Women's Support Roles in the World Wars Right up to the outbreak of World War I, feminists on both sides pledged themselves to peace, in transnational women’s solidarity. Within months of the war’s outbreak, however, “all the major feminist groups of the belligerents had given a new pledge – to support their respective governments.” Suddenly, campaigners for women’s suffrage became avid patriots and organizers of women in support of the war effort. Many of these feminists hoped that patriotic support of the war would enhance the prospects for women’s suffrage after the war, and this came true in a number of countries. (On women factory workers, see pp. 384–96.)171

The more than 25,000 US women who served in Europe in World War I did so on an entrepreneurial basis, especially before 1917. They helped nurse the wounded, provide food and other supplies to the military, serve as telephone operators (the “Hello Girls”), entertain troops, and work as journalists. Many of these “self-selected adventurous women … found their own work, improvised their own tools … argued, persuaded, and scrounged for supplies. They created new organizations where none had existed.” Despite hardships, the women had “fun” and “were glad they went.” Women sent out to “canteen” for the US Army – providing entertainment, sewing on buttons, handing out cigarettes and sweets – were “virtuous women” sent to “keep the boys straight.” Army efforts to keep women to the rear proved difficult. “Women kept ignoring orders to leave the troops they were looking after, and bobbing up again after they had been sent to the rear.” Some of the US women became “horrifyingly bloodthirsty” in response to atrocity stories and exposure to the effects of combat. Looking back, the American women exhibited “contradictory feelings” of sadness about the war, horror at what they had seen, and pride in their own work. Mary Borden, a Baltimore millionaire who set up a hospital unit at the front from 1914 to 1918, wrote: “Just as you send your clothes to the laundry and mend them when they come back, so we send our men to the trenches and mend them when they come back again. You send your socks … again and again just as many times as they will stand it. And then you throw them away. And we send our men to the war again and again … just until they are dead.”172

American Elsie Janis performed for British and French troops starting in 1914, and “anticipated Bob Hope in her devotion to entertaining the soldiery.” Women entertainers were treated chivalrously by troops, not as sex objects. Doughboys behaved badly towards French women, but put American ones “on a pedestal that grew and grew,” as Janis put it. One woman who stayed with 200 doughboys in a canteen near the front said she would feel comfortable leaving a 16-year-old daughter there alone, because “if any man touched her with his finger, these boys would tear him into a thousand pieces.” Women entertained troops not only with song and dance but with lectures, dramatic readings, and poetry. “Troops clamored for Ella Wheeler Wilcox’s readings of her own sentimental poems” urging sexual purity: “I may lie in the mud of the trenches, / I may reek with blood and mire, / But I will control, by the God in my soul, / The might of my man’s desire.” A soldier described seeing Sarah Willmer perform (after a 10-mile ride through a storm had, she thought, ruined her dress): “I shall never forget as long as I live the blessed white dress she had on the night she recited to us. We had not seen a white dress … in years. There we were with our gas masks at alert, all ready to go into the line, and there she was talking to us just like a girl from home. It sure was a great sight, you bet.”173

Harriot Stanton Blatch in 1918 (with an endorsement by Teddy Roosevelt) urged American women and the government alike to “mobilize woman-power” for World War I. One reason for US women to support the war effort, she argued, was the character of Prussian culture which glorified brute force, supported men’s domination of women, and treated children harshly. To men dubious of women’s entry into the labor force, Blatch argued that “[e]very muscle, every brain, must be mobilized if the national aim is to be achieved.” Blatch praised women’s contributions in Britain, where participating in the war effort had made women “capable … bright-eyed, happy.” She described England as “a world of women – women in uniforms; … nurses … messengers, porters, elevator hands, tram conductors, bank clerks, bookkeepers, shop attendants … Even a woman doing … womanly work … dusted a room for the good of her country … They were happy in their work, happy in the thought of rendering service, so happy that the poignancy of individual loss was carried more easily.” This happiness seems dubious as a general proposition (see pp. 384–85), but for some individuals it must have been true. One woman wrote that she was “nearly mad with joy” at being sent to Serbia to do war work. Women at the front used very different language than those at home – receiving, in the words of one, “something hidden and secret and supremely urgent … .[Y]ou are in another world, and … given new senses and a new soul.”174

The World Wars shook up gender relations, but only temporarily. Individual British women in the World Wars found new freedoms and opportunities in wartime – “like being let out of a cage,” in one woman’s words. However, gender changes were short-lived. “[A]ttitudes towards [women’s] roles at home and at work remained remarkably consistent over nearly fifty years. Both wars put conventional views about gender roles under strain,” but no permanent change occurred in hostility to women in male-dominated jobs, the devaluation of female labor, and the female-only responsibility for home life.175

