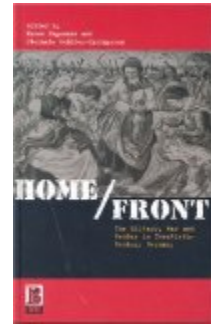


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Reviewed by David Bielanski (Boston)
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Gender and the World Wars: An Integrated Epoch of Change

Gender and the World Wars: An Integrated Epoch of Change

No better reflection of increasing interest in the social and cultural implications of war and military life can be found than in the recent work of gender historians, of which this collection of essays is a fine example. Taking a long view of history, this volume addresses questions regarding how masculinity and femininity were constructed in the age of total war, how these constructions influenced perceptions of race and nationalism, and how changing gender roles offered a multiplicity of venues from which to define the roles of men and women. A cornerstone of this volume is its attention to the complexity of gender dynamics that allow for a plurality of masculinities and femininities, while at the same time drawing valuable and stimulating conclusions about more general tendencies in German national development. Key questions of gender, nation, and war are addressed. For example, did war cause a crisis of masculinity? Did a gender war take place amidst the age of total war? In particular, elements of continuity and discontinuity from 1900-1945 receive careful attention.

The introduction by Karen Hagemann offers an overview of the three main periods concerned: World War I, the Weimar era, and World War II. The new demands of total war exacerbated and accelerated tensions in the gender order, undermining traditional ideas of proper male and female roles. Changing social relations also generated new expectations and desires—as well as

new perceptions of ability and vulnerability—among both women and men. After 1914, women shattered gender boundaries by entering the work force and flocking to war-related charity and aid work. For men, war offered an opportunity to redefine the German male by breaking down the rarefied elitism of the aristocratic officer corps, consequently democratizing the concept of the male warrior. In both cases, social changes fundamentally altered gender relations, and also increasingly emphasized the duty of women and men to the nation rather than to each other or the individual family. Hagemann encourages the reader to view the period from 1900 to shortly after 1945 as a “single epoch” (p. 31) in which World War II is the climactic and perhaps apocalyptic event for gender relations. Over the span of the world wars, a growing presence in public affairs increased women’s “scope of action and responsibilities” (p. 3). On the other hand, men experienced increasing vulnerability (physical and psychological) in industrial mass slaughter. Their traditional roles as national defenders and domestic providers were called into question.

Approximately one-third of the essays are allotted to each period, and several cover cusps between periods. This loose, flowing format argues effectively for an integrated view of the periods, and allows for a wide range of subject matter. However, the lack of thematic grouping (other than by time period) is in my opinion ultimately a significant drawback as the widely cast net does not encourage synthesized interpretations, and hinders the reader from easily following common thematic threads.

The lack of formal sections may be related to its origin in a 1999 Berlin conference, however, and is meant explicitly to further discussion about recent research.

Thematizing aside, the essays themselves offer important insights into relationships between social change, the militarization of society, and gender order. The essays concerning World War I locate the origins of warlike masculinity, xenophobic nationalism, and militant racism in a volatile combination of shifting perceptions of gender roles, broader and stronger bonding of men and women to the nation, and the social transformations of modern warfare. In "Ready for War? Conceptions of Military Manliness in the Prusso-German Officer Corps before the First World War," Marcus Funck charts the fragmentation of the aristocratic notion of masculinity amidst fears as early as 1907 that an extended period of peace had weakened German men. One result was a concept of the officer in which "national conviction" (p. 58), defined in terms of toughness, stamina, service, and duty replaced social origin as the basis for membership even before 1914. The war, of course, provided an arena where ideas of masculine toughness linked with national duty were further encouraged and legitimized.

Women experienced transformations in their self-perception and the demands placed upon them by the state in the name of national defense. In "Homefront: Food, Politics and Women's Everyday Life during the First World War," Belinda J. Davis argues that women helped redefine German identity through increasing reliance on the state after 1914 for their basic welfare and food for their families. Women did not remain passive recipients, however. Embued with a new sense of power and participation, women were now more likely to take on the task of chastising any regime that failed in the role of provider. Here Davis sees the origins of direct political action in the streets, mob violence, and the virulent friend/enemy dichotomies that persisted through the Weimar and National Socialist eras.

