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Reviewed by Andrea Orzoff

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Women and War in Europe's East

Conventional wisdom associates war with masculinity and the battlefield. Soldiers are male; killing is male; heroes are male; and wartime bodies, whether injured or whole, are male. Nurses are nurturing mothers, while female soldiers, when they exist at all, are often forgotten. Women, in times of war, are on the “home front,” forced to remake and protect themselves and their families in the face of their husband’s absence. Women can cope with, lament, or remember war, not make it.

Nancy M. Wingfield and Maria Bucur’s thoughtful, fascinating edited volume challenges this simplistic set of wartime associations, along with many other related elisions and stereotypes. The book emphasizes Eastern and Western Europe’s very different wartime experiences: Eastern Europe’s Great War consisted of a fluid, mobile front rather than static trench-based fighting, and its Second World War was considerably more brutal than in the West. Also, as each essay underscores, these “different wars” and their aftermath brought about different Europes: a briefly Wilsonian Europe of new multinational states, a Nazi-dominated “New Europe,” and a Soviet socialist empire.

The essays here discuss wartime experience, postwar attempts to “restore” or impose gender order, the wartime body, collaboration and resistance, and postwar memory. The focus on gender makes obvious sense when analyzing issues like female patriotism (frequently defined either as obedient procreation or, on the contrary,

as the willingness to abandon the family and enter the workplace on behalf of the nation), “horizontal collaboration” or fraternization with the enemy, and sexual violence. Yet gender sheds an intriguing light on seemingly unrelated topics, such as the postwar demobilization of Austrian soldiers, wartime starvation in Leningrad, and the postwar creation of collective memory in Serbia and Romania. A few essays are more suggestive than conclusive, but overall the book’s contributions are consistently excellent. Preceding these is the editors’ useful introduction, situating the reader in the historiography of modern Eastern Europe and European gender.

Alon Rachamimov’s contribution addresses World War I delegations of aristocratic Austro-Hungarian women in Russia. Dubbed “nurses,” they in fact reported to their government on Austro-Hungarian prisoners of war (POWs) and negotiated with Russian officials on the POWs’ behalf. They were expected to improve morale and discipline, distribute (very limited) imperial largesse, and generally represent “the maternal caring and the good will of their ... home state” (p. 24). Hampered by inadequate funds, these women met with a chilly reception from the POWs. Certainly part of this reception stemmed from their distance from traditional female caregiving roles.

Maureen Healy’s deftly written essay presents the problem of civilizing or “adapting” Austrian soldiers to domestic life after the Great War. Defeat, territorial loss,

and social chaos loomed over the young “German Austria,” whose leaders attempted to reestablish order within the frame of the family. The family was expected to help transform the soldier into the respectable *paterfamilias*, who himself would cure Austrian society of its wartime ills: wayward youth and women, overturned gender norms, and poverty. But given a destitute state unable even to disarm returning *Heimkehrer* (home comers), the family’s ability to civilize its soldiers was very limited. Rather than stabilizing society, the home comers further challenged it, demanding jobs, needing services, and refusing to abandon wartime bellicosity, sometimes hurting or even killing the wives and children they were supposed to kindly and sternly control.

Eliza Ablomovatski addresses the differing mythologies of the Hungarian Soviet revolution led by Bela Kun in 1918 and the violent, repressive “White” counterrevolution that placed Admiral Miklos Horthy as regent on the country’s throne. Women wrote important mythopoeitic memoirs inscribing each movement with moral value or degradation. Women in the White movement portrayed “Red” women as unclean, impure, decadent, and unfeminine. The White revolution signified, for them, a return to order, chivalry, and sanity; White women were the “angel of the nation” (p. 77). Meanwhile, Red women—particularly Jewish women—described to the Joint Distribution Committee and to a 1920 delegation from the British Labour Party a veritable martyrdom at the Whites’ hands, emphasizing graphic accounts of torture and rape by these supposedly chivalrous Christian warriors.

Melissa Feinberg analyzes the activities of the Czech “Women’s Center,” a group of highly educated professional women who believed that women should be able to participate in public life, albeit in a manner that privileged their primary social focus as mothers and homemakers. When the Czech Protectorate government refused to accept the Women’s Center’s policy recommendations, the Women’s Center directly addressed Czech women. Women were glorified as mothers and caregivers, in accordance with Nazi gender precepts; but they were also honored as the heart of the Czech nation. In particular, menu planners that adapted Czech culinary specialties to Nazi rationing exemplified this dualism by ensuring that Czech cooks could still present their families with a “Czech” meal even if made predominantly out of millet and water, rather than white flour and meat. Historians of the Second World War often assess wartime actors as either collaborators or resisters. The Women’s Center did both; an accurate understanding of

their actions implies abandoning or modifying these preconceived categories.

