

Joanna Bourke. *An Intimate History of Killing: Face-to-Face Killing in 20th-Century Warfare.* London and New York: Granta Press, 1999. vii + 564pp. \$30.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-465-00738-7.



Joanna Bourke. *An Intimate History of Killing: Face-to-Face Killing in 20th Century Warfare.* New York: Basic Books, 1999. xiii + 511 pp , , .

Reviewed by Regina Titunik

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Killing, She Wrote

In *An Intimate History of Killing: Face-to-Face Killing in 20th-Century Warfare*, Joanna Bourke brings attention to a central but often neglected aspect of warfare: the act of killing. She illuminates this paradigmatic act of war by presenting a myriad of personal recollections and literary accounts of killing drawn from the experiences of Australian, British and American participants in the First and Second World Wars and the Vietnam War. Her main point, it seems, is that the inversion of the accustomed order brought about by war authorizes men and women to revel in acts of destruction that they would ordinarily view with abhorrence. In the midst of war, men and women find pleasure in the act of killing (directly or vicariously).

Bourke does not doubt that women are as disposed as men to thrill in destruction. It is made clear throughout the book that, during war, wom-

en are also aroused by the delights of bloodletting. She rejects the view of many feminists and conservatives that women are peaceful "life givers" who naturally shrink from killing of any kind. Indeed, women's encouragement and approbation of violent acts in war have added to men's satisfaction in committing these acts.

The theme of women's violence appears intermittently throughout the book and is given specific attention in a chapter entitled "Women Go to War." Bourke opens the chapter with an account of the British nurse-turned-soldier, Flora Sandes. Sandes fought with the Serbians during World War I and ultimately became the "first woman to be commissioned in the Serbian army" (p. 296). Sandes wrote about the fulfillment she felt as a soldier and later in her life was nostalgic for the excitement of war.

Aside from Sandes, no extended consideration of a woman warrior emerges in Bourke's dis-

cussion. There is ample source material on other women who have demonstrated a capacity for fierceness in war (Soviet servicewomen or Yugoslav women partisans in World War II, for example). But since Bourke concentrates on the experiences of American, Australian and British participants in the two twentieth Century world wars and the Vietnam War, she does not describe the exploits of women from other nations who participated more directly in war. Rather the chapter on women ranges over reports of women's desire to be more involved in the action, the experiences of women in anti-aircraft batteries and debates about arming women.

The most interesting part of this chapter is Bourke's account of perceptions of women's violence. Women who engage in warfare, she observes, are either regarded as freakishly masculine or, conversely, super-feminine insofar as their violence is thought to result from a protective maternal instinct. This reputed maternal ferocity strikes particular terror into opponents of arming women. Not concern about women's inability to fight so much as fear of female brutality underlies resistance to disrupting gender roles and arming women. Female violence is perceived to be unrestrained by "man's more impersonal sense of justice" (p. 330). The woman warrior is imagined to be akin to "wild-cat fighting for her young" (p. 329); her fury is uncontrolled and irrational. This is a fascinating observation about the fear of female violence, which, though noted by other commentators on women and war, is rarely acknowledged by opponents of women in the military.

Attitudes about the role of women in war are changing, of course. Bourke concludes the chapter on women by commenting on the increased acceptance of women in the armed forces in the U.S., Britain and Australia since the 1970s. The incorporation of greater numbers of women in the armed forces in these countries is, she observes, due to a combination of factors including the lack

of available men and the women's liberation movement. It should be noted that the percentage of women she reports in the U.S. military in 1990 is inaccurate. Bourke writes that the proportion of women in the U.S. military reached 7 percent by 1990 (p. 330) whereas the proportion of women in the U.S. military was actually more like 11 percent by this time.

This is a prodigious and ambitious work that comprises a large number of personal accounts and literary representations of the experience of killing. The act of killing is presented from a number of angles ranging from the experience of the lone sniper to the group atrocity of the My Lai massacre. In the end, however, it is not clear what this succession of narratives is supposed to add up to other than the rather facile point that the characteristic act of war is killing and that men and women sometimes enjoy it.

It may be true that sometimes, for various reasons, men and women in war have found pleasure in killing. It is equally true that human beings often deplore and regret having to perform this act. In *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society*—a book which is, somewhat surprisingly, disregarded by Bourke—Lt. Col. David Grossman convincingly shows that human beings naturally resist killing members of their own species and pay a high psychological price for doing so. Even in Bourke's own account human beings report feeling repulsed, sickened and guilt-ridden about the act.

While reading this work, one senses that Bourke maintains a disdainful distance from the activities and events she presents. Indeed she confesses that the trauma associated with researching this book was almost unbearable (p. x). This antipathy toward her subject may account for the recurrent and curious failure on Bourke's part to connect with the material or take notice of what seems evident in the stories and experiences she recounts. Bourke lays out an enormous amount of fascinating information, but then makes shallow

and erroneous observations about it. Her discussion of Flora Sandes is a case and point. Sandes is said to represent a woman who had found pleasure in killing. But it is not obvious from Bourke's account that Sandes' enjoyment of war was connected with killing. Rather the information presented about Sandes makes it clear that she was swept up in the excitement and unaccustomed freedom she experienced in soldiering and found satisfaction, above all, in camaraderie.

Another example of this odd incongruity between the material presented and Bourke's observations about it occurs in her discussion of psychological breakdowns in war. Bourke notes that most of the psychiatric casualties of the three wars covered were soldiers who had not been in contact with the enemy. From this fact she infers that these soldiers suffered because they were unable to release their aggressive impulses. "Frighteningly," she writes, "psychiatrists recognized that more men broke down in war because they were not allowed to kill than under the strain of killing" (p. 237). But what appears more obvious is that inaction in the midst of danger, not the stifling of aggression, caused psychiatric disorders. Not being able to do anything in perilous circumstances, such as being shelled, creates tremendous stress. The ardor for battle most often reflects a desire to be engaged in some kind of activity rather than being immobile in the midst of threat. As Polybius commented regarding the Romans eagerness for battle at Cannae: "there is nothing more intolerable to mankind than suspense." The agony of inaction and suspense is brilliantly elucidated in Richard Holmes' classic *Acts of War: The Behavior of Men in Battle*, another significant work also largely neglected by Bourke.

The most interesting insight that emerges from the mass of material in Bourke's book is that combatants have a need to see the enemy as human and to take responsibility for the act of killing this fellow being. Notwithstanding the mechanization of war and the subordination of

combatants to a higher authority, soldiers insisted on attributing the act of killing to their own agency and resisted attempts to dehumanize the enemy. If they could not see the face of their vanquished foe, they imagined it (p. xviii). Bourke sees this humanization of the slain enemy as increasing the satisfaction of killing; the acceptance of agency she connects with the assertion of the self through the act of killing. But we can also view the persistence of the human element in war and the need on the part of combatants to take responsibility for their actions as an encouraging sign of an inextinguishable humanity. A strain of something heartening reveals itself in the horror, something that the author in her proud aloofness does not seem to appreciate.

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