Similarly, Bianca Schoenberger's essay, "Motherly Heroines and Adventurous Girls: Red Cross Nurses and Women Army Auxiliaries in the First World War," also illustrates women's growing sense of power and participation by documenting the willingness and eagerness of middle-class women to serve at the front. Nursing and auxiliary work allowed these women significant room during the war to transgress traditional gender norms. However, the preservation of traditional norms within gendered imagery that sanctified the motherly, caring nurse and stigmatized as unhealthy the army auxiliary

worker presaged the attempt to control the memory of war to promote traditional gender norms in the post-war era.

The importance of imagery on a broader, international scale is reflected in two other essays. In "German Comrades–Slavic Whores: Gender Images in the German Soldier Newspapers of the First World War," Robert Nelson discusses the importance of male friend/enemy constructions in terms of masculine/feminine, strong/weak soldiers, in ways that emphasized national superiority. Similarly, female constructions contrasted the motherly German woman concerned with family and *Volk* with the supposedly loose morals of women in occupied territories. Of special interest is the conclusion that the Slavic nations were targeted for more overt and virulent racist and sexist imagery for both men and women. Christian Koller, in his essay "Enemy Images: Race and Gender Stereotypes in the Discussion of Colonial Troops: A Franco-German Comparison, 1914-1923," makes a similar point regarding perceptions of African troops. By carefully analyzing the different imagery used for men and women, both Nelson and Koller illustrate the complex interweaving of sexism and racism that served as a foundation for nationalism.

As the collection moves into the Weimar era, the influence of war and post-war memory provides a fruitful discussion of changing gender constructions in the aftermath of total war. Birthe Kundrus, in "Gender Wars: The First World War and the Construction of Gender Relations in the Weimar Republic," questions the degree to which entire generations of soldiers were shattered and unsure of themselves as males. According to Kundrus, a crisis in masculinity that prompted the *Maennerbund* mentality, misogyny, and eventually a reactionary National Socialist gender platform is not the whole story. She emphasizes that while both men and women found defeat traumatic, they also perceived great opportunities for experimentation in the post-war world, including the chance to create a lasting camaraderie between the sexes. Even National Socialism in its early years "promised to enforce an ordered reconciliation of the sexes" (p. 169). Kundrus makes an effective argument for a plurality of experiences among both men and women. She also suggests that Weimar social reality may have provided more of a turning point for changing gender dynamics and the seeds of a gender war in late Weimar (e.g. the growing significance of war literature and the *Frontsoldat* after 1929) than the war itself.

The body of the German male as soldier and worker

provided an important backdrop to Weimar society and culture. In "Body Damage: War Disability and Constructions of Masculinity in Weimar Germany," Sabine Kienitz, like Kundrus, cautions against one-sided narratives that offer Ernst Juenger's steel soldier as the dominant form of masculinity. After the mutilation of war, it was left to technology to reshape shattered men into productive beings according to accepted constructs of masculine labor. Prosthetics contributed to the "mechanization of the body" as a "symbolic remasculinization" (p. 193) that melded man and machine to reintroduce productive bodies into the national collective. The male body's appearance and performance and its rehabilitation became sources of contention. On the one hand, mechanization fed the "fantasies and expectations of progress-oriented thinking," but on the other threatened to demean the body to "nothing but a source of energy for the prosthesis itself" (p. 194). The complexity of post-war masculinity is also the focus of Stefanie Schueler-Springorum in her essay "Flying and Killing: Military Masculinity in German Pilot Literature, 1914-1939." Her analysis also focuses on the melding of man and machine, though in a different manner and with a different purpose. The fascination among Germans with air warfare evolved over time from depictions of individual knights to an emphasis after 1933 on the pilot's national feeling and his integration into a German community.

