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# Women and War: A Focus for Rewriting History

Joan W. Scott

*This article is excerpted from the introduction to a collection of papers presented at the "Conference on Women and War" sponsored by the Center for European Studies, Harvard University, January 4-6, 1984. The collection will be published as Women, War, and History, edited by Margaret R. Higonnet, Jane Jenson, Sonya Michel, and Margaret C. Weitz. A list of the conference presentations and a summary of the conference, by Persis Charles, is on page 7.*



An investigation and analysis of the specific subject of women and war points to the possibility for important conceptual advances in the field of women's history. Debate has traditionally centered on the characterization of the great wars of the twentieth century as watersheds for women. The focus has been women; for those interested in their experience, the question has been about the impact on them of war. For the most part, evidence has been compiled to affirm or deny that war was a turning point. The single answer (yes or no) assumes linearity, direct correlation, and simple relationships between cause and effect.

## **Watershed Theme: Variation One**

There seem to be at least four variations on the watershed theme. The first hails the new opportunities opened for women by the war emergency: in production there were new skilled jobs in heavy industry at high pay; there were new positions as well in government bureaucracies, educational institutions, the armed forces; and on the front lines as ambulance drivers, medics, and *resistantes*. During the war, this argument continues, women were able to demonstrate their capabilities, their skill, and their power, and thus to challenge the irrational prejudices that otherwise or previously had confined them to a separate sphere. Indeed, women proved they could be like men. For the historian William Chafe, the behavioral changes for American women created during World War II were irrevocable and fundamental, even if there was something of an ideological lag until the 1960s.<sup>1</sup> Then feminism initiated the change in attitudes required to make social ideas about women's roles and women's place consonant with the behavior of twenty years. The dissenting position argues, with Leila Rupp, that the power of ideology denied the possibility of really changing women's status. American war propaganda appealed to notions of female service and self-sacrifice "for the duration," thus perpetuating cultural notions of female difference, even in circumstances which should have objectively challenged or denied those notions.<sup>2</sup>

## **Variation Two**

The second variation on the watershed theme stresses political rights, pointing to the "irony" of the fact that it was after

World War I that women (whose interest was presumably in peace) received formal citizenship in England, the United States, and Germany, and after World War II, in Italy and France. In the textbook renditions of the story, women's good behavior during wartime assumes far greater significance than their organized suffrage struggles in the pre- and post-war periods; that, of course, was often how the politicians explained extending the right to vote to women. (Rewarding good and ladylike behavior was a far better justification for granting suffrage than was appearing to give in to the militant tactics that had characterized the pre-war era.) But monographic accounts of suffrage also deal with war and the nature of its impact—socially and politically—on women's rights and the women's rights movement. And some of the major political histories—of British suffrage, for example—argue that women's cooperation with the war effort earned them support for the franchise and served to counter the negative attitude engendered by militant suffragettes before 1914.<sup>3</sup>

Those who argue that war did not have a major impact on the question of women's rights minimize both the effects of war—compared to ongoing suffrage campaigns—and the effects of the vote on women. Without other legal, economic, and social changes, they insist, the public recognition of women as citizens was an essentially empty or merely symbolic gesture.

## **Variation Three**

The third variation on the watershed theme, albeit a minor one, presupposes a fundamental (natural?) female antipathy to war, and so documents women's leadership in peace movements and in life-saving and nurturing activities. War gave women the opportunity, in this view, to articulate a feminist politics in opposition to the destructive (masculine) impulses of nation-states. The world wars were thus a turning point in feminist consciousness and a starting point for pacifist activities embodied, in the early years of this century, in the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, and leading directly, in more recent times, to Greenham Common and Seneca Falls. Those opposing this variation point out that female opponents of war were actually very few. The vast majority of women lost sight of their (biological or culturally constructed) interests as the political crisis united men and women around national concerns. If sexual difference persisted in the culture, it did not inform national mobilizations in support of war.<sup>4</sup>

## **Variation Four**

The fourth variation on the watershed theme focuses on arguments about long- and short-term impacts. Some historians insist that war initiated changes which revolutionized women's status over the long run. Although it may

have taken years to work out the details, the revolution began with the structures improvised or established during a war. Others see the gains for women as temporary and short-term, "for the duration," for individual consciousness, but with no lasting or socially transformative impact. The sexual division of labor, unequal treatments for women, and obstacles to their economic, educational, and political advancement persisted despite the "proof" the war furnished about women's responsibility, capability, and skill.

