

# H-Net Reviews

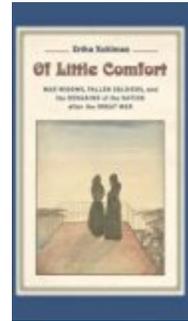
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

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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Erika Kuhlman's thoughtful, carefully researched, and often quite moving book delves into a poorly understood aspect of World War I and its aftermath: the experiences of millions of war widows whose husbands fell victim to what at the time was the deadliest war in human history. Kuhlman's book reflects the influence of Jay M. Winter's investigation in *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (1995) into the social practices of commemoration and mourning through which postwar societies sought to work through the trauma of war. Kuhlman's work also contributes a much-needed counterpart to a raft of demobilization studies by scholars such as Antoine Prost (*Les Anciens combattants et la société française: 1914-1939* [1977]) and Alan Allport (*Demobbed: Coming Home after World War Two* [2009]) that have focused on the postwar lives of veterans and their families. By exploring widowhood as an experience that is at once national and transatlantic, personal and political, Kuhlman breaks down artificial barriers that are often assumed to separate the home front from the trenches and to separate citizens of warring nations from one another. The result is an effective argument for the broad relevance of widows and widowhood to our understanding of the Great War and its consequences.

World War I is often noted for its effects on the lives of women. In the United States, women's service in war industries was widely cited as one rationale for women's suffrage under the Nineteenth Amendment. The 1920s that followed are widely remembered, particularly in the United States and Western Europe, as periods of relative freedom for women as sexual mores relaxed and wartime sacrifice gave way to interwar prosperity. In contrast to

the glamorous lives of flappers and film stars, the lives of war widows offer an alternate narrative of the period after 1918. Women who lost their husbands in battle, to disease, or to many other fates faced significant challenges in caring for themselves and their children and in upholding stringent codes of feminine and national honor in the postwar years.

Kuhlman's introductory chapter addresses the general stakes of widowhood as a social and political problem after World War I. She writes that "estimates suggest that of the 9 million uniformed men killed in the First World War, around 3 million had been married" (p. 3). These approximate numbers clearly illustrate the scale of widowhood as an international reality after 1918. During and after World War I, widows increasingly became public figures, and "played honored roles as living, patriotic symbols of self-sacrifice to the nation" (p. 5). Even as widows' bodies were displayed at military parades and official state commemorative occasions, their private lives were debated as matters of national interest. Their decisions to work or to collect a pension, to remarry or to remain widowed, or to give birth to children or to not to do so were interpreted and policed by the press, states, and societies at large as politically meaningful acts.

Kuhlman's second chapter focuses on the experiences of two German war widows. The first is Elisabeth Macke, wife of the expressionist painter August Macke. Kuhlman's main argument regarding this couple is that, "contrary to some historians' views, husbands and wives expressed their experiences and emotions quite thoroughly and honestly during long absences from each other" (p. 25). By focusing on the degree

to which home front and battlefield experiences were shared, she takes aim at the notion that a vast gulf of experience separated the two fronts from each other. A second widow, Johanna Boldt, stands out for her success in running her husband's business after his death and becoming *selbständig*, or independent, in a cultural atmosphere that tended to assume that women needed a man to protect them. On the one hand, Kuhlman's decision to focus on just two widows' stories in detail raises questions about how representative these two unusually well-documented cases are. On the other hand, by supplementing her central narratives with relevant contextual information, Kuhlman is able to explore a variety of social and political issues relating to war widowhood in Germany on an intimate scale that brings home the personal and embodied aspects of her characters' experience.

Chapter 3 explores the parallel experiences of war widows in the United States. This second national case study allows Kuhlman to focus on the particularities of the American case, especially the ways in which American war widows were enlisted for political purposes and the ways in which, conversely, their private lives were made political. During and after the war, the U.S. government created medals and ceremonies that enlisted war widows and bereaved mothers as public symbols of self-sacrificing patriotism. American widows often saw their mourning as a public affair; Kuhlman writes that, in a poll undertaken by essayist Frank Crayne, "only a minority of those surveyed felt that the decision to wear [traditional mourning clothes] should be a matter of personal choice" (p. 67). In spite of their contributions to propaganda, Kuhlman shows that American widows faced difficulties in receiving the pensions that they were promised for their losses. Popular conceptions of the need for selfless sacrifice contributed to the stigmatization of widows' efforts at collecting public money, and pensions were also subject to limitations based on the state's moral concerns. In the case that a widow remarried, her pension was to be cut off.

