

## 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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#### **Part 2: Chapter 14**

#### **GENDER, IMPERIALISM AND MILITARISM IN WESTERN SOCIETIES, 1870s-1910s**

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How are sexed bodies produced, deployed, and changed in an age of Militarism and Imperialism? This (given) question is the point of departure for an essay that will focus on the work of gendering imperialism and militarism as discourse and action. How *are* sexed bodies, produced, deployed and changed?

The short answer is that the gendering and sexing of bodies in the age of Militarism and Imperialism is caught between a 19<sup>th</sup> Century past and a 20<sup>th</sup> Century future. It runs up against the 19th century dualism of “the” masculine and “the” feminine and the sharp distinction between the military as a state and social institution and civil(ian) society and initiates a new sense of the individual and the social body. The act of gendering and sexing thus rather separates fathers from sons and mothers from daughters and in this generational transition creates new patterns of who gets to be a man, who a woman, and what kind of man and woman. This epistemic shift happens in a world in which a past of limited European and often total peripheral wars gives way a future of destruction that has entire populations – men, women, and children -- as its subject and as is object. If an entire nation is under attack or if an entire population is the object of violence, what difference does gender make? In wrestling with these questions the debates on and the articulations of Militarism and Imperialism struggle to work out a new moral economy of war and violence.

This answer points to the parameters of the essay. The focus of the essay will be on the period of High Imperialism roughly between the 1890s and 1914, though on occasion it stretches back to the 1860s and 1870s (American Civil War, Russo-Turkish Wars) and forward into World War I and World War II. It will have the metropolitan (western and eastern) empires of Europe – Great Britain, France, Germany, Austria-Hungary and Russia -- as its main subjects, with the Ottoman Empire, the United States and Japan providing supplementary material. Colonial violence, which peaked in the 1890s and early 1900s, will have its place in the essay, but only insofar as it is reflected in metropolitan centers. (This choice presumes that others will focus on colonial violence.) The essay will approach Militarism and Imperialism both as talked-about and visually staged phenomena (as “discourse” if you wish) and as action or practice. That is, it is one thing to discursively

“embody” violence in order to give violence a narrative and visual shape (as with the soldier in his uniform and with his gun or, for that matter, the savage cannibal of caricature with a bone sticking in his hair). It is a rather different thing to produce a soldierly body, who is capable of killing and ready to be killed. And it is yet another matter to generate surfeit populations of refugees or, alternatively, an armored society. In each of these cases, so the given premise of this essay and of the Handbook, gendering and sexing matters – which is to say, they make a difference for understanding Militarism and Imperialism.

One other matter needs clarification and a bit of explication. The starting point of the essay is the contemporary understanding that the period under consideration is a time not of war, but of peace and prosperity, even if characterized by dramatic economic growth, social tensions and culture shocks, among which the challenge to gender and sexual identities figured prominently. It should be evident – and other essays in the volume will support this claim – that this is a distinctly “metropolitan” view and, hence, part of the problem rather than a self-evident starting point. Still, the fact that the period is remembered, and re-remembered today, as a period of peace, abundance, creativity and, indeed, of exquisite civility, is of import, because this self-understanding of a world at peace and of violence banished to the external and internal peripheries shaped the work of gendering and sexing at the time, much as it inspires some of today’s historiography. For example, the prevailing sense of peace and civility was the foil for the idea that “primitive” violence (and sexuality) could salvage manliness. By the same token, it is also against the background of metropolitan peace that historians (such as Christopher Clark) could attribute the causes of the Great War to a European-wide crisis of masculinity.

Needless to say, this framing of the essay is not without problems. For the peace that we take as a starting point is in reality a state of absent-mindedness in a world in which imperial violence is a permanent feature, nationalizing violence is an emergent reality (along the Eurasian seam with the Ottoman Empire as its main object) and in which naval and land arms races in the European-Atlantic world and in East Asia shape the relationships between metropolitan powers and emerging, imperial nations. I come from a rather more alarmist school that takes the overt and subterranean violence of the period rather more seriously than many of the contemporaries and bespoke historians did and do. But in my effort to put gender and sex into the story of pre-World War I Imperialism and Militarism, the often un-spoken self-understanding of a metropolitan world at peace and of Armies and Navies as peacetime forces that are protecting a civilian and civil society against the threat violence proved overwhelming. The solution, I would suggest, is not to set one against the other. Rather, the crosscurrents between peripheralized actual violence and the danger implicit in arms races on one hand and the prevailing self-understanding of living in an age of peace and civility on the other produced the kind of discursive and material disturbances and the urgency in discourse and practice that allow us to explore how contemporaries gendered and sexed Militarism and Imperialism.

