

## **Conference:**

**Gender, War and Culture: From the Age of the World Wars to the Cold War,  
Anti-colonial Struggle to the Wars of Globalization (1910s-present)**

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### Part III: Chapter 23

## **MASCULINITY, MILITARY SERVICE AND COMBAT IN THE AGE OF WORLD WARS: A TRANSATLANTIC COMPARISON**

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### Aim:

Under scrutiny is the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, from the 1900s to the early 1950s, the time of Total Wars. For the purpose of the Handbook, the intersection of two developments shall be explored:

- The trepidation, or ‘crisis’, of masculinity since the turn of the century: numerous changes, including the rise of the consumer society and the inchoate empowerment of women, questioned the 19<sup>th</sup> middle-class gender division along the private-public dichotomy and propelled an intense, never-ending debate on how ‘true’ masculinity could be regained;
- The industrialization and brutalization of warfare: while the boundaries between combatants and non-combatants had been blurred or ignored throughout the history of warfare (in the 19<sup>th</sup> century mostly outside of Europe), only the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw the *systematic*, purposeful and planned mobilization as well as targeting of civilian populations in war on the European continent, with genocide as its ultimate consequence. The invention and use of new mass weapons that mechanized warfare paralleled this process.

Taken together, these two developments rendered the dominant 19<sup>th</sup> century notion of manliness, obsolete, the latter being embodied by the citizen-soldier, a man who switched easily between the civilian morality of production and the martial morality of destruction in order to secure the integrity of his nation and family. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Western societies did not dismiss this or related traditional notions of military masculinity revolving around concepts like independence, honor, and strength, but tried to adapt them to the fundamental changes of warfare. The era of Total Wars was driven by feverish, convulsive, arduous, and always controversial searches for masculinity, i.e. for answers to the questions ‘What is a man?’ and how does masculinity relate to political constitutions, entities, and regimes. This chapter shall inquire into the various directions and fragile results of these searches at different times, in different regions and countries, under different political regimes,

and among different groups of people (men/women, soldiers/civilians, officers/rank-and-files, rightists/leftists, white/non-whites, working-class/middle-class, etc.).

The result of these searches shall be addressed as ‘hegemonic diversification’ of masculinity, especially military. In the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, after two catastrophic total wars, Western societies allowed for, appreciated, and considered a broader variety of attitudes, actions, and emotions as manly than at the beginning. This diversification, however, was rigidly restricted to, in fact traded off for the tightening of the heterosexual standard. Homosexual masculinity was marginalized while heterosexual masculinity was pluralized.

### State of Research:

Since the 1970s, especially since the 1990s, historians, sociologists, and literary scholars have established a multifaceted body of research into military masculinities and their contexts in the time and space under scrutiny. Klaus Theweleit’s now classic extension of the misogynic writings of German post-WWI Freikorps fighters into a universal theory of masculinity defined through the rejection, suppression, or destruction of whatever may be considered as feminine and family-oriented has been echoed and indiscriminately transferred to various historical and social settings. It has also, since the mid-1990s, provoked more nuanced inquiries into representations as well as experiences and appropriations of military masculinities.

Joanna Bourke’s 1996 analysis of ordinary British WWI servicemen’s private writings and similar studies (Nelson; Crouthamel; Frevert; Kühne; Rose; Belkin; Kivimaki; Tec) have highlighted the fluidity and ambiguity of both the experiential and representational sides of masculinities, the first examined especially by focusing on the ways men interacted in all-male groups, i.e. homosocial settings, such as military units or veterans’ associations. Rather than fleeing domesticity and femininity, men worked on including these ideals into complex and fragile constructions of male identity. A yet different strand of research has focused on public discourses on and representations of masculinities including memoirs, novels, monuments, visual propaganda, movies, and highlighted how ideas about concepts of national identity and citizenship have been based on heroic masculinities and especially male bodies (Mosse; Jarvis; Braudy; Koureas). German speaking Central Europe and the Anglophone part of the Western world have been the focus of all of these studies; military masculinities in other regions, such as Eastern Europe and Russia, Southern or Northern European countries are still covered only rarely or in passing (Roeger/Leiserowitz; Krylova; Tec; Ahlback; Kivimaki).