Although it is possible to take a position on these arguments, and so to assess the wars' impacts on women (and perhaps to decide once and for all whether war is a watershed or not), I think that approach leads ultimately to a dead end, at least as far as my agenda for women's history is concerned. For so long as the questions focus only on *women's* experience and *women's* status, these discussions of women and war can continue to be left out of standard accounts. How can we at once include them and change the standard accounts? How can we use women's history to rewrite history? How might the history of the world wars be written differently if questions about women and gender figured in the story?

These questions bring us to the important possibility for women's history inherent in the "Women and War" papers: the reconceptualization and rewriting of the wars' political history. By asking questions not about watersheds and the impacts of events on women, but about processes of politics, about interconnections between economic policy and the meanings of social experiences, about cultural representations of sexual difference and their presence in political discourse, we move the inquiry to new terrain. For the questions about the representation of sexual difference are what link women's history with "political" history and permit historians to maintain a perspective that at once makes women visible as historical actors, as subjects of the narrative, and offers new readings of, in this case, two world wars.

### Representations of Sexual Difference

To begin, I would ask questions about representations of sexual difference. How, in the course of the extraordinary conditions and wartime emergencies, was the sexual division of labor reproduced? To answer this large question, we have to look at policies directed at women and at the construction of women's experience. How were mobilizations of women handled and what political processes were involved? What were the terms of appeal used to mobilize women? What were the interconnections among women's experiences at work and in public roles (which women? which roles?) and policy discussions and debates about appropriate activities for women? (Who took what sides in the debates and what reasons did they offer for their positions?) How, in Denise Riley's terms, was the "web of cross-reference," which included politics, social science, and social policy, formulated?<sup>5</sup>

To answer the question about the reproduction of the sexual division of labor, however, we must go beyond an examination of the terms of women's experience *per se* to metaphoric uses of gender representation. Did nation-states express political goals in sexual terms? What meanings did sexual representations of war have for social and personal experience? Here it seems critical that the kind of analysis of manliness and masculinity in wartime literary production,



Jane Addams and Mary McDowell at 1932 Democratic National Convention. (Swarthmore College Peace Collection)

offered by Sandra Gilbert, also be done for political discourse; indeed, the two kinds of texts must be similarly analyzed with questions about their uses of sexual representation. Here, too, Michelle Perrot's paper on antifeminism in pre-World War I France offers an important model of interpretation. She suggests that long before hostilities commenced, a climate of opinion existed that expressed national anxieties as a crisis of masculinity (brought on in part by heightened feminist activity during the last decades of the nineteenth century). The terms in which wartime efforts were defined, and by which war itself was depicted, existed before the war began, and those terms included references to women and their politics that were rooted in specific historical contexts. With this kind of information in mind, we can ask whether the war heightened or relaxed cultural definitions of sexual difference. How? In what terms? Was the process singular or varied? Who was affected and in what ways? Is there a politics of gender (that is, dispute about language, terminology, allocation of resources, the exercise of power, and the definition of the terms of relationship between the sexes) in the politics of war?

The papers presented at the "Women and War" confer-



ence begin to point to some answers, or at least to areas of fruitful examination. By focusing on a variety of themes and details in these papers, and by moving across different levels or kinds of analysis, we can extract a sense of possible directions for a new history.

