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Susan R. Grayzel. *Women and the First World War.* New York and London: Longman, 2002. ix + 193 pp. $15.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-582-41876-9.

Reviewed by Deborah D. Buffton

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Women and World War I

In recent years, there has been a revival of interest in World War I, and particularly in the roles, expectations, and uses of women in that conflict. Susan Grayzel's work synthesizes a broad range of such works to offer a perspective on the varied ways women related to World War I. This book is part of the Seminar Studies in History series, which seeks to provide concise overviews of the current research on specific topics. It is designed for use in the college classroom and works well as an introduction to the subject. In addition to 119 pages of text, the book contains a chronology of events from 1914 to 1920, 30 primary documents (both visual and text), a glossary of terms and organizations, a "Who's Who" of 30 significant women, and a guide to further readings (in English) categorized by topic. While much of the focus is on women in the major combatant nations, some attention is paid to women in other areas, particularly British and French colonies.

The text of the book is divided into three sections: "Backdrop," "Experiences of War," and "Effects of War." The first sets up the basic arguments and goals of the book, stating that it "seeks to highlight the points of communality in the experience of women across national borders" especially in "public debates about women's social, cultural and political roles that the war inspired" (p. 4). Grayzel also challenges John Keegan's assertion that "warfare is ... the one human activity from which women, with the most insignificant exceptions, have always and everywhere stood apart."[1] The remainder of the book demolishes that position quite convincingly.

The war experience varied greatly for women based on class, race, nationality, and family status. And throughout the war, just as in peacetime, the reality of women's experiences often diverged sharply from the images of women that were used for propaganda purposes or to determine social policy. For example, in early wartime propaganda, governments often encouraged men to enlist by portraying women as helpless, passive victims who needed to be defended. At the same time, women were anything but helpless and passive, as they contributed in a number of ways both to the war effort and to the peace movements that

existed in all combatant countries. Women worked in factories, joined auxiliary military forces where available, and took on the formerly "male" jobs of policing, driving buses and trams, running businesses, and working the land, to name just a few of the ways they participated in the war effort. They also served as doctors, nurses, and ambulance drivers in the battle zones and behind the lines. Some engaged in "white feather" campaigns and used other means to encourage men to enlist. A small number of women actually served as soldiers in the military, some disguising themselves as men, and others serving openly as women (on the Eastern Front). Most were not recognized in any official way. Technology precluded the war from staying neatly boxed on the battlefields and brought war "home" in an unprecedented way as civilians experienced raids by zeppelins, submarines, and airplanes, forcing them to realize that no place was safe. Far from being passive, women were active and essential to the functioning of society and propaganda during the war.

Ironically, the need to get women to participate in work that supported the war forced societies into awkward and uncomfortable places with regard to beliefs about the traditional roles of women. While governments sought, in varying degrees, to encourage women to take on previously "masculine" tasks, they did not want to undermine the traditional ideal of women's "true" vocations being homemaking and mothering. It was a complicated business because, with male breadwinners away at the front or dead, women often found themselves in dire economic straits, which forced them to abandon their roles as full time mothers and homemakers to support themselves and their children. Added to the complexity was the common assumption that women who took higher paying factory jobs used the money to live extravagant and immoral lifestyles. Reinforcing this belief was the reality that the war created more opportunities for women to interact with men at the workplace and elsewhere.

Thus, we find that women were both celebrated as heroes for taking on nontraditional "war work" but also criticized for having loose morals in doing so. They were forced by economic circumstances to work to support their families, but also condemned for abandoning their proper roles of being mothers and homemakers. Furthermore, wartime propaganda portrayed women as the sexual rewards for men who enlisted, while at the same time debates raged over the sexual promiscuity of women and the threats they posed in spreading venereal diseases.

The war left a complex legacy for women. Concerns about women's ability to reproduce led to some progressive workplace reforms, such as maternity leave and nursing stations for factory women. On the other hand, in many countries the postwar period also saw the criminalization of birth control and abortion. The war raised fears of increased numbers of "illegitimate" births and prostitution along with the breakdown of marriage and sexual mores. Societies grappled with questions of what to do about the offspring of unions between women and "enemy" men (whether such unions were voluntary or forced). Should women impregnated as a result of rape be allowed an abortion? Was a child with a French mother and a German father an enemy or an ally? What of "war babies"--those that resulted from unions between unmarried soldiers and women who "lost their heads" trying to "support the troops"? While societies felt the need to support the children of soldiers, did this not also encourage and reward promiscuous sexual behavior by women who were well meaning, but not properly supervised? Should prostitution be suppressed entirely or regulated to prevent the spread of venereal diseases? And how to prevent relations between men and women of different races as Asian and African colonial populations and African Americans came to Europe to fight? None of these questions had easy answers.

Not all women supported the war. A number actively worked for its end, including, most famously, the gathering of women at The Hague in the spring of 1915, which resulted ultimately in the creation of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) with Jane Addams as its first president. On a more local level, a number of women engaged in rent strikes and other anti-war demonstrations, and offered assistance to conscientious objectors and pacifist organizations, especially after 1917, when conditions in the war became intolerable. For their trouble, dissenters were imprisoned and ridiculed in the press. Some, such as French activist H=n=e Brion, pointed out the contradiction that the state accused her of a political crime though she had no political rights. Women participated in revolutions in Ireland, German, and Russia as well.

In the commemoration after the war, women were rarely recognized in national monuments (Scotland is a notable exception), but mothers were given special status at the unveiling of memorials to men. The image of the mourning mother became a common representation of the nation in mourning. Ultimately, the effects of the war on women depended on "class, nation, region, ethnicity, age, war experience and loss" (p. 101). Some women in Western countries achieved new political rights as well as some new social and economic opportunities. But many women also found themselves in dire economic straits. Almost everywhere, the postwar era saw renewed emphasis on motherhood as women's proper role.

The difficulties in coming to terms with the relationship between women and war remains today with many of the same questions being raised: should women be excluded from combat? Are they "natural" peace advocates? What is the role of mothers in war? What does citizenship mean for women if national service is not required? What are the boundaries between war and the home front?

Grayzel's book offers a very helpful introduction to the experiences of mainly European women in World War I. The ancillary materials are interesting and useful. She synthesizes a very broad range of topics and regions into a manageable size. The one drawback inherent in this approach, of course, is that similar information is not always available for all the regions covered, making comparison difficult in some cases. For example, the section on the use of women in propaganda relies heavily on British propaganda, with much less material on other areas. In other cases, information on a particular area is so slim that one wonders why it was included at all. For example, women's protests in China and Japan are discussed too briefly to really be of much use. Nonetheless, the broad range of topics, collection of documents, and bibliography make this a very useful starting point for undergraduate students.

Note

[1]. John Keegan, *A History of Warfare* (New York: Knopf Publishing Group, 1993), p. 75.

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