

Conference 1

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

UNC-Chapel Hill • Institute for the Arts and Humanities • Hyde Hall

February 20-22, 2014

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Comment on

PANEL IV: GENDERING THE HISTORY OF THE WARS OF NATIONS AND EMPIRES

1. **Mobilization for War and Nation: Gender, Culture and Propaganda in Nineteenth Century Europe and the United States**

Robert Nye, Oregon State University, Department of History

2. **Gender and the Wars of Nation-building in Europe, 1830s-1870s**

Mark R. Stoneman, German Historical Institute, Washington, D.C.

3. **Gender and the Wars of Nation-building and –keeping in the Americas, 1830s-1870s**

Amy S. Greenberg, Penn State University, Department of History

The three papers, one in a more embryonic stage than the other two, succeed admirably in setting the stage for what promises to be a fantastic section. They help us better understand how gender, war, and military culture broadly defined interacted in different spatial and temporal contexts, and how this interaction was central to the formation and legitimization of national and imperial power structures in the nineteenth century on both sides of the

Atlantic. I will develop my remarks in three steps. I will first summarize the major analytical findings of each paper before spelling out a few ideas about what I think are the broader themes that tie them together. I will conclude by pointing out a couple of silences in the papers and try to make suggestions as to how each contribution could engage productively with some themes that struck me as either absent or underdeveloped.

Robert Nye rightly stresses the impact of gender on what he calls the “conjoining of civilian and military cultures” in a period characterized by numerous wars fought in the name of nationalism. This fusion, however, was quite lopsided, with the militarization of civilian life being the principal result. Nye sees in the practices of memorialization and processes of medialization the chief catalysts of this development. While wars were supposed to be fought by men, women played a crucial role in the realm of cultural production, suffusing an expanding public sphere with images of male sacrifice and female vulnerability and caregiving. Nye’s paper sensitizes us to the ways in which the period’s civic militarism encouraged the participation of women as writers, organizers, speechmakers, and nurses while their participation, somewhat paradoxically, hardened politically constricting ideals of female domesticity rather than subvert them. Nye’s analysis of military masculinity is equally convincing but would have been richer still if it had unearthed some of the political countercurrents of the age (socialism, peace movements) and discussed their relationship to nationalist movements. Moreover, he could have dug deeper into the politics of fashion, a field where military and civilian symbolism intersected most visibly. What do we make, for instance, of the beards and moustaches that returned in a big way in the wake of 1848? Hecker hats and Garibaldi shirts became all the rage in nascent consumer societies. Men donned them for battle, women craved them, children ran around in them. As style setters and sex objects, revolutionary celebrities who wore flashy uniforms and refused to shave were widely imitated.

Drawing on the European wars of unification, in particular the Franco-Prussian war, Mark Stoneman proposes to interrogate the gendered limits of military violence as well as what it meant when these limits were transgressed. Upholding the distinction of fighting men and damsels in distress, as well as demonizing the enemy for ignoring that distinction, Stoneman contends, was crucial to the construction of the nation as it emerged in central Europe at the time. The ideological origins of nationalism, however, were multifaceted, and

I hope that Stoneman will incorporate scholarship on the liberal revolutions of 1848, barricade fighting, democratic militia, volunteer masculinity, and their impact on gendering nationalism and war.

Amy Greenberg unearths a similar nexus in her survey of nation-building processes in the Americas, but also offers valuable additional insights. Some South American women joined armies in an active fighting capacity. Yet their battlefield heroics failed to unhinge the discourse of republican citizenship, which bound men to the expectation of acting as citizen-soldiers and women to the performance of traditional female tasks such as nursing, cooking, and nurturing. Such gender divisions underwrote the U.S.-Mexican and the American Civil War as well, although there, too, war expanded women's spheres of action, at least temporarily. Greenberg's analysis also outlines a masculine republicanism that favored the volunteer over the conscript and accounted for much of the wartime violence on and beyond the battlefield. Men donned the uniform to prove their worth as men and citizens, committing atrocities against other men they regarded as racially substandard until the disillusioning reality of combat promoted alternative masculinities anchored in the ability to survive.

