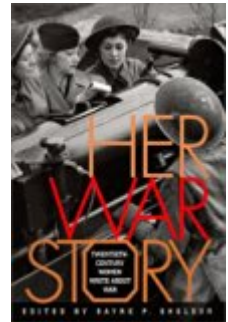


Sayre P. Sheldon, ed.. *Her War Story: Twentieth-Century Women Write About War*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1999. 370 pp. \$55.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8093-2245-9.



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Published on H-Minerva (April, 2002)

Omission and Inclusion

It is a regrettable fact that a transgression committed in earnest is still a transgression. Sayre Sheldon's compilation, *Her War Story*, suffers from the transgression of omission even as inclusion surfaces as the overriding aim of the book. This shortcoming handicaps what is at the very least an ambitious effort.

The author has pulled together a collection of letters, memoirs, books, poems, and diaries written by women that examines the experience of women facing war in the twentieth century. The medium of writing covered is as expansive as the topics addressed. A look at the First World War opens the book, followed by the experience of the inter-war years, which includes women caught up in the Spanish Civil War, and then an examination of World War II and the Holocaust. It ends with a discussion of several Cold War battles, such as in Korea, Vietnam, the Falkland Islands, and in El Salvador. A final chapter looks at the last third of the century to illustrate the suffering of children during war and how this afflicts mothers.

Inclusion struggles against omission throughout the text. Accounts from women of differing nationalities, such as American, English, French, Russian, Cambodian, Vietnamese, and El Salvadorian, are included in the volume. Yet, the feel is decidedly western. More successful is the author's view of women fighting wars who are from different walks of life. For instance, Sheldon looks at the high ranks of government, as English Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher describes her experience during the Falkland War, and then examines the gritty existence of the peasant soldier, as Karla Ramirez fights a guerrilla campaign in El Salvador.

The broad scope of the book reveals an expansiveness which calls into question the message on the pages: women would not foster war. Rather, war is a passion of men, and women are pulled into it reluctantly and always as victims (p. 274). This message is not absolute, such as with Helen Zenna Smith's angry lamentation that the patriotism of her mother has induced Smith to fight World War I as a nurse, a service that lands

her squarely in the slaughter of the Western Front (p. 33).

Such admissions are rare, however, and the argument that war is the fault of men gains credence from multiple women's stories. This is particularly true of the Second World War, where a "front line" dissolved given air power and what the author terms the "Unthinkable" (the Holocaust). The changing nature of warfare and the unimaginable cruelty unleashed in this conflict indeed has involved women in the fighting like never before, a valid point to stress. An additional point is more suspect. In response to the violence that so often engulfed them, women offered reports, observations, and lamentations. According to Sheldon, their contribution amounted to what was basically an appeal to posterity, that the fairer sex recognized a male dominance that wrought destruction, a fate women could not control, let alone stop.

Did women respond with anything more than this? Certainly their time, as these eyewitness accounts come from wives, drivers, mothers, journalists, and even soldiers. Still, omission remains the biggest obstacle to understanding this book. As sure as women took a lead in nuclear disarmament (p. 268), what of those women who supported waging Cold War? And nowhere in this book does a woman level a gun at a target; that action has been left to men. Nowhere has a woman been in the front lines as a participant; fighting is a man's activity. The El Salvadorian rebel Karla Rameriz is one exception, as is the female, Russian sniper who has killed 500 Germans and serves as an inspirational, if mythical, figure to American Mary Lee Settle. Yet, historically, numerous examples can be found where women took an active lead in the fighting of a war, particularly in the twentieth century.

Is war the fault of men? Clearly, the author thinks so and omission has become the tool to safeguard her primary aim of implicating gender as the determinant of violence in these modern

times. Still, no matter this problematic message, the reality that totality is impossible redeems this ambitious book. When constructing any text, omission is a likely weakness. For this reason, the story that unfolds here is more persuasive than not and largely so, I think, because ultimately, it offers an appeal to stop the violence.

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Citation: Matthew J. Flynn. Review of Sheldon, Sayre P., ed. *Her War Story: Twentieth-Century Women Write About War*. H-Minerva, H-Net Reviews. April, 2002.

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