### **Militarist and Misogynist Rhetoric**

The first theme we might want to explore further has to do with the coincidence of militarist and misogynist rhetoric. Michelle Perrot and Sandra Gilbert illustrate the ways in which political threats can be represented in terms of gender. Gender relationships, the traits and behaviors of male and female, are assigned a timeless quality, outside social and political systems. The turmoil of politics is then depicted as an overturning or inversion of the "natural" order: Men are weak and impotent, "cut-off" and rendered unmanly, while women are strong, taking over public life, abandoning husbands and children, ugly, domineering. Both papers argue that war, or at least World War I, is then the ultimate disorder, the disruption of all previously established relationships, or the outcome of earlier instability. War is represented as a disorder; disorder is represented as sexual disorder. Peace thus implies a return to "known" or "traditional" gender relationships, the familiar and natural order of families, men in public roles, women at home. In the inter-war period, the fascists' call to order and their promise of stability were also presented in gender terms, as a restoration of established and commonly understood relationships between the sexes. Susan Gubar's paper shows that Nazi ideology went further, articulating an ideal of virility that put women in subordinate and inferior positions. (Indeed, Gubar argues that the virulence of Nazi misogyny catalyzed the opposition of women writers.) The Nazis also expressed antisemitism in terms that were explicitly gender-related. The Aryan bonds that formed the (masculinized) nation were defined in contrast to those of effeminate, homosexual Jews. The excluded and marginalized were feminized, hence their exclusion was justified. How did these representations resonate in German and in Jewish families? What sort of alternative meanings of ethnic identity, and of male and female, were created among those Germans who resisted the Nazis, and among Jews? What kinds of political appeals are inherent in the uses of these kinds of gender representation?

### **State Policy**

The second theme that emerges from the conference papers concerns state policy, especially family-welfare and pro-natalist policy. An examination of the terms of the policy reveals not only something about the intentions of its proponents, but something about the way politics itself was represented. As states developed wartime or post-war policies for families, they justified these by pointing to the need to restore a natural order or organization. Thus Karin Hausen shows how the German state aimed at restoring "natural families" for war widows; Sonya Michel finds American social workers arguing for education and day-care as a way of bolstering mothers' natural ties to their children; Renate Bridenthal documents the ways Nationalist Feminists were encouraged to serve the German nation by fulfilling and expanding their roles as domestic producers; and Denise Riley discusses post-World War II British pro-natalism as a policy that enshrined motherhood as an inherent function of all women. In all cases, a set of political decisions was

represented as a protection of natural social relationships among family members, especially mothers and children. The consequence of this kind of representation was to depict social policy as somehow outside of politics, when, in fact, vast social and political reorganizations were being attempted or implemented. Post-war stabilization efforts were almost always also efforts of reorganization; yet the political processes at work were obscured by discussions of the welfare of mothers and children in terms of their natural psychological and biological needs. For historians who accept the terms of discussion at face value and separate their treatments of social policy from the more "serious" politics of diplomacy and war, those political processes are also obscured. Since women tended to be the focus and the recipients of social welfare policy, those who attend to women's history are in a special position to reveal the politics of the programs, both as they relate to the programs themselves, and as they relate to the "larger" issues of national politics.

### **Power of Ideological Representation**

A third theme we can extract from the conference papers has to do with the power of ideological representation. Women's experiences in World War II, as examined in two papers based on oral histories of women in France and Germany, were remarkable for their insistence on death and deprivation. These discussions of experience contrast dramatically with the official discussions of heroism and valor aimed at mobilizing national support. Karin Hausen writes, "The silence surrounding the hard, gray everyday realities of war-time and post-war life is part of the pathos of hero worship. The innumerable war monuments in our city squares block our view of the realities of war . . ." She then quotes the president of the German Reichstag in 1918, and we can see in his words the transformation of suffering into heroism, the silencing of the human experience of loss and grief by invocations to patriotism and the life of the fatherland. Indeed, the dead soldiers become, in this speech, the children, the property, and the lifeblood of the nation:

Heavy, too, the losses of human life demanded by the war. Many a woman's heart is consumed by grief at the death of her fallen husband and brother, many a father and mother's heart aches for the sons torn from them. We honor their pain and mourn with them, but the fatherland thanks them and is proud of so many heroic sons who have spilt their blood and laid down their lives in the World War we are fighting for our own existence.

Considerations of women's experience, when brought into relationship with official pronouncements on the meaning of war, provide insight not only into the discrepancy between domestic, private history and official, national history, but also (and more importantly) a means of analyzing how and by whom national memory is constructed. The private-public distinction—families as compared to the nation, mothers' needs versus needs of state, individual death as opposed to national existence—is critical in the formulation of nationalist or patriotic ideologies. To what extent these ideologies also rest on and reinscribe existing notions of gender relationships and the sexual division of labor remains an important—and as yet unstudied—question.

