

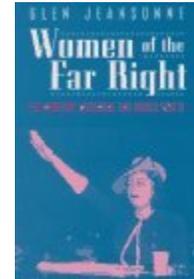
H-Net Reviews

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Glen Jeansonne. *Women of the Far Right: The Mother's Movement and World War II*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996. xix + 264 pp.

Glen Jeansonne. *Women of the Far Right: The Mothers' Movement and World War II*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996. xix + 264 pp. \$32.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-39587-6; \$22.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-226-39589-0.

Reviewed by Lisa Krissoff Boehm (Indiana University)
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Glen Jeansonne's *Women of the Far Right: The Mother's Movement and World War II* documents the rise of ultraconservative women's groups which organized in protest of U.S. involvement in the Second World War. Jeansonne, a seasoned political biographer, is a professor of history at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and brings a biographer's eye for detail to his narrative of the formation of these organizations. Jeansonne succeeds in presenting a full story on this heretofore dimly known or understood corner of American women's history by utilizing nearly every possible scrap of written evidence on the groups. *Women of the Fair Right* is an important addition to the historiography of far right politics and of ultraconservative women.[1]

What Jeansonne terms the "mothers' movement" (groups of women who organized against U.S. involvement in the conflicts of Europe and in part presented themselves as concerned mothers) originated in California just after the German invasion of Poland in September 1939. Part of the original impetus for organization came from William Randolph Hearst and Robert McCormick, who used their newspapers to promote the isolationist groups. The newspapers provided positive press to the movement for years, although the possible financial link between the papers and the movement remains hazy. The original mothers' organization, the National Legion of Mothers of America, spun off and inspired other organizations. Gradually, the various groups grew into a large, decentralized movement with as many as five to six million members. Over time, the groups moved farther and farther to the right. The leaders of the movement

openly sympathized with Nazism and fascism generally and were overtly and passionately anti-Semitic. Most of the women members were white, middle-class, middle-aged, and Christian; the leaders resembled their groups except for the fact that they were more often college-educated and upper-middle class. Organizing to publish materials, testify before Congress, picket government centers, and aid in political campaigns, these women ultimately had little effect on the workings of government or the general American attitude towards World War II. But they undoubtedly hampered Franklin Roosevelt's attempts to unify the country in preparation for war.

Jeansonne points out early on that he seeks not to document conservative women, but ultraconservative women, who he sees as very different from the mainstream members of the political right. Jeansonne carefully attempts to document the evolution of the leaders' thoughts, although their philosophies veer significantly from the logical. The work concentrates on presenting the lives of the leaders of the 1930s-40s ultraconservative isolationist movement, including Elizabeth Dilling, Catherine Curtis, and Lyril Clark Van Hyning, as well as self-appointed far right activist, Agnes Waters. Chicago-born Elizabeth Dilling was the most important woman of the far right of the 1930s. After three years at the University of Chicago (she left without her degree), Dilling married and traveled extensively. Trips to Germany, where she attended Nazi meetings, and the Soviet Union, which appalled her, largely colored her thought on international relations, awakening her sympathy for fascism and the Nazi movement in particular, and her antipathy

for communism. After being inspired by the teachings of Iris McCord of Chicago's Moody Bible Institute, Dilling began a career as an anti-communist speaker, researcher, and organizer. She compiled a list of suspected communists entitled *The Red Network* and gradually came to believe that an international Jewish conspiracy lay behind communism. Independently wealthy Catherine Curtis spun groups to oppose FDR's court-packing plan and to keep the United States out of war from groups she had earlier organized to promote women's investing. Together, Curtis and Dilling helped organize the most important action of the mother's movement—a six hundred woman protest of the proposed Lend-Lease plan in Washington D.C. Lyrl Clark Van Hyning joined them in the endeavor, bringing her Chicago-based “We the Mothers Mobilize for America” to the fight. Agnes Waters did not lead a group of women but gained prominence as a self-appointed ultraconservative spokeswoman. Waters, who had campaigned for women's suffrage, served as secretary of the National Women's Party, and had registered as a Democrat, oddly metamorphosed into a rapid anti-Roosevelt commentator, openly protesting the immigration of European refugee children, conscription, and Lend-Lease.

