

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Margaret Randolph Higonnet, Jane Jenson, Sonya Michel, Margaret Collins Weitz, eds. *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987. 308 pp. \$19.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-300-03687-9.

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The multidisciplinary essays that make up this book are the result of a 1984 Workshop on Women and War held at the Center for European Studies at Harvard University. The authors seek to answer a challenge issued by Joan Scott in her beginning interpretative essay, "Rewriting History", to apply gender analysis in reconceptualizing the two world wars of the twentieth century.[1] As Scott points out this would in effect redefine "the terms of traditional historical analysis" (p. 22) and create a very different understanding from the predominant one which, by and large, continues to depict war as a masculine undertaking.

In her essay Scott also outlines the themes of the book in a clear and thought provoking fashion that allows the reader to connect disparate works in a useful way. For example, in looking at the "coincidence of militarist and misogynist rhetoric," Scott draws attention to French pre and post-war political discourse on feminism (in the essay "The New Eve and the Old Adam: Changes in French Women's Condition at the Turn of the Century" by Michelle Perrot) and wartime British literature (in a classic essay reprinted here, "Soldier's Heart: Literary Men, Literary Women and the Great War" by Sandra Gilbert [2]) to make the point that political fears are often described with gendered language. Consequently, the political disorder of wartime "is represented as sexual disorder" (p. 27). Susan Guber's essay "'This is My Rifle, This is My Gun': World War II and the Blitz on Women" describes fascist ideology as a call for order that was in part a response to this gendered perception of social instability in the post WWI era. Nazi political rhetoric frequently articulated a masculine ideal designed to return women to subordinate positions and to marginalize Jews. Scott goes on to identify other broad themes across geographic, chronological and disciplinary lines and to pose probing questions for further research.

A second introductory essay by Margaret Higonnet and Patrice Higonnet puts forward a very useful model

for thinking about gender in wartime. Making their analogy to the double helix configuration (an image familiar to even those with a limited understanding of DNA), they reason that these two twisting strands represent the structure of gender relations and explain the consistency that underlies eras of apparent change. In wartime women enter new jobs, assume new positions and acquire new authority. It often seems that their status is revolutionarily altered; indeed, a number of scholars have argued exactly this. However it remains the case that women's roles in wartime are valued less than men's. As non-combatants women are not given the same acknowledgment for their contribution to the war effort as male combatants. And as Jenny Gould ("Women's Military Services in First World War Britain") and Lyn Latton ("Vera Brittain's Testament(s)") establish in essays on WWI and Paula Schwartz argues in her piece on WWII ("Redefining Resistance: Women's Activism in Wartime France"), when women do take on military and combatant roles, they still receive less recognition from the government, the public and scholars. Regardless of perceived gains, the structure of gender is unaltered and women's status relative to men unchanged. Furthermore, the post WWI and WWII eras are associated with conservative and pro-natalist policies that seek to reverse economic and social gains made by women. The double helix, with its two strands always equidistant, illustrates this reality graphically. The model helps to explain why women, who take on "masculine roles" both on the home front and the battlefield, remain in the same position relative to men after the war is over. In the ongoing debate in women's history over placing a more appropriate emphasis on continuity or change [3], this book clearly supports the former interpretation, making a strong case that consistency in the structure of gender is evident despite apparent changes wartime wrought in the lives of women.

Following these two essays, the book is divided into three sections: "Sexual Identities in Conflict," "Wartime

Politics and the Construction of Gender,” and “Postwar Traces.” The essays are mostly limited to Western Europe, with six on Britain, five on France, and three on Germany. The final two are on the United States. Although the editors call for more work on masculinity, only one piece, Elaine Showalter’s fascinating analysis of male battlefield hysteria in WWI, “Rivers and Sassoon: The Inscription of Male Gender Anxieties,” deals directly with the “flip side” of the gender coin. The essays are of uneven quality: a few are so brief that they whet the appetite without providing a satisfying and substantial response. Some authors rely solely on literary evidence, but make broader historical claim. In this regard one of the strengths of the book, its cross-disciplinary approach, is also a weakness.

Despite any limitations, this book is important in terms of its theoretical stance and provocative in the questions its contributors pose about the meaning of gender. The essays collectively illustrate what Higonnet and

Higonnet claim in their essay: the social significance of war can only be understood fully by examining the structure and language of gender.

Notes

[1]. Scott makes the broader case about applying gender analysis in “Gender: A Useful Category of Analysis,” *American Historical Review* 91:5 (1986): 1053-1075.

[2]. This piece originally appeared in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 8:3 (1983): 422-450.

[3]. See Katharine W. Swett, “Assessing Patriarchies: Continuity and Change for European Women,” *Journal of Women’s History* 11:2 (1999): 224-235; Pamela Sharpe, “Continuity and Change: Women’s History and Economic History in Britain,” *Economic History Review*, 2d ser., 48 (1995): 353-69; Bridget Hill, “Women’s History: A Study in Change, Continuity or Standing Still?” *Women’s History Review* 2 (1993): 5-22; and Judith M. Bennett, “Women’s History: A Study in Continuity and Change,” *Women’s History Review* 2 (1993): 173-84.

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