Thomas Kuehne's analysis of comradeship also addresses the complexity of masculinity by focusing on the military bond in war. In "Comradeship: Gender Confusion and Gender Order in the German Military, 1918-1945," he argues that masculinity as wartime community exhibited an essential female component of sociability alongside the warrior's masculinity. In this way, the nexus of comradeship provided mutual support as a surrogate family that allowed men to cope with the pressure of war, including participation in executions. According to Kuehne, this male-female duality as an imagined construct stabilized the gender order, and the feminine side provided "a symbolic connection between home and the front, between the real family and the real military society of male bonding that largely excluded women" (p. 249).

The essays concerning World War II focus closely on male-female gender dynamics and racial stereotypes. In "Rape: The Military Trials of Sexual Crimes Committed by Soldiers in the *Wehrmacht*, 1939-1944," Birgit Beck examines the relative leniency in punishing sex crimes in the East compared to heavy punishments meted out in the West. In France, a "civilized" country, military lead-

ers were concerned about the reputation of the *Wehrmacht*, while in Russia sex crimes were only punished if they were directly related to "undermining military discipline" (p. 262). This type of gendered racism is also an undertone of Elizabeth Harvey's "Remembering and Repressing: German Women's Recollections of the 'Ethnic Struggle' in Occupied Poland during the Second World War." Her oral history offers the conclusion that in an effort to claim independence, some German women working with ethnic Germans in Poland "found it possible to ignore the wider picture of Nazi rule and its consequences" (p. 291).

Three essays follow the impact of war on gender relations into the post-1945 years. In "Erotic Fraternalization: The Legend of German Women's Quick Surrender," Susanne zur Nieden examines a myth of female fraternization with the American occupation. Contrasting the supposedly quick surrender of women with the long years that men battled at the front became a coping mechanism that shifted the blame for moral decay away from the soldiers. According to zur Nieden, the stab in the back of World War I was now "reformulated as the battle of the sexes" that showed once again that "there had been a heroic battle—lost only because the enemy was stronger" (p. 307). Women on the home front, rather than politicians, now served as scapegoats for male wounded pride. Irene Stoehr's "Cold War Communities: Women's Peace Politics in Postwar West Germany, 1945-1952," examines tensions within and between various women's groups after the war. With the priority of reconstruction and independence from political parties, women attempted to work together, and included even former National Socialist women. When cooperation between West and East ultimately failed, it was due to cold war politics, not questions of war and National Socialism, which both sides relegated to the margins. The question of German masculinity and the military comes full circle in the final essay. In "Men of Reconstruction—The Reconstruction of Men: Returning POWs in East and West Germany, 1945-1955," Frank Biess discusses how the protracted release of POWs influenced the construction of masculinity in both Germanies. Remasculinization became an integral part of reconstruction projects and national development. In the West, reintegration took the form of reestablishing patriarchal rule through the family, while the East revived the military tradition with anti-fascist ideology. This essay provides a nice starting point for comparison with the far more voluminous work regarding World War I, as Biess concludes that both Germanies were eager to move ahead instead of brooding about the past.

The scope and breadth of this collection make it per-

fect for graduate courses, particularly for gender historians to introduce key elements of masculine/feminine construction and representation. In addition, the intertwining of gender with nationalism and war will make this volume of interest to a broader segment of social and cultural historians. A good starting point for discussion is the editorial decision not to cover National Socialist gender ideology in a specific essay or thematic grouping. Implicitly, perhaps, the selection of essays argues that the war and Weimar years are more intrinsic to understanding gender over the long term, and that the period 1933-1939 did not provide a distinctive rupture. Taken as a whole, this succeeds in explaining, as promised, “the connections between gender images and the national, social,

racist and ethnic concepts of the enemy,” the “gender relations and hierarchies in the military and war,” as well as “the experiences, perceptions, and memories of the First and Second World War” (p. x). The massive twenty-three page bibliography compiled by the editors will also be of broad value as a resource for anyone wishing to delve deeper into twentieth-century gender dynamics.

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