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The essay starts out with three brief visual tableaux that explore literally the dressing up of Militarism and Imperialism. This approach picks up on Percy Ernst Schramm’s notion of *Herrschaftszeichen* (insignia of might) and the apocryphal story that in his old age he cut out

pictures of men with umbrellas and bowler hats from magazines in the attempt to study the insignia of bourgeois might. Such insignia do not “embody” Militarism and Imperialism, but they surely dress up bodies and the latter is far more important than is commonly granted. For the insignia stand in for the substance – so much so that most anyone would recognize (Prussian) Militarism by its “feudal” uniforms and the eagerness of wearing these uniforms as the quintessential sign of Militarism -- contradistinction to what? I would suggest they stand in opposition to the way Imperialism is dressed up as well as to a new and more youthful dress-code that fuses military and civilian elements. Another possibility is elided in this triangulation. The uniform is set not only against civilian dress, but also against un-marked fighters with a gun or spear, such as franc-tireurs or warriors, and thus distinguishes between legitimate and illegitimate violence. Dress/uniform not only makes the military man, but it distinguishes what is right and wrong in war.

- The first tableau focuses on the elaborate military and, especially, officer uniforms of the period and discusses them as insignia of command authority – of officers over “their” men and of soldiers in relation to civilians. Elaborate uniforms accompanied the rise of the modern armies. Yet they reach their full elaboration only at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and become the staple of the critique of Militarism and of Prussian militarism more than any other. There are two issues that need elaboration. The first one is to note that into the 20<sup>th</sup> century the display of might, commanding masculinity and martial violence, are tied up with extraordinarily ornamental excess. This is strange because ornamentalism becomes ever more closely associated with women in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the case of the military, though, ornamental peacockery is distinctly an articulation of masculine might and privilege. This peacockery dresses up social “apparatus” and collective subjectivity that interests me, not least because it was wiped out so dramatically in the bloody opening battles of World War I. Note in this context that royal women have command authority and, hence, they can slip even into some of the more forbiddingly martial uniforms. There is, in other words, an older gender model at work. Second, the ornamentalism of uniforms found its highest expression neither in Prussia nor in the eastern monarchies (Habsburg, Russia), but in the British Raj and the French Empire (and in both cases the soldiers, such as the Zouave soldiers stood out; the latter, incidentally, found their imitators in the United States.). However, it is Prussian Militarism that becomes associated with hyper-masculine ornamentalism, and the question is why. The answer is that the debate about democracy (workers) and equality (women) and over just war has Prussian Militarism as its focus, and the ornamentalism of the military is one of the more visceral targets.
- This ornamental display of might can be contrasted with the black three-piece suit (in its sober work-a-day form) as the *Herrschaftszeichen* of the bourgeoisie and the preferred dress of metropolitan Imperialism. The simplicity of color and shape is set against the sumptuousness of female dress on one hand and the peacockery of the military caste on the other. The three-piece-suit will lead us to a discussion, not of Empire (see above!), but of Imperialism. The later choice is dictated by a strange reverse challenge that emanates from Prussia. The culture of commerce and finance is distinctly coded as feminine as in “(masculine) soldiers vs. (feminine) merchants,” even though imperialists form an exclusively male club in actual fact. Commerce and finance are also coded as peaceable, whereas its critics suggest the opposite, whether

we peruse “high” (Hobson, Lenin) theories or “low” (socialist, nationalist) popular denunciations of imperialism. “Rapacious” finance capitalism has moreover a peculiar gendered body, the racialized (and feminine) body of the Jew and the immaculate, but dead body of Dracula.

- The sailor suit is our third and most puzzling visual guide. It proliferated throughout society (from royals to proletarians) and was surprisingly gender and sex neutral (it served male and female, gay and heterosexual, children and adults), if highly charged. Not unlike colonial dress (Khaki) it carried the attributes and qualities of modern simplicity and sportiveness, before Coco Chanel invented the latter as modern style. The civilian appropriation of the naval uniform was for the young and the modern. Much as it is accepted as patriotic in an age of Imperialism, modern clothing also runs into massive opposition as licentious and immoral. It stands for youthfulness for sure and, hence, may also be seen as an indication of epistemic shifts in gender and sexual codes. In any case, it makes sense to link up the naval craze with the embrace of functional utility and, hence, with what is yet in the future, the overall as the uniform of the working man and woman and the relaxed sartorial standards of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.. What we got is a uniform alright, but it is a civil-military uniform, which is defined by utility or, in any case, by a dress that signals utility and reflects the industrialization of warfare as much as of urban life.

These three tableaux introduce us to a complex and often contradictory regime of signs. They break up the dualism of masculinity and femininity and bring out a moral discourse about “good society,” in which sex figures centrally. They also highlight the interstate and international struggle over these insignia of might.

