

Ute Daniel. *The War from Within: German Working-Class Women in the First World War.* Oxford and New York: Berg Publishers, 1997. xii + 343 pp. \$109.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-85496-892-3.



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Eight years after its original publication as *Arbeiterfrauen in der Kriegsgesellschaft*, Berg has issued a slightly revised English translation of Ute Daniel's examination of German working class women during World War One, bringing this influential study to a wider audience of students and scholars. In the work, Daniel disputes the assumption that the war "modernized" women's position in German society (and hence "emancipated" them). If anything, the war attained for women only "an emancipation on loan" (p. 283).

Daniel's focus is on the everyday lives of urban working class women, those who worked for wages and those who did not. She contends that these women's *Alltag* cannot be analyzed without attention to such "macro" forces as state labor and rationing policies and demographic shifts. The book's introduction outlines Daniel's methodology, a synthesis of Lukacsian Marxism, phenomenological sociology, and *Alltagsgeschichte*, aimed at understanding how historical subjects perceive their concrete position in society. The study, which taps a range of sources from government and industrial records to police reports and

wives' letters to the front, conveys the dense historical context in which working class women negotiated the means of survival for themselves and their families. While Daniel's defense of her methodology appears less necessary in 1998 than it did, perhaps, in Germany in 1989, its inclusion in this translation makes it useful reading, particularly for students.

Chapters then go on to explore women's reactions to August 1914 (which apparently differed little from men's); the connections between quantitative developments in women's work and state labor policies; relations between economic and family policy, demographic changes, and women's productive and reproductive work; and struggles between the home front and the authorities to define the war experience. Among her findings (many of which have become common knowledge among historians of gender) is that while the meanings "woman" could contain expanded during the war ("the individual who supplies the soldier with ammunition" as well as "what the soldier defends" [p. 22]), the period saw no whole-

sale rethinking of gender roles once the crisis was past.

This was reflected in the war's effects on women's economic status: Daniel debunks the myth (first propagated during the war by bourgeois feminists, among others) that the war constituted an "emancipatory" moment for women, as hordes of previously homebound housewives entered the factory. Instead, the war prompted a redeployment into war industry of women who had worked previously in other sectors. Apparent jumps in female employment figures were in fact relatively small and limited largely to the war's duration, despite efforts to lure women into war industries. Efforts to mobilize women were often undercut by other policies such as Family Aid, paid to dependents of conscripted soldiers. Women on Family Aid who needed to supplement this meager assistance turned not to factory work but to homework, which interfered less with their domestic duties. 1916's Auxiliary Service Law did little to ease chronic labor shortages, as the women it mobilized clamored for office work in growing administrative sectors. Those who did enter war industry tended to come from sectors hard hit by unemployment (textiles) or from low-status jobs (domestic or agricultural service) in which the chance to switch signaled the possibility of greater personal independence. Women took up jobs crucial to the war effort only when these offered attractive compensation or work conditions. While the state, employers, and even unions saw women as auxiliary labor to be exploited and deployed at will, Daniel suggests that women "mobilized" themselves only when it was in their interest to do so.

But work itself did not constitute "modernization" for women. In fact, measures such as the August 1914 decree gutting workplace health and safety codes for women and adolescents signified, in Daniel's words, a "relapse into the nineteenth century" (p. 63). Nor did the war produce any greater acceptance of women's waged work out-

side the prevailing gender division of labor because both men and women (including bourgeois feminists) saw any disruption of that arrangement as strictly temporary. Skills training for female workers was undercut by the omnipresent specter of eventual demobilization; for their part, women were not eager to take war industry jobs they knew they would lose at war's end. Daniel also examines the issue of why female labor was never formally conscripted, suggesting that the immediate demands of war could not override pronatalist concerns or society's stubborn inability to see work and femininity as compatible.