### Concepts:

That gender is a relational category has been affirmed many times in order to grasp on ideas, beliefs, attributes, and practices men and women consider as ‘manly’ or masculine, i.e. features that are typically but not exclusively performed, or thought to be performed, by idealized types of men, and are seen as necessary to become or be a man; these features define powerful social relations, hierarchies, inclusions, and exclusions. How these features are shaped, understood, and appropriated depends on

their contexts, i.e. their relation to other categories of difference – class, race, ethnicity, age, region, sex, etc. These relations are historically changeable. (Although not entirely identical, the English concepts ‘masculinity,’ manliness,’ and ‘maleness’ are used synonymously for the purpose of this comparative inquiry.)

While many scholars (Theweleit; Jeffords; Goldstein) insisted on a dichotomy between masculinity and femininity—in order to become a man, one must disavow whatever is considered feminine—more recent studies (Bourke; Kühne; Belkin) have suggested that military masculinities often consist of a dynamic or even dialectical relationship between the two poles; soldiers embrace ‘feminine’ qualities as part of their practiced masculinity. Robert Connell’s concept of ‘hegemonic masculinities’ has been widely used to explore the (historically contingent) hierarchies that order the plurality of masculinities in any given institution, nation, or group of people: different men, e.g. generals versus rank-and-files, black men versus white men, war volunteers versus drafted soldiers—may observe respective masculinities, but these ideas or practices, and their carriers, operate in a constant state of competition for broader social approval and power, i.e. for hegemony.

#### Historical Overview:

Any historical inquiry into Western masculinities of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has to render account to the traumatic experience of the First World War; this war ended not only with the destruction of most European monarchies and its ideological basis, the thousand-year old idea of divine, God-given political regimes, but eroded also other mythical certainties including the assumption of a biologically determined polarity of man and women and their respective characteristics.

These ideological confusions climaxed during and after World War I but rooted in pre-war social changes. Infringing allegedly male job markets and state constituencies, women seemed to adopt manly characteristics while men seemed to effeminate by indulging themselves in consumerism, idleness, vanity, narcissism and other ‘feminine’ attitudes including homosexuality. Worries like these affected Western societies at a time when they were impressed by social Darwinism and concerned with their prospects as imperial and colonial powers (Britain’s Boer War 1899-1902; American-Spanish War 1898) or in a future major European war and shocked by statistical data suggesting a long-term decline of physical health and strength of men.

Responding to this ‘crisis’ of masculinity (some scholars have doubted whether there was ever no crisis of, i.e. uncertainty about, masculinity), phantasies about war as a purgatory became popular. War would cleanse society from weak and effeminate men, reverse their ‘degeneration’, and reinstate the strong, tough, dominant, heterosexual, protective, selfless, and honorable male standard. Until the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, Western societies had adhered to ‘restrained’ and domestic concepts of masculinity. Now the soldier, the warrior, or, in the U.S., the frontier hero epitomized the now hegemonic martial masculinity. Not all parts of these societies shared the transformation, however. While the vociferous educated middle-class pushed this desire for war and dominated the public discourse, the socialist working classes and the less vociferous rural populations observed reluctant attitudes.

Crucially, this new martial masculinity did not emerge out of actual war experiences (e.g. the Civil War in the U.S., or the Crimean War in Europe). Instead, it indicated the drift of societies into a counter world. The frontier hero in the U.S. became popular when the frontier was closed. European fascination with belligerent masculinity spread after generations of Europeans had not been subjugated to any kind of war. When young men in Europe in 1914 volunteered to the armies in order to pass the test of masculinity—"I must be a man ... I ask nothing better than to end in honorable battle for my King and Country," wrote Oscar Wilde's son Cyril Holland in June 1914, obsessed with overcoming the stigma of "effeminate" decadence that lasted on his family (he was indeed killed in battle a while after)—they expected a short cabinet war with sportive fights between individual men dedicated to traditional ideas of chivalry and honor. Instead they felt paralyzed and emasculated in the mud of endless trenches and in face of horrible mutilations and anonymous mass death as the result of a mechanized war of attrition. Only a minority of soldiers actually suffered from "shell shock," yet it symbolized like nothing else the erosion of the heroic masculinity that had enthused men before and at the beginning of the war. The fact that most of the soldiers had been drafted, not volunteered, and not shared, or not even cared for, the martial rhetoric of vociferous educated middle-class men did not diminish the disillusionment.

