History is replete with stories of women who achieved mythic status for their wartime exploits. Believing God called her to fight, Joan of Arc joined French troops battling English invaders in the fifteenth century. Brazil’s Maria de Quiteria de Jesus disguised herself as a man so she could fight in the War of Independence in 1823. During the 1857 Sepoy Mutiny in India, the widowed Lakshmi Bai led troops and fought British forces trying to annex her kingdom in the wake of her husband’s death. The Hebrew scriptures tell stories of such women as Judith, a siren who decapitated the Assyrian general Holofernes after getting him drunk on wine. When Holofernes’s soldiers saw their commander’s severed head, they became so demoralized that they failed to capture the Hebrew city of Bethulia. Societies celebrate their fabled women warriors even when they limit women’s military service in the contemporary moment.

Margaret D. Sankey’s compilation of women’s experiences in war in forty-seven countries throughout the world serves as more than an encyclopedic accounting of military and civilian women’s roles in wartime. Read in succession, the chapters reveal universal themes that link women and war to broader cultural conflicts, political changes, and economic concerns in kingdoms and countries. Although the title suggests that Sankey’s book focuses on the twenty-first century, each chapter provides historical context before bringing readers into the present. In Afghanistan and Iran, modernization efforts that included the expansion of women’s political rights and educational opportunities divided liberal urbanites and conservative rural folks and eventually sparked wars that resulted in the limiting of women’s rights. Women in France and Greece have seen military service as a route to employment and benefits during times of economic instability. British and US military leaders have had to navigate deeply rooted ideas about all-male unit cohesion, morale, and battle readiness as they opened military opportunities to women in order to meet personnel needs. In each chapter, Sankey shows the myriad ways war has shaped women’s lives.

As she notes in her introduction, Sankey is responding to the call of Cynthia Enloe, the noted political scientist and international relations scholar who some thirty years ago asked of studies of diplomacy and war: “Where are the women?” Sankey’s book illustrates just how important it is that military and international relations scholars work to answer Enloe’s question. Each of the chapters offers evidence that debunks the notion that war is men’s business. In the 1920s, China’s Communist leaders were aware of both the need for women fighters and prevalence of conservative attitudes of the peasantry, and so they urged.
women to emphasize class liberation over feminism so as to not offend rural sensibilities. Nigerian women’s protests influenced policymakers to keep Nigeria out of the Iraq War in 2003. India sent women peacekeepers to Liberia in 2007. In myth, in ideology, and in reality, war has required and affected women across the globe as much as it has men.

Centering the study of conflict and militarization on women uncovers the complex consequences of war on women’s lives, and Sankey is careful to balance the progressive aspects of women’s military service with war’s capability to destroy women’s lives. In many of the countries Sankey profiles, military service has offered women career paths, job training, and educational access. As more women rise up the ranks, the visibility of women commanders could normalize the idea that women are soldiers, too. Yet, as Sankey notes, rape remains a weapon of war that conquering armies use against vanquished women and that servicemen have wielded against their own women comrades. The UN Security Council has issued resolutions encouraging member nations to write the specific needs of women and girls into their national security and conflict resolution policies, but the UN does not have the authority to require its members to do so. Writing that builds on Sankey’s work will make it increasingly difficult for policymakers to ignore women’s roles and experiences in wartime.

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