Taken together, all three papers urge us to reconsider the place and role of gender in a period in which war and war-making were intensely political, technologically more advanced, and in a sense more democratic. Wars were waged and conceived as "people's wars" (Stig Foerster) and thus understood as constitutive for entire nations. Masses were mobilized and drawn into armed conflict not just in terms of actual fighting but through the increasing circulation of images of war propelled by the mass availability of books and magazines, the printed portrait, the daguerreotype and finally the photograph. These wars of nation-making can be read as rites of passage where subjects were remade into citizens. They were liminal moments, threshold zones of major revolutionary upheaval and potential chaos with many possible outcomes. For contemporaries caught up in the whirlwinds of war, gender became a significant tool for imposing order in a disorderly world. Order in its bourgeois variation depended just as much on difference as did its aristocratic predecessor. It required demarcations of power and circles of belonging. If revolutionary wars were to sweep away the ancient regime without disrupting entire societies, categories of gender helped draw boundaries within nations as well as between them.

That this drawing was as much a question of representation as it was one of practice becomes evident, or is at least hinted at in all three papers. Gender, however, was only one among many fault lines that delineated the boundaries of nineteenth-century conceptions of liberal citizenship. Citizenship was gendered, but it was also racialized, aged, and classed. Racist stereotypes that depicted Mexican men as devious and their woman as frivolous were deployed to justify atrocities and instances of rape at the hands of white soldiers. African American and Confederate military manhood were galaxies apart. Held back by the prospect of retaliation, Southerners threatened to execute any ex-slave soldier fighting for the Union if they became prisoners of war. Racializing the enemy was not absent from European warfare either. During the Franco-Prussian war, German-speaking commentators ridiculed French manhood by stating that Romanic people lacked the physical fitness and sense of duty of the German soldier. The New York Draft Riots of 1863, on the other hand, provide a perfect example of how ethnic and class divisions bred competing wartime masculinities. Locating manhood in the ability to make ends meet, poor immigrants wanted nothing to do with what they thought was a “rich man’s war.” Intersectionality is an important analytical tool that allows us to grasp “the mutually constitutive relations among social identities” (Stephanie A. Shields) as they evolved in war and peace, and I would like to see the papers pay closer attention to such intersectional dynamics.

The New York draft riot example brings me to another omission. Comparative history is good, transnational history is better. In their current form, the papers gloss over the question of transatlantic influences and exchanges. I understand that the geographical division of labor has led the authors to adopt a hemispheric or continental approach, but separating history in that fashion is somewhat artificial, and we need to keep that in mind as we write our pieces. When people, goods, and beliefs crisscrossed the Atlantic, so did culturally specific ideas about manhood and womanhood. Did it matter for the gendering of citizenship in the Americas that these were multiethnic societies? Did it matter for the gender troubles of the U.S. Civil War era that this was a conflict that consumed native-born and immigrant Americans alike? What about the transfer of revolutionary military strategy from Europe to America, which combined the goals of military conquest with the remaking of social relations through dispossessing the enemy (Andrew Zimmerman)? Many of these immigrants had mounted the barricades during the European Revolutions of 1848, which

spellbound North Americans regardless of political affiliation (Timothy Roberts). How different were the languages of masculinity and femininity, both linguistically and ideologically, of a Catholic Irish immigrant, and Protestant New Englander, or a German-speaking red republican? Did it matter, in turn, for the military masculinity of German aristocrats that Prussian noblemen fought in nation-building wars in the Americas before they marched against Austria or France? My hunch is that, yes, these transatlantic circuits do matter for our task at hand.

Allow me to close with some final thoughts about outcomes and legacies. Greenberg's and Stoneman's papers suggest that Europeans and North Americans drew different lessons from their respective wars to sustain or achieve national unity. The line Stoneman draws from 1871 to 1914 hints at the hegemonic position of military masculinity in Wilhelminean Germany, whereas Greenberg sees a restrained manhood tilting toward entrepreneurialism as the normative model for postbellum American men. Although this was probably true in a general sense, the long-term trajectories of manhood were probably more diverse. Consider that by the 1860s the colonization of the American West was not yet complete, that Civil War officers (Sheridan, Custer) transitioned smoothly from fighting Confederates to seeking martial glory against Indians on the frontier. Consider also, as Amy Greenberg indicated, the de facto race war that raged across the South as white redeemers rolled back the civic gains of blacks by resorting to terror and violence. And by the late nineteenth century, a new generation of white imperialists cast Victorian manliness as inadequate to securing the biological survival of the nation. But this leads us into another time, one that is just as difficult to capture with a few buzzwords.