Jeansonne's choice to concentrate on the lives and ideologies of the leaders of the mother's movement rather than trying to capture the beliefs of the mass of members may lead readers astray, however. Perhaps the paucity of information on the movement led Jeansonne to concentrate on the most visible members of the groups. But in doing so, Jeansonne highlights the most reactionary of these women and fails to explain how the groups could have appealed to millions of American women. Understanding how extremely zealous political activists are able to translate their message for a broad base of people should be one of the goals of this type of political research. Jeansonne documents the investigation of the groups by the FBI, culminating in the sedition trial of far right leaders, first indicted in 1942. (A mistrial occurs after the death of the Judge, and the case is eventually dropped.) The focus on the unwavering anti-Semitism and pro-Nazism of the leaders, the organization's ties with other far right leaders like Father Charles Coughlin and Gerald L. Smith, and the detailed discussion of the sedition trial offer little room for understanding the concerns of the mass of women involved with these anti-war movements.

Jeansonne, trained as a political biographer, naturally gravitated toward documenting the lives of the leaders of the movement. The bulk of the book, he explains, com-

bines “a narrative of one or more groups with an interpretation of the principal figures” (pp. xii-iii). This method proves problematic, creating a strain between the stories of individuals and groups. Jeansonne's heavy reliance on the documents of the F.B.I. and the Anti-Defamation League of the B'nai Brith tends to highlight the leaders and their baser motivations. Jeansonne himself admits that most women left the mother's movement after the American entry into the war after Pearl Harbor. But the narrative underplays this significant turning point and offers little explanation for this burst of loyalism. Although Jeansonne explains that “oral history proved infeasible,” it may have proved the only available antidote to this concentration of the leaders given the shortage of existing papers (p. xiii). Members of the groups and family members are certainly still alive.

Not being a practiced historian of women, Jeansonne struggles to link the motivations of these publicly-minded ultraconservatives to the idea of feminism, ultimately falling short of a meaningful connection. Rather than trying to fit these right-wing women into the definition of feminism, (a task which seems unwarranted), Jeansonne could have benefited from a deeper analysis of the women's motivations to oppose war from the position of mothers. While he intentionally calls the movement by its own chosen name, the mothers' movement, he discounts motherhood as a true motivation for anti-war activism. This error is magnified in Jeansonne's discussion of “We the Mothers Mobilize for America” (a Chicago-based group) vice-president Lucy Palermo. Jeansonne quickly describes Palermo's off-shoot organization, the Illinois Bataan Relief group, as “an anti-Roosevelt organization created on the pretext of aiding Americans held as prisoners of war by the Japanese” (p. 92). Through my own research of Lucy Palermo, I concluded that the “pretext” leading to the formation of the group was nothing other than the imprisonment of Palermo's son Amiel as a Japanese P.O.W. for two years.[2] In addition, Palermo's life-time commitment to the Democratic party and her own work in Chicago government as an elected official (Democrat) during the 1930s belie Jeansonne's assertion that these women were almost solely Republicans, if they joined any party at all.

The work could have been strengthened by connecting the work of the ultraconservative isolationists with the history of other isolationist women activists in the United States. Jeansonne occasionally mentions Jeanette Rankin, but does not explicitly address the ways in which her protest of involvement in war differed from that of the mothers. Including a full discussion of the

women who worked as liberal anti-war activists would have linked the previously unknown story of the ultra-conservative women to a more established historiography, and provided a better context for understanding their actions. Perhaps the reader would also be better able to understand the motivations of the far right-wing activists had the issue of ethnicity been knit more completely into Jeansonne's narration; many of these women must have been at least partially compelled to oppose entry into World War II because of German, Italian, or Irish ancestry. (A significant number of Irish opposed or felt ambivalent towards entry into World War II because of antipathy towards the British.) Ethnic sympathies are not explored at length.

Despite these criticisms, Jeansonne's book remains an extremely important element in the history of women of the far right. As Jeansonne himself points out, *The Women of the Far Right* "alters the historical conception of isolationism" (p. 179). The work is highly significant because of its choice of subject matter, and the diligent way Jeansonne managed to weave a picture of this corner of the American past given the shortage of available

documentation. *Women of the Far Right* reminds us of the benefits of studying even the most abhorrent of political activists, and that the history of women is not the history of consensus.

Notes:

[1]. Jeansonne's book fits in with a growing historiography on right-wing women, including Andrea Dworkin's *Right Wing Women* (New York: Perigree Books, 1983), Rebecca E. Klatch's *Women of the New Right* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987) and Kathleen M. Blee, *Women of the Klan: Racism and Gender in the 1920s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981).

[2]. See "Lucy Russo Palermo, 1885-1979," in *The Historical Encyclopedia of Chicago Women* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, forthcoming.)

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