Nazi occupations of Poland and the USSR. But in her presentation her coverage was broader.

Generally, I found her essay to be well thought out with little overlap with other chapters except, perhaps with Frank Beiss's essay depending on how they each handle sexual violence and the holocaust. Including both the Japanese experience and the Armenian massacre is an important feature of her work in my estimation. My one question concerns what might the differences have been (if there were differences) in the nature of sexual violence and practices between military invasion or situations of combat and regimes of occupation.

Glenda Sluga's contribution is a well-thought through gendered analysis of international efforts to foster humanitarianism and to tame or prevent war. She argues that throughout much of its history – the historical period that she covers, 1900-1948, women and gender were absolutely central to public and inter-state efforts to promote human rights and peace. It would appear that in spite of the efforts of women's organizations and individual women to promote such an agenda, it was men who ran the organizations and who have been recognized by historians. So, the organizations, themselves, were structurally gendered while women both were actively engaged in the struggles to achieve these agendas, and ironically, humanitarian ideas and ideals were gendered female or as feminine. So, when women did become active in men's organizations, they were in 'separate spheres' – dealing with issues relating to women and children and excluded from international politics of making peace. Sluga also covers the feminist organizations that were active in humanitarian efforts and in promoting pacifism, and she examines international organizations that were engaged in the project – the League of Nations following World War I and the UN following the Second World War. She discusses differences in the ways that some European efforts and American efforts were organized and the gendering of both. Although women's organizations engaged in philanthropic or humanitarian work were deemed to be suitable arenas for women, they also were engaged in promoting feminism. While there seems to have been more similarities than differences in the ways members of civil society and national or state-sponsored organizations promoted and worked to implement their humanitarian goals, when male national or state actors were involved as national actors, their efforts to 'rescue' those who were at risk, the rescuing nation was depicted as masculine. This was apparently especially associated with rationales for American international intervention. Given that nations at war generally present themselves as warriors defending women and children, why would this have been particularly true for the U.S.? Or was the U.S. the primary 'national' actor promoting international organizations

after the First WW? Interestingly, Glenda suggests that post-war relief efforts were gendered male, and were male dominated.

While Sluga's focus is on these efforts during peace-time (or at least after large-scale international conflict had ended), I wondered about wartime efforts to provide relief for refugees and those who were threatened by invading armies. These efforts most likely were carried out by women such as the Scottish Women's Hospital nurses who went to Eastern Europe (especially Serbia) during the First World War. The subject of nurses is taken up by Karen Hagemann but perhaps an allusion to them here would be worthwhile. Overall, I found this to be a well-argued paper that complements others with a specific focus on war and conflict zones.