The “reconstruction of gender” in Britain after World War I constrained women’s roles and reinvigorated the ideology of motherhood. The feminist movement never regained after the war the status as a mass movement it had held before the war. Where prewar feminists had fought against separate male and female spheres and different constructions of masculinity and femininity, feminists in the interwar period gradually “accepted theories of sexual difference that helped to advance notions of separate spheres.” After the “horrific events” of World War I, British society “sought above all to reestablish a sense of peace and security” and this precluded the egalitarian feminism of the prewar years, mandating instead a feminism of separate spheres to avoid “provok[ing] the men to anger.”176

Several major differences distinguish the two World Wars’ effects on women. The first war had more concentrated action, on the Western front and in static trench warfare, leaving civilians relatively safe, whereas the second war was more “total” (drawing in civilians) and more mobile. In Britain, World War I soldiers were “invisible” whereas in World War II the US and British forces were a highly visible presence, the blitz targeted London, and fighter pilots could battle the enemy by day and drink at pubs near air bases by night. The first war was more of a surprise to Britons. Although both wars led to shortages of essential goods, the second war made it much harder for homemakers to compensate. Most importantly, in terms of gender roles, women in the military in the first war were “largely confined to very mundane work like cleaning, cooking, clerical work, waitressing, and some driving … But in 1939–45 in addition … women handled anti-aircraft guns, ran the communications network, mended aeroplanes and even flew them from base to base.” Nonetheless, gender relations quickly reverted to tradition after World War II as after World War I.177

United States In World War I, 13,000 women enlisted in the US Navy, mostly doing clerical work–“the first [women in US history]….to be admitted to full military rank and status.” The Army hired women nurses and telephone operators to work overseas, but as civilian employees (although in uniform). Plans for women’s auxiliary corps – to perform mostly clerical, supply, and communications work – were shot down by the War Department. So were plans for commissioning women doctors in the Medical Corps. The end of the war brought an end to proposals to enlist women in the Army.75

During World War I, a number of women participated individually in several armies. One of the most famous, Englishwoman Flora Sandes, fought with the Serbian army on the same terms as the men, and took an Austrian speaking tour in 1920.138

Women shaming men into war Women are often active participants in shaming men to try to goad them into fighting wars. Recall the Russian women in World War I who went “over the top” to try to shame exhausted Russian soldiers into fighting again (see pp. 73–75). In Britain and America during that war, women organized a large-scale campaign to hand out white feathers to able-bodied men found on the streets, to shame the men for failing to serve in combat. Not all women supported it: “Dealer in white feathers / … Can’t you see it isn’t decent, / To flout and goad men into doing, / What isn’t asked of you?” However, the Women of England’s Active Service League pledged never to be seen in public with an able-bodied man not serving in the military, and British recruiting posters told young men their women would reject them if they were “not in khaki” and meanwhile told the young women that men who refused to fight and die for them were not worthy of their affections. (The white feather campaign was briefly resurrected in World War II, and the British government had to issue badges for men exempt on medical grounds.) Some scholars object to blaming women for goading men into World War I. They argue that the poster claiming “Women of Britain Say, ‘Go!’” (see Figure 5.3) was propaganda devised by men to affect other men. “[M]any women tried to get their sons out of the army. Others were agitating to prevent conscription.”58

Factory Workers

The armies of twentieth-century total war depended on women in new ways, not only within the army (see pp. 64–76, 88–92) but in the civilian workforce (and in addition to the ongoing responsibilities of women for domestic, reproductive, and sexual work). In 1914, feminist Carrie Chapman Catt warned that “[w]ar falls on the women most heavily, and more so now than ever before.” Both Britain and the United States mobilized substantial numbers of women into war-related industries, and into the workplace generally to make male workers available for military use. These arrangements, although effective in boosting the war effort, almost everywhere were cast as temporary. They used, rather than challenged, existing gender stereotypes.138

In World War I Britain, about 1 million mostly lower-class women worked in munitions jobs. They were called “munitionettes” or “Tommy’s sister.” Unlike nurses, the munitions workers could not profess pacifism since their work directly contributed to the fighting. In fact, in 1918, Scottish women working at a shell factory raised money and bought a warplane for the air force. However, the munitionettes’ main motivation was financial, contrary to the popular belief that it was patriotic. The women found the wages “at first livable and later lucrative.” Compared with domestic work, war work “offered escape from jobs of badly paid drudgery.” However, although they earned more than they would have doing women’s work, the women received nowhere near the fortunes they had been led to expect when deciding to take war work.139