The subjective experience of anonymous warfare and male powerlessness, the latter paralleled by (actual or alleged) female empowerment at the home front, evoked various responses. Three may be distinguished, all of them emerging during the war to then be popularized afterwards: the pacifist disavowal of martial masculinity; its belligerent radicalization; and efforts to renew the conjunction of martial and civilian masculinities. Neither the first nor the second type of responses ever gained more than temporary mass support, although pacifist sentiments shaped France's political culture in the interwar period substantially, and radical belligerence chaperoned the rise of fascism in Italy, Germany, and elsewhere. But fascism's success in Europe would be poorly explained by focusing on depictions of 'steeled,' machine-like warriors or brutal, berserker-like Stormtroopers. On the other hand, at least the popular pacifist movements did not dismiss military masculinity completely. Even if major parts of the French veterans movement resorted to a Never-Again attitude, they remained proud of having heroically sacrificed lives and limbs, or offered such sacrifice, on the altar of their nation, not by devaluing military masculinity altogether. And so it was in other countries such as Germany.

Neither during nor after the war adhered the bulk of WWI soldiers and veterans to super-martial fictions or abandoned military masculinities altogether. Instead they worked on mediating and integrating different and even opposing ideas about what you had to do to become a man and to be acknowledged as such. They did so by transforming and adjusting the 19<sup>th</sup> century concept of the sovereign citizen-soldier to the conditions of total war and mass destruction. Ideals of sovereignty, dominance, and stability had fed 19<sup>th</sup> century masculinity. By contrast, WWI- and post-WWI masculinities embraced the experience of physical and mental fragility and men's ability to perform both tough manliness and soft femininity. To be sure, the post-war discourse still spared masculinity's crucial feature--power and dominance--by insisting on men's will and eventual success in overcoming feminine,

weak, and soft conditions. These were appreciated only as temporary conditions. Yet the change is significant. While pre-WWI masculinity was designed as a state or a property, post-WWI masculinity was understood as a process—the lifelong alternation of first indulging in and then overcoming states of femininity, i.e. weakness, traumatization, humiliation, ideally experienced in the military and especially in war. The cult around prosthetics, supposedly repairing all kinds of war damages and propagated in all post-WWI countries, visualized this concept of masculinity most decisively. Loosing a leg could not destroy manliness as enough technics, tools, and therapies stood ready to yet reconstruct man's functioning and power.

Not the progress of medical technique but myths about a supposedly inclusive social and mental dynamic of the male bond and images of complex personalities, worldly-wise sobered yet steadfast and stoic, allowed the popular reconstruction of hegemonic masculinity in the interwar period. Male solidarity in small combat units, addressed as brotherhood in arms, comradeship, and friendship was praised for saving the citizen-soldier from physical death, emotional deprivation, and moral dissolution. It ensured the fighting effectiveness—heroic masculinity—and at the same allowed for homoeroticism, in World War I even homosexuality, and for expressing all kinds of tender, ‘feminine’ emotions. Either way, in war the male bond bore the potential of uniting men of different social backgrounds and different personalities. This way, it epitomized the united nation. Only in war the nation came into being, war veterans propagated.

Germany had lost the war under the impression of deep class gaps within the military (contrary to the idea of comradeship), i.e. the dissolution of military unity, and yet German popular war memory enthroned the idealized trench community of fate as the ultimate resort of true masculinity as well as the nucleus of a truly united nation. This community had welded together soldier figures deprived of hope and agency, war memory claimed, most popularly in Remarque’s bestseller *All Quiet on the Western Front*. In this and almost all other popular German war novels the group, not individual soldiers, are the heroes.