The relative silence of the state on the issues of individual war experiences contrasts with the noise associated with

policy proposals on pro-natalism, especially after World War II. Positive attention to women and families is evident; indeed, the conference papers point to an "over-feminization" of the language of social policy in this period. Is there a connection, in official pronouncements, between the wartime and post-war silence (or minimization of the issue) about misery and death for soldiers and the loud discussions about the welfare of mothers and children? Instead of treating these as separate subjects, can we view them as aspects of the same national politics? How? Tim Mason has written about the "reconciliatory function of the family in Nazi ideology"; is there a similar function evident more generally in post-war Western politics?<sup>26</sup> What can we learn about the operations of political discourse, about the appeal of ideological rhetoric, about the interconnections among governmental policies, about the perceptions and politics of two world wars from these kinds of questions?

In the three themes I have discussed, the focus on political discourse necessarily raises a set of important methodological issues: the diversity of experience of social and national groups; differences between women and men; between Jewish and German women; among men and women of different races and ethnic groups; between dominant cultures and persecuted minorities. Yet my emphasis on the state, on political discourse, cultural construction, and ideological representation suggests a uniformity not only of language, but of its impact. In fact, as Denise Riley suggests, we need to study the "lived effects of political language." By that I take it she means we have to find out how people interpreted, understood, and used the language of politics; how official pronouncements resonated with various publics;

how people articulated their understandings of war and its consequences; how opposition was expressed and silenced; how this differed in different nations and among different groups. To find this information involves more than a search for documentation in the form of written texts and oral interviews. We cannot simply accept at face value the written records or individual memories of various people; we cannot assume that women's experience somehow lies outside of officially constructed contexts, as a definably separate, purer commentary on politics. Instead, we must "read" the evidence we accumulate for what it reveals about how people appropriate and use political discourse, how they are shaped by it and in turn redefine its meaning.

The particular advantage in "reading" women's texts is that it gives us another angle on political discourse; it reveals new interpretations, stresses different understandings of events, exposes hitherto hidden connections, and leads to new insights into how political consensus is achieved. Annemarie Tröger's paper shows German women reconstructing the war as a kind of natural disaster, with themselves as its victims, unable to alter its course. Although their language contains what seem almost universal references to women's passivity and helplessness, it also contains historically specific referents—to German politics during World War II and to gender identifications inherent in Nazi political discourse. We can "read" out of these interviews a sense of how individuals construct historical meaning and a sense of how official political ideology had built into it, and was built upon, references to gender and sexual difference.

One finds "gender" in political discourse not only by reading women's texts. When women, children, or the family is



**Delegates to the First International Congress of Women, meeting at The Hague in 1915. In the front row, from left to right, Alice Thatcher Post, Jane Addams, Fanny Fern Andrews, Rose Morgan French. Behind Alice Thatcher Post, Alice Hamilton. Behind Alice Hamilton, Lucy Biddle Lewis. In the third row, far left, wearing a flowered hat, Emily Greene Balch. In the last row, third from the left, Grace Abbott. Photo from the Swarthmore College Peace Collection. (Swarthmore College Peace Collection).**



the subject of policy debate or of legislation, references to sexual difference abound. In addition, and perhaps most interesting, are the uses of gender in political representations of all kinds—whether or not the focus of discussion has anything to do with real women or the specific relations between the sexes. Analyses of gender imagery in political rhetoric may reveal a good deal about the intentions of speakers, the appeal of such rhetoric, and the possible nature of its impacts. And, of course, such analyses will also reveal some of the ways in which cultural construction of sexual difference are reproduced. The exciting point, however, is that the concerns of political history and women's history can be joined around analyses of gender in political discourse. By examining the ways in which political events are constructed in political discourse and by examining the ways gender or sexual difference figure in those constructions, we begin to discover the interconnections between gender and politics. By examining women's history—female experience, actions, and expressions, as well as policies and legislation formulated for them—as a part of political history, and by asking how women's history figured in the “larger” play of national (or international) politics, we gain new understanding of that politics. The question then becomes not what was the impact of the wars on women, but what does the history of women during that period reveal about the politics of war? Beyond that, there is a whole series of questions about gender and politics, summed up, I think, in questions I asked earlier: Is there a politics of gender in the politics of war? And what does one reveal about the other?