Continuing the discussion of World War II collaboration in Czechoslovakia, Benjamin Frommer demonstrates that despite common perceptions of women as denouncers, men also denounced, and at greater rates than women. The difference stemmed from the collaborationist government’s limiting women to the private sphere, in which denunciation became their main means of political action, whereas for men it was one among many. Nor was fraternization, for which women received harsh postwar sentences, exclusively the province of women. Here, too, the difference was gendered. Even legally intermarried Czech women faced official and informal retribution after the war, whereas men who had married German women were often protected. Similarly, women tended to be punished for wartime offenses; men were usually fined or jailed for postwar crimes, when they were punished at all.

Mara Lazda depicts the Soviet, Nazi, and Latvian use of the family as a means of disseminating values and reorganizing Latvian society. The Soviets presented themselves as liberating women from their previous oppression under the independent Latvian interwar government. Under the Soviets, the propagandists wrote, women could work, and children would be cared for and educated by the state. These advancements would rescue not just Latvian women but all of Latvian society from backwardness, and join them with their “brother peoples” within the Soviet family. Latvians, too, used the structure of family relations to understand their own wartime experience, “adopting” strangers into extended family networks to survive the stresses of mass deportation in 1941 into the Soviet hinterland. Nazi administration emphasized the post-Soviet restoration of traditional gender roles, but only some families were fully acceptable: to protect the German *Volk* Latvians could not “have relations” with German soldiers. Under Nazi rule, Latvians were allowed substantial autonomy within family and welfare policy, and they used that autonomy to protect the Latvian nation by addressing women and girls. Both occupying regimes, as well as Latvians themselves, reimagined the family, then claimed it as a main means of reshaping Latvian society.

Two essays in the book come from early stages of new research, but still offer suggestive portraits of the creation of historical memory in southeastern Europe. Melissa Bokovoy writes about the trope of medieval Serbian suffering at the Battle of Kosovo (1389) as a theme

in women's remembrance and commemoration of the Balkan Wars and First World War. Serbian society's chief mourners, women, did not recall their own experiences but lamented their missing husbands, sons, and brothers, whether they died in battle or during the 1915 typhoid epidemic. Their discourse of mourning referred repeatedly to medieval themes, describing Serbia as a mother and teaching their daughters to mourn in her name.

Bucur notes the significance of women's autobiographical writing in Romanian memory of twentieth-century wars. Women's memoirs of the Great War complemented the more numerous military and political depictions of the war by men. Upper-class women testified to the dignity and courage of female wartime volunteers who served as nurses (although some female diarists were relatively ambivalent about the behavior of other women), their own emotional engagement with the difficulties of wartime, their relationships with loved ones, and the prevalence of anti-Semitism even in educated Romanian discourse. Bucur follows the thread of Romanian female war diarists to a World War II journal published after 1989. She notes similarities to the Great War diaries, and asks provocative questions about the role of Romanian women in creating cultural memory as well as identifying themselves as authoritative, objective observers.

Katherine Jolluck describes the experience of Polish women forcibly deported from Soviet-occupied eastern Poland to the least welcoming regions of the Soviet Union: Siberia, Central Asia, and the Arctic. Jolluck notes that these women tended to interpret their experience in terms of national myths, comparing themselves to Poland's martyrdom as the "Christ of Nations." But some offenses were committed against them not as Poles but as women—particularly rape. The more intimate the offense, the less nationalistically these women

interpreted it, when they discussed it at all. Jolluck skillfully demonstrates the way these female deportees implicitly cast the Polish nation as masculine, and their own suffering as outside the norms of that, or any, discourse.

Finally, Lisa Kirschenbaum's analysis of survivor testimony from the siege of Leningrad highlights the issue of starvation, little mentioned in survivor literature, and its significance with regard to gender. Soviet propaganda depicted Leningrad as an urban war-front in which civilians served as soldiers, heroically defending the motherland in a masculinized model of heroism (the Russian word for "courage," *muzhestvo*, comes from *muzh*, or "man"). But soldiers volunteer to sacrifice their bodies on the battlefield: Leningrad's residents were forced to starve, thanks to the government's inability to stockpile food and its refusal to negotiate on behalf of the city's inhabitants. Years of desperate hunger deprived Leningrad women of even the most basic outward signs of their gender, destroying their bodies and ravaging their faces, marking them not with heroism but with shame. Kirschenbaum notes, though, that most survivors described their experience with the Soviet tropes of courage, virtue, and perseverance in the face of overwhelming odds. "The state did not need to impose silence in the face of the degradation and destruction of the human body—especially one's own body" (p. 231).

In sum, this fine volume is notable for its unified presentation of complex and engaging issues. It provides an introduction to the most significant recent historiography in gender studies and military history, as well as an overview of some of the most stimulating new research being done in an important field. Many of these essays would be extremely useful in undergraduate courses on European or East European history, gender studies, or the history of warfare. Rarely are compilations like this one so consistently well written and intriguing.

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