In Britain and in France ideas about the rebirth of the nation through the experience of male bonding in war gained some popularity as well, although not as much as in Germany. Especially in Britain (in a different way also in the U.S.) individual heros stood at the center of popular war memory. One of them was Lawrence of Arabia, an extraordinarily complex, ambiguous type of man, who displayed exoticism, homoeroticism, dandyism, charisma, and military functionality at the same time. Consequently, memories of trench comradeship in Britain focused on friendships between individuals, based on mutual sympathy and agency, not on fate or coercion. In Britain the discourse on masculinities privileged civilian over military values.

Since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the discourse on masculinities had been impressed by the rising athletic movement that was fueled by the desire for physical strength including youth or youthfulness as the crucial feature of manliness, idealized along classic Greek statues. This was a deliberate departure from 19<sup>th</sup> century masculinities, which had prioritized moral, spiritual, and social qualities over physical ones. Early body builders, or strongmen, as they were called at the time, like Eugene Sandow,

headed this movement. It reached out to various types of sport enthusiasts—the revival of the Olympics is only one example—as well as to paramilitary strands of the simultaneously rising youth organizations, paradigmatically represented by the Boy Scouts in the Anglophone world. Initially and still in the 1930s clearly a common Western phenomenon, not a German peculiarity, it was radicalized in Nazi Germany. Supernatural statues came to visualize Nazi fantasies about the dominance of Aryan master race; the male body cult received the fascist smack it still has today. In the Third Reich, the muscular male body indeed symbolized the *Volksgemeinschaft*, the racially purified Aryan nation. Nazi propaganda, however, never monopolized the muscular, youthful, athletic, heroic, seemingly invincible male body; it remained popular throughout the Second World War (and beyond) and symbolized the nation at war also in the U.S., for instance, although in a less martial way than in Germany. As often in representations and practices of gender norms, the devil is in the details. While the symbolic male body in Nazi Germany was depicted nude, machinelike, and void of any individual traits, “the United States deployed a wider rhetoric of muscles, which incorporated a broader range of bodies within its body politic,” “retained distinct facial characteristics”, thus invoking America’s individualistic culture, and occasionally even played with the theme of racial diversity, as C. S. Jarvis (pp. 48-50) has shown.

This individualistic, eventually civilian note of the dominant, hegemonic masculinity has been identified also for other parts of the Anglophone world, and it is reflected in the World War II combat motivations of American soldiers if compared to the Germans, for instance. As is known, Nazi ideology promoted a concept of ruthless, in fact genocidal, masculinity that elevated above Judeo-Christian traditions of mercy, pity, and empathy with the unarmed or defeated enemy. It would be wrong, however, to take such propagandistic representations of hegemonic masculinity at face value. ‘Extreme’ masculinities as adored and observed in elite troops such as the SS in Nazi Germany or, in different ways, in the Marines in the U.S., did not easily dominate the mass armies based on conscription (Cameron; Diehl). The latter armies needed to accommodate rather different types of men. Consequently they had to offer flexible, diverse, and inclusive standards of manliness. A comparative inquiry into personal writings of ordinary German and American WWII soldiers, for instance, reveals an enormous specter of different subjective experiences and practices counting as manly. In short: the ‘totalization’ of Western warfare, and the subsequent recruitment of larger parts of the male populations than ever before, facilitated, in fact required, the pluralization of hegemonic masculinity. Norms and standards such as courage, toughness, perseverance, the maxim ‘death before dishonor,’ and a certain offhandedness, serenity, and disdain for heroic grandiloquence based military masculinity in both (and other) WWII armies, the latter being a ‘lesson’ taken from the disillusioning experience of the First World War. In either army, however hegemonic masculinity did not exclude the performance of ‘feminine’ emotions; military masculinity was astonishingly divers and inclusive, not exclusive—except for one part, as Paul Fussell (*Great War*, pp. 279-80) has noted long ago with regards to British war poetry. While homoeroticism, even homosexuality, could be relatively openly communicated in

and right after the First World War, this was no longer possible thirty years later, neither in the British nor in the German army.

### Shortcomings:

Obviously, this outline does not render sufficient account to national and other differences, such as those between elite troops and drafted mass armies. Nor does it address masculinities in marginalized or persecuted groups (e.g. the victims of Nazi genocidal warfare; or deserters). The final essay will address these themes exemplarily.

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