Eric Leed argues that World War I created for women “an enormously expanded range of escape routes from the constraints of the private family” because the war caused “the collapse of those established, traditional distinctions” that had restricted women. A Punch cartoon of the time shows a soldier’s wife who receives an allowance: “This war is’ eaven – twenty-five shillings a week and no ’usband bothering about!” Costello credits World War I with winning women both the vote and a “new liberation” in fashion and behavior (smoking, bobbed hair, short skirts, and hedonism). But for British women war workers in World War I, “no doubt conditions varied a lot.” Conditions worsened over time, making 1917–18 “the hardest year of the war for civilians,” especially in the pan-European 1918 influenza epidemic. Some women complained of barracks-like hostels with poor food and little heat, whereas others found accommodations clean, if crowded, and occasionally even comfortable. Most often, though, the woman war worker had “little in her life now except work and sleep.” Work shifts of 10–12 hours were “not uncommon.” Conditions in factories were, for women, an “alien environment” of deafening noise and depressing grime, encased by blacked-out windows.140

Other scholars doubt that World War I was an exhilarating, erotic release for women who took on traditionally male roles. Some women who drove “trucks, cranes, cars, and motorbikes in Britain during the war did find it thrilling,” but many others were “killed, injured, and poisoned” in munitions factories. German women in World War I “shoulder[ed] double burdens,” working at heavy machinery but still responsible for their domestic duties.141

Women’s peace movements: In the twentieth century, the exemplary women’s peace organization is the Women’s Peace Party (WPP), founded during World War I and later renamed the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF). The WPP grew out of the international women’s suffrage movement. It was catalyzed by a US tour in Fall 1914 of a Hungarian woman and a British woman (from enemy sides in the new war). The WPP women “turned a good deal of their energies, in the midst of the suffrage campaign – which they did not abandon – to address the causes and cures of war.”181

The WPP held an International Conference of Women at the Hague (Netherlands) nine months into World War I in 1915 (three months after the WPP’s founding). The conference called for mediation to end the war. Jane Addams chaired the conference, and the WPP. In spite of travel problems and government obstacles, 1,136 voting delegates from 150 organizations in 12 countries attended. The conference brought together women from enemy and neutral countries, a feat that one delegate contrasted with the failure of others: “Science, medicine, reform, labor, religion – not one of these causes has been able as yet to gather its followers from across dividing frontiers.” The participants were “a quite extraordinary group of gifted, courageous, and altruistic pioneers.” Critics, however, found “conspicuously absent … representatives of English, French, German, and Russian feminism.” Theodore Roosevelt called the meeting “silly and base.” Winston Churchill closed the North Sea to shipping, preventing most British delegates from attending. The British Admiralty also detained the US delegation’s ship – which the British press called a “shipload of hysterical women” and “feminine busybodies” – until the last minute.182

When the United States entered World War I, some feminists remained antiwar activists, but faced difficult challenges as most of their colleagues supported the war effort. The YWCA’s work supporting soldiers in World War I “strained against – and temporarily overwhelmed – its historic pacifism.” Addams’s efforts to galvanize US opposition to World War I backfired as she “alienated American public opinion by daring to question the ‘heroism’ of war.” She was “instantly accused of besmirching the heroism of men dying for ‘home, country, and peace itself.’” She argued, based on visits to military hospitals in Europe, that soldiers were not natural killers and were victims of the sheer horror of mechanized war. Her critics took this to mean she thought men incapable of heroic self-sacrifice. After 1917, Addams “was increasingly isolated” in opposing the war. She admitted moving “from the mire of self-pity to the barren hills of self-righteousness and … hat[ing] herself equally in both places.” After the war, she was branded a traitor, Communist, and anarchist. However, she won the 1931 Nobel Peace Prize.183

Addams believed that mothers would be the first to protest the slaughter of their children in war, and that “women of civilization” could help end this senseless killing. However, she did not hold a polarized gender conception of war and peace. In 1915, she dismissed the “belief that a woman is against war simply because she is a woman … In every country there are women who believe that war is inevitable and righteous; the majority of women as well as men in the nations at war doubtless hold that conviction.”184

The first woman to serve in the US Congress, Jeannette Rankin, was a pacifist who voted against US participation in both World Wars.

War and Gender: How Gender Shapes the War System and Vice Versa

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