Although specific attitudes toward the personal and sexual morality of war widows varied from country to country, some degree of regulation was the norm across the cultural and geographic contexts that Kuhlman investigates. Kuhlman's fourth and fifth chapters shift from national case studies to an explicitly transnational focus. Here Kuhlman also broadens her study to include sources from France, the United Kingdom, and other combatant nations. These chapters are the strongest portions of her study, building on her investigation of structural similar-

ities in the experience of widowhood between Germany and the United States in chapters 1 and 2. Kuhlman's fourth chapter focuses on the transnational connections forged between widows during and after the war. She documents how widows resisted the use of their mourning for the purposes of propaganda, and how postwar relief efforts "fostered the transnationalization of war widowhood" (p. 96). Kuhlman argues that, following World War I, art and popular culture as well as war memorials became less stridently nationalistic. One symbol that was recognizable across geographic contexts was that of the mourning widow or mother, a symbol of war's cruelty rather than its heroism. Kuhlman also addresses widows' involvement in transnational organizations, including Jewish organizations, social relief groups, and feminist and pacifist organizations. Kuhlman claims that "humanitarian organizations constitute another way in which the Great War fostered transnational identities," although this transnationalism was often tempered by political concerns, most notably, the need to avoid the appearance of being unpatriotic (p. 109). As widows sought to act in accordance with the universal aspects of their experience, they ran up against criticism and resistance from the national forces that sought to enlist them as political symbols.

Kuhlman's fifth chapter addresses the postwar pronatalist movements with regard to their effects on widows. The destruction caused by World War I led to public concern about low birthrates, and political pronatalism advocated contraception bans and other regulations on female sexuality for the purpose of national defense and renewal. Concerns about declining birthrates came up against contradictory concerns about public morality. Kuhlman writes that "to urge women to remarry and to validate new relationships by bearing children would have been to implore them to be women first rather than war widows, to disregard their wartime sacrifices and move on into the next phase of their lives" (p. 126). Instead, in most cases, the possibility of war widows remarrying was met with public and official ambivalence in spite of the pronatalist politics of the time. Kuhlman concludes by addressing the efforts of war widows to reclaim their experiences and their voices as political subjects. In response to efforts by states to make use of widows' mourning for political purposes, widows mobilized politically. Their visible roles in postwar political movements and in the burgeoning international peace movement publicly contradicted national efforts at harnessing womanhood in general and widows in particular to the machine of war.

Moving from the personal stories of two German widows to the broad context of the postwar pronatalist and peace movements, Kuhlman provides a readable and engaging introduction to the history of an often-ignored sector of wartime and postwar life. For students of the social and cultural impact of war on societies, *Of Little Comfort* points both to the national and regional particularity and the universality of the experience of widowhood. Kuhlman shows how careful attention to widows' experiences can reveal the values and anxieties of their societies and times, and can challenge, or at least nuance, national historiographies. Yet Kuhlman's is a slim volume, at just over 150 pages, and so is necessarily selective and suggestive rather than comprehensive. It falls to other scholars to pursue larger studies of widows' experiences in specific cultural contexts and in specific transnational organizations and movements.

In postwar societies, widows' distinctive dress and their overlapping symbolic functions made them living *lieux de mémoire*, or sites of memory, for their contemporaries. At the same time, the experiences of widows of World War I, translated into memory, became contested

aspects of their public and private identities that shaped the politics and cultural life of their times. Kuhlman's work, alongside the demobilization histories that it mirrors and complements, indicates that cultural memory, like death and bereavement, is a human phenomenon; though memory may crystallize around monuments and texts, a monument without mourners is just a stone. The task of historians of memory is to understand how individual and collective memories function with reference to the many social factors that shape human experience, not least among them being gender, race, sexuality, and class. Finally, Kuhlman's work points to what is lost when war widows are marginalized in both national and transnational historiographies. Veterans and war widows inhabit complementary subject positions defined by warfare, and taken together their experiences have a great deal to teach us about war as a social phenomenon. Kuhlman shows that widowhood belongs at the center of any comprehensive history of warfare and peacemaking, as widows' lives can offer rich insights into the nature of the home front and of the battlefield experience alike.

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