Another factor that emerges from Daniel's exhaustive research is how the war served to expand the welfare state, from the Family Aid scheme to the rising tendency of municipalities to pay unemployment benefits. "Family issues" came to define local and regional social policy and rested on an intensified identification of "woman" with "family" (an identification Daniel herself replicates). The war's effects on the family—especially falling birth rates and more open extramarital sex—became politicized and defined as symptoms of a pervasive social crisis demanding state intervention. While soldiers were provided with prostitutes and prophylactics, authorities constructed sexual behavior on the home front—namely that of "war wives"—as "unpatriotic" and damaging to troop morale. (War wives' aura of independence stemmed not least from Family Aid, which was paid directly to them, giving rise to discourses about their decadence and wastefulness.) The state also blamed these women for the "waywardness" of working class youth and even tried to step in as an *ersatz* father, in one case instituting a mandatory savings plan for working teens that was vehemently rejected by youths and their mothers alike.

The most interesting section of the study examines female household consumption during the war, a "private" responsibility that emerged as a political issue as "the nation...discovered that

the trenches ran through the kitchens of German housewives" (p. 193). As Daniel notes, "not even the most intensive and economical housekeeping could guarantee the survival of urban populations after--at the latest--1916, when rationing became ubiquitous and the rations constantly smaller" (p. 196). The collapse of the consumer-goods market had disastrous effects on the state's ability to control the home front. It pulled women even further away from war industry--why work for wages when there was little to buy? More importantly it shattered the state's legitimacy as rationing forced women and their families to secure their basic existence by illegal means. Daniel argues that the strategies working class women used to meet their responsibility of feeding their families turned into strategies of subversion that ultimately destroyed the social consensus between rulers and ruled. Working class women "expressed their critical stance toward the war the earliest, developed it most radically and participated most frequently in collective action such as food riots" (p. 7) at sites where rumor had it that food was being secretly hoarded to keep up prices. (Daniel recounts some of these surreal food rumors, such as the story that a trainload full of rotten eggs was aimlessly crisscrossing the countryside). These spontaneous acts of social protest forced the authorities to engage in what Daniel calls a "fight over the meaning-endowment of the war." As letters between women at home and men on the front constructed an alternative version of the war experience, state apparatuses of propaganda and surveillance expanded in an attempt to measure and improve morale. The fact that these measures had as one of their prime objectives "gain[ing] access to working class women" (p. 253) acknowledges the political clout this feminine counter-public possessed.

Daniel characterizes as "political" the spontaneous daily acts of social protest by women and adolescents--acts which first signaled the state's loss of legitimacy and displayed the mass radicalization without which the 1918 revolution was

unthinkable. Yet she concludes pessimistically that women's political influence ended when the war did, as political parties reemerged to steer events. Daniel does not consider how the war's breakdown of the private-public divide may have reconfigured how Germans understood the political or educated the female masses for a more formal political role, unlike more recent work such as that by Belinda Davis, who posits women's consumer activities during the war as a gateway to imagining female citizenship.[1] Daniel's conclusion that working class women's political activity occurred solely within concrete, limited *Alltag* contexts risks replicating the view expressed both during the war and Weimar that women lacked the "big picture" mentality necessary for sustained political participation. Seen in this way, the politics of everyday life appear cut off from all other relations of power, something that proponents of *Alltagsgeschichte* would surely not wish to argue.

Some aspects of Daniel's study also appear a bit dated. Her conclusion's focus on the meanings of "emancipation" and "modernity" for women is something of a played-out debate, while her claim that we can read sources in which women describe their war work "actually [to] analyze attitudes instead of topoi" (p. 93) has been thrown into question by the so-called linguistic turn. Nonetheless, her work remains valuable not least for reminding us that the wartime economy was far more differentiated than gender-blind studies have revealed. It also raises many issues that historians of gender and the war are still chewing on, including the social constructions of the female worker, the sociopolitical implications of women's role as consumers on the home front, the sources of the Kaiserreich's loss of legitimacy, the expansion and gender dynamics of the welfare state, and so forth. It remains an excellent introduction to the history of working women during the First World War and its translation is to be welcomed, not least because it permits further

comparative study of women's wartime experiences.

Notes:

[1]. Belinda Davis, "Food Scarcity and the Empowerment of the Female Consumer in World War I Berlin," in V. de Grazia (ed.), *The Sex of Things: Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996): 287-310.

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