

# H-Net Reviews

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Erika Kuhlman. *Of Little Comfort: War Widows, Fallen Soldiers, and the Remaking of the Nation after the Great War*. New York: New York University Press, 2012. x + 225 pp. \$49.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8147-4839-8.

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In 1917, shortly before the United States entered the Great War, newspaperwoman Ethel Thurston of the *Syracuse Herald* captured the growing tension between the belligerent nations and their female citizens who lost husbands in the war. “They have wept, but they have not been the helpless forlorn creatures that one associates with widow’s weeds” (p. 54). In this transnational history of war widows in Germany and the United States during and after the Great War, Erika Kuhlman explores the many contradictions at work in the lives of women, and the families, who survived the fallen soldier.

In this concise yet wide-ranging study, Kuhlman traces the many ways in which war widows became a central locus, highly contested cipher, and strategic tool for modern politics. “The image of women surrendering their men,” Kuhlman writes, “meshed with the nation-state’s drive to elicit its citizen’s submissions to the country’s cause” (p. 13). If this association tied women to the nation-state, it also set up a modern set of mutual responsibilities between women citizens and the nation—particularly when their soldier husbands died and they became widows. Though grounding her work in the tragic conditions facing war widows, Kuhlman draws our attention to the many ways that these women empowered themselves politically as citizens and human beings around these issues. Mourning women, she argues, became an instrument for remaking the modern nation, just as their newfound role at its center became a tool for challenging gender roles and even the nation itself.

War widows—of which there were some 1.6 million in western Europe and Germany alone—faced a set of largely untenable contradictions. The most immediate

problem concerned the body of the fallen soldier. Widows were expected to care for the body of their husbands; yet they were often prevented from doing so. They were not given sufficient or accurate information as to the precise location of the body or the circumstances of death thanks to the fog of war, vast distances, intentional misrepresentation, and an overwhelmed bureaucracy. Recovery of the body was difficult with long delay; and widows, if they remarried, lost the right to determine the final resting place of their former husbands.

The belligerent governments provided some financial support for the wives and widows of soldiers in order to ensure domestic support for the war and preserve gender relations with the man as the breadwinner. Yet this support was often insufficient and slow in coming, resulting in “deprivation at best and poverty at worst” (p. 56). Furthermore, state support was conditional on such factors as whether the soldier fell during the war, if he had served honorably, and if the widow had children or remarried. Similar conditions limited participation of war widows in the program—organized by the U.S. quartermaster general—to allow war widows to visit the grave of their fallen soldier in Europe.

Once widowed, women faced a number of pressures to remarry. Most simply could not provide for themselves and their children. Some programs tried to restore German society to normalcy by matching war veterans with war widows; this arrangement also addressed the eugenic desire for reviving the birthrate. Yet women who remarried also faced the criticism of playing their own happiness over their loyalty to their fallen husband and hence to the nation. Remarriage often ended

their widow's pension. Conversely, many women had received an income supplement from the government while their husbands had been at war, so they had learned to be more autonomous. It appealed to some, therefore, to remain a widow in order to maintain their independence. Some even relished the cultural capital of being a war widow in the commemorative atmosphere associated with the Great War and its aftermath.

Children presented yet another problem for war widows. The birth of children signified to many a restoration of normalcy and a regeneration of the country. Yet more children meant more mouths to feed when these women faced already insufficient resources. Pronatalist campaigns tried to convince women to repopulate the nation in support of their flagging armies. Interestingly, Kuhlman finds that war widows largely ignored this issue in their memoirs. Moreover, state politics seemed to conflict with itself, for insofar as war widows did remarry and produce new children, they were at the same time seeming to disregard the wartime sacrifices of their deceased husbands and move on—beyond that heroic death, beyond the war. Some critics also raised the concern of how the new stepfather would relate to the children of a fallen hero. Kuhlman's point is that what had been a private decision—to have a child—became a public one. The debates about war widows thus marked a major impetus in the modern politicization of women's lives and reproductivity.

Women responded to these contradictory pressures with activism. They began to make demands of the state and the community as creditors who were in debt to war widows for their losses. Instead of mourning their death as a tragedy, some celebrated the patriotic sacrifice of their loved ones by trading their black dresses for white ones and adding commemorative armbands akin to military honors—in the United States, the arm bands had a gold star. Yet either choice—to wear black or to wear a gold star—was a political statement about gender roles, citizenship, nation, and war. Some even demanded medals and burial for themselves with military honors as the proxy for their loved ones who lay somewhere in Flanders Fields.

Women organized, wrote articles, and demanded jobs and job-training programs. They did not see these government programs as relief but a reward for their sacrifices. Whereas German widows also protested publicly against government policies, American widows did not; women in the United States maintained the public image of a united front behind the war effort. In private,

however, widows in both countries challenged that patriotic discourse through letters sent and claims filed to demand pensions from the government. Some even challenged pronatalist campaigns with the call for a birth strike, refusing to produce children just to be slaughtered on the battlefield. Kuhlman thus presents war widows as the catalysts of women's mobilization just as women's activism began to shape the character of politics and the modern nation. In Germany and the United States, Kuhlman seems to imply, women experienced their political awakening through the politics of mourning.

At her most provocative, Kuhlman contends that some people responded to the plight of the war widow not in national but in transnational terms. For instance, the war promoted the development of international humanitarian relief at the center of which stood war widows and their children. The Great War also promoted cross-border intimate relationships; “transnational learning process[es]” (p. 102);[1] and transnational relationships of memory, ironically, because, as Kuhlman notes, remembering the trauma of war of one nation inextricably linked to other nations, including the enemy. Kuhlman further suggests that some people identified with war widows as victims of the war writ large rather than as German or American women. Such transnational dynamics of identification undermined “the regional constructions of place and identity” to promote a modern, placeless identity (p. 93).[2] To be sure, the common experience of war widowhood across national boundaries did not lead to empathy for the enemy in most cases, especially during and after the Great War. In the short and medium term, these transnational dynamics were still overwhelmed by the nationalist project. One might conclude from her work, however, that war widowhood may very well have laid the foundations for certain kinds of internationalist movements and post-national identities in the long term, none the least through dynamics of memory.

This book reads more like a series of essays than a monograph, which makes it repetitive and disorganized. It moves back and forth chronologically and between different case studies. These issues may be attributed in part to the transnational scope of her project. Some readers might also find the evidence to be too selective or insufficient. Nonetheless, Kuhlman has written an interesting new contribution to the history of women and nations at war. Replicating the tensions between the home and war front, war widows became the locus of a debate as to whether it was the soldiers or their families who suffered most from the war. Insofar as women seemed

to accept the loss of their loved ones, at least in public, recognizing them as war widows served to reinforce the dominant consensus in support of the war effort. These debates about war widows were central to the political debate about who bore the burdens of war and what the nation owed its citizens in return. In the process of these discussions, war widows took center stage in the debate about the nature of modern citizenship and the relationship of the modern state to its citizens. These debates transformed death from a private tragedy into a matter of public concern. Kuhlman's fascinating study reminds us once again of how the Great War marked a new stage in the development of modern politics and the politiciza-

tion of women's everyday lives.

#### Notes

[1]. Kuhlman follows Heather Jones, "International or Transnational? Humanitarian Action during the First World War," *European Review of History* 16, no. 5 (2009): 697-713.

[2]. Kuhlman follows David A. Davis, "The Modernist Death of Donald Mahon" (paper presented at the meeting of the Modern Languages Association, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, November 2006), [faulkner-society.com/mla06davis.doc](http://faulkner-society.com/mla06davis.doc).

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