Women's history as the rewriting of history is an ambitious undertaking, but it is not beyond our daring. Indeed, it is because it is so much within our grasp that I ask my questions and anticipate that we will find some, if not all, of the answers. □

## NOTES

1. William H. Chafe, *The American Woman: Her Changing Social, Economic, and Political Role, 1920-1970* (New York: Oxford University Press)
2. Leila Rupp, *Mobilizing Women for War: German and American Propaganda, 1939-1945* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1978)
3. See, for example, Constance Rover, *Women's Suffrage and Party Politics*. 19. It would be interesting to analyze some of these histories and see the extent to which they incorporate the rhetoric of politicians on the question of the relationship between women's wartime activity and the granting of female suffrage.
4. It should be obvious that this argument, like many historical disputes, rests on a projection of current feminist political debates onto historical materials. In this case, at least two points are at issue: whether women are essentially or naturally peace-loving because of their biological or cultural preoccupation with childbearing and childrearing, and whether political appeals against militarism ought to speak to notions women are presumed to hold about themselves, whether or not these are “true.” The first position assumes an inherent pacifism in women's nature; the second seeks to exploit cultural beliefs, assuming that ideas about gender are less susceptible to change than ideas about politics and the military.
5. Denise Riley, *War in the Nursery: Theories of the Child and the Mother* (London: Virago Press, 1983), 189.
6. “Women in Nazi Germany,” *History Workshop*, no. 1 (1976): 74-113, and no. 2 (1976): 5-32.

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## Papers Presented at the “Women and War” Conference

Joan W. Scott, Pembroke Center for Teaching and Research on Women and Brown University, “Rewriting History”; Patrice Higonnet, History, Harvard University, and Margaret Randolph Higonnet, English, University of Connecticut at Storrs, “The Double Helix”; Charles Maier, History, Harvard, “War and Social Change”; Michelle Perrot, UER, Geographie, Histoire, et Sciences de la Société, University of Paris, VII, “The New Eve and the Old Adam: Changes in Women's Condition in France at the Beginning of the Twentieth Century”; Steven Hause, History, University of Missouri at St. Louis, “More Minerva than Mars: The French Women's Rights Campaign and the First World War”; Renate Bridenthal, History, Brooklyn College, “Nationalist Feminism in Germany during and after World War I: A Contradiction”; Ruth Milkman, Sociology, Queens College, CUNY, “American Women and Industrial Unionism in World War II”; Paula Schwartz, Institute of French Studies, New York University, “Observations on the Specificity of Women's Roles in the French Resistance”; Karin Hausen, Technical University, West Berlin, “The German Nations Obligations to the Heroes' Widows of World War I”; Denise Riley, Department of Cul-

tural Studies, Northeast London Polytechnic, “The Peculiarities of Women as Objects of Social Policy: World War II in Britain”; Sonya Michel, Committee on History and Literature, Harvard, “Patriotism and Professionalism: Social Services for American Working Women in World War II”; Jane Jenson, Political Science, Carleton University, “Liberation and New Rights for Women: France after World War II”; Sandra Gilbert, “Soldiers Heart: Literary Men, Literary Women, and the Great War”; Susan Gubar, English, Indiana University, “Charred Skirts and Deathmask: World War II and the Blitz of Women”; Lynne Layton, Psychology, Boston University, “Vera Brittain's Testament”; Andrea Walsh, Sociology, Clark University, “Of Strong Mothers and Terrified Wives: World War II and Hollywood's ‘Women's’ Films”; Annemarie Tröger, Sociology, University of Hannover, “Experience/Memories/Images of War: Oral Accounts of World War II by Women in Berlin and Hannover”; Margaret Collins Weitz, Center for European Studies, Harvard, “Discovery and Self-Discovery of Women in the French Resistance”; Carla Brooks Johnston, Mary Ingram Bunting Institute, Radcliffe College, “Concluding Remarks.” □