A second set of considerations will explore “embodiments” of Militarism and Imperialism in contradistinction to their dress-up. Contemporaries as well as historians are rather muddled on the two acts of “dressing” and “embodying.” However, it is (I hope) productive to separate the two analytically, because they speak to different facets of the problem. In this section I would like to get at what social science jargon calls “structuration.” That is, we contemplate actions and forces that need to gain a body in order to be discussed and understood. More to the point, we wonder how violence is embodied in an age of Imperialism and Militarism and how legitimate and illegitimate forms of violence are separated in the process. Again, we also wonder what kind of violence remains unembodied and what happens when historians speak up as was the case when Mike Davis called the 1890s Bengal famine a “Victorian Holocaust.” As an additional note of caution, let me add that I want to keep Imperialism and Militarism together, because the defense of one typically implicates the other as its opposite and both stand accused of embodying regimes of violence. Neither of these observations solves the question of the gender of the embodiments or, for that matter, how much gender matters, but the insistence that Imperialism and Militarism are twins and that they typically acquire a body when deployed or debated is as good a starting point as I can think of.

- The Heart of Darkness Syndrome is the best venue I could come up with in discussing the violence and its legitimacy. Between the 1870s/1890s and 1910s there was a conspicuous rise in debates of atrocities (starting with the Turkish atrocities in the 1870s) and culminating in the debate on the Vulet-Chanoine mission, the Boxer

rebellion, the Boer War, Congo and Amazon atrocities, and the German colonial wars in Africa. The debate on atrocities runs through all imperial and imperialist countries and even Latin America and it has as its implicit other the debate on civilized warfare that happens at the same time in The Hague. The latter leads to the emergence or, in any case, the formalization of an international law of war that pertains to civilized nations. These debates provide ample material for discussing savage as opposed to civilized warfare and for the gendering at work in this distinction – most simply in the sense that in civilized warfare (all) men supposedly fight on demarcated battlefields and women and children stay home, which is a quite adventurous embodiment of violence in an age of industrial and mass war, when this distinction is massively challenged. Civilized masculinity is ever more defined as the protection of women and children. Savage warfare is the other issue, and the subject here is ambivalent, because it includes presumptions about the way natives fight and the assertions about the way they can be fought. Indiscriminate destruction as symbolic act – the deterrence effect of annihilation -- is the key for the latter. Colonial masculinity asserts the violent subjection of the natives. The two sides are mediated by a discourse of humanitarianism on the inviolability of the body

- In a second take on structuring violence, I would like to pick up the theme of Hubris and Anxiety in an Imperial World. This take should capture the embodiment(s) of European societies as masters of the universe and the deep anxiety that this rule may collapse any time. Two topics stand out and seem particularly suitable to a gendered and/or sexed analysis. There are firstly the perennial fear that civilization may prove to be brittle and that the norms and values of civilized intercourse will be broken apart from within and “from below” and, more so, the anxieties over the seductive nature of a more primitive existence. The figure of the gamekeeper instantly comes to mind. But there is a wider circle of characters. I am particularly fascinated by the free-floating association of vitalistic love, sex and violence that foreshadow World War I and its imagination and will eventually shape Fascism (and, much later, films about Fascism). We see here the formation of a (masculine) sensibility that celebrates the breaking of the veneer of (feminized) civilization in order to tap into a more primitive and urgent vitality, whether we turn to Freud, to Japanese wood-prints or to *Le sacre du Printemps*, where a virgin is slaughtered to bring about the revitalization of a *Männerbund*.
- Then again, the latter is the hubris-side of a story, in which anxieties proliferate. The fear of penetration – in a memorable woodprint a Japanese soldier is buggering the defeated Russian enemy – is not merely a matter of embodying battlefield defeat. It is a pervasive anxiety, which is expressed, among other things, in the bluster and Angst of Chickering’s “We Men Who Feel Most German.” The rise of the spy-novel in Great Britain seems as important as the German imagination of a “nervous age” and the irreversible decline of the French nation. The most successful stories of this kind, however, elaborate the ever present danger of seduction by secret powers like Free Masons, Jews or Vampires, the susceptibility of women to the seductions of these unmanly penetrators, and heroic men – Scientists, Nationalists and Warriors – who fight and defeat them.

It turns out that the peaceful and civil world of the “civilization” before World War I is a dangerous place. The wager of this section is that the gendering and sexing of the dangers

that lurk everywhere as effects of Imperialism and Militarism makes these dangers comprehensible and establishes a moral economy of good and evil as well as just and unjust that transforms older 19<sup>th</sup> century tales and shapes the century to come. Needless to say that sexualization and racialization often go hand in hand. The latter seems to me self-evident. I have rather more problems with the interplay of gender and sex in the stories I encountered so far. They lead me to wonder why it is that gender is so evidently and sometimes grotesquely sexualized. Could one say speak of a sexualization of always already gendered assumptions about violence? And what would be the consequence, if we thought of sexualization and racialization (rather more than gendering) as the markers of the turn to the twentieth century?

Only in the last section, Military Bodies – Performing the Military, will I turn to the more conventional aspects of gendering the military and Militarism and what the latter stands for. This section is set apart from the previous ones in that it takes on very real (male) bodies – an ever growing percentage of the male bodies of a nation -- and discusses how and why and with what effect they are shaped, molded, and disciplined into soldiers. Gender enters the analytics of this section by way of talking about men (and what men do to men) -- how men are made over into soldiers and officers are made over into commanders, who send their men into death and wager the future of their nations. The idea of what makes men over into soldiers and what kind of men soldiers are shifts and changes in this period. This is the main claim of this concluding section of the essay. I am even tempted to speak of an epistemic rupture. In any case, we will discover that the blood-right of officers (as representatives of the state) to send men into death is what “performing the military” is all about and that soldiers, far from rejecting this role, find a new kind of intimacy in act of killing.

- In the first instance, we need to deal with the tenacity not simply of stereotypical images, but also stereotypical practices in the armed forces both on a level of command and on a level of military practice in the field. Rigid command hierarchies on one hand and drill on the other never go away. It could indeed be argued that although national cultures differ, the images and practices of the military become ever more traditional(ist) as we move from prewar to wartime. But this traditionalism contrasts with developments that challenge radically traditional notions both of commanding and of subservient masculinity. The most important one results from the challenges of machine warfare. Fighting this war ultimately requires “a new man” – a man of steel, whose masculine identity is quite the opposite of the subaltern soldier. The lowly foot soldier now has to be more of a man in the sense of being his own commander, which not least raises the question as to what happens to the commanders. In any case, masculinities change; they acquire a different body. It is a more ascetic and athletic and a more impenetrable, “armored” body, though the latter is a fantasy. Real men are killed off.
- By the same token, we need to look at the developments that lead from a crisis of leadership (often associated with a crisis of masculinity, be it nervous aggressiveness or a constitutional timidity) to a new nationalism of civilian and military leaders and an aggressive fighting spirit that finds its expression in the collective subjectivity no longer in the military, but in the entire nation. The new leaders (Clemenceau, Lloyd George and, more questionably, Ludendorff, though eventually Hitler) are by and

large civilians and politicians rather than military men. I am not sure yet, how to deal with these nationalizing and totalizing leader figures, who are foreshadowed in the rising nationalist tide before the war. And I have no idea how to gender them, except by way of gendering what now is commonly called “charisma.” But it seems evident that these new leaders have little in common with authorities as father figures or armored bodies, even as people try to hang on to these older images (Petain) for dear life and fantasize over men of steel. There is a new bloody ruthlessness and stubbornness about them that makes these men utterly fascinating – and “fascination” is not a quality that is easily associated with military leadership or for that matter with banking and finance (at least until the 1980s).

- Last but not least, the emerging weapons culture ultimately remakes the military, but this is a perplexing phenomenon. First off, here is also an element of neo-traditionalism. New weapons revive old heroism, such as that of pilots or eventually tank leaders. It is intriguing that the newest weapons are linked to some of the most retro images of men as heroes, though we cannot exclude that the notion of heroes has changed. (They are more like film stars.) But second then the rising weapons culture also partakes in an emergent industrial (material) culture with its distinct attributes such as “efficiency” and its embodiment in the engineer as well as the orchestration of the masses. Also, it may well be the case that the main actors here are not men, but weapons such as big ships and big guns (“who” are anthropomorphized and for the most part remain feminine, though this would require closer scrutiny) and small guns as prosthetic extensions of the body. And third, weapons of mass destruction (starting with long-range artillery) and their handlers are not celebrated for their masculinity, but feared for their destruction of humanity. War becomes a *Menschenschlachthaus* and leaves behind what it always had been, a *Männerschlachthaus*, which is a historical half-truth, but certainly challenges the prewar idea of civilized war as a masculine thing.

The shift and indeed epistemic rupture in the role of gender in the transition to mechanized mass armies is startling. It seems entirely appropriate for the age of Imperialism and Militarism to suggest that a crisis in masculinity and thus gender affected or caused the decision for war or: that gender trouble makes war. However, we end up with a situation in which violence restores manliness, which makes the opposite case that gender is the effect of war or: that war makes gender and/or that violence makes the sexed body. Somewhere in this transition the 19<sup>th</sup> century ends and the 20<sup>th</sup> century begins.