

Introduction

IV. AMERICAN WOMEN AT WAR

WATCHING loved ones depart, uncertain if they would return—this was an experience that women around the world shared during the Great War. Women sending men off to fight was a familiar, timeless ritual in most western societies, one that reinforced the notion that while men fight, women stay home and wait. A tremendous amount of wartime propaganda urged women to send their men off bravely. U.S. propaganda posters pictured voluptuous women encouraging men to enlist and gray-haired mothers stoically telling sons to make them proud. Yet the demands of total war and the desire of some women to break free of traditional gender roles enlarged the ways that women eventually contributed to the war effort both at home and overseas.

Even before the United States entered the war, American women had responded to the plight of Belgian and French civilian refugees by taking on leadership roles in groups like the Red Cross that coordinated humanitarian aid efforts. Once the nation was at war, more than eight million female volunteers “did their bit” by knitting socks for the troops and preparing surgical dressings. As millions of men went into uniform, women also began working in munitions plants and taking new jobs as streetcar conductors, elevator operators, and railroad workers. They were, of course, expected to leave these jobs once men returned home.

The United States was a major food producer for the Allies, and the Food Administration launched a massive campaign urging women to conserve staples like wheat, meat, and sugar so troops would be better fed. Women who signed a pledge card agreeing to abide by Food Administration guidelines received a pamphlet with suggested recipes. They also got a sign to hang in their windows to advertise their compliance to neighbors. “If you have already signed, pass this on to a friend,” the pledge card instructed. In “Roll Call on the Prairies,” Willa Cather offers some insights into how female peer-pressure

changed the social dynamics of small-town America during the war.

Rather than simply waiting for loved ones to return and normal routines to resume, many women chose to put on uniforms. Approximately 16,500 women served in France with the American Expeditionary Forces as nurses, telephone operators, clerks, and as welfare workers serving soldiers in canteens and rest areas. In the heroic spirit of Florence Nightingale and Clara Barton, women volunteered to serve in medical units as nurses. Mary Borden and Shirley Millard struggled to save lives in French field hospitals where the horror of war often overwhelmed them. Memories of their personal encounters with death stayed with them, prompting them to publish accounts of their experiences. In this respect, they may have had more in common with male soldiers than with women who stayed home. But gender equality still remained elusive. Male doctors and orderlies often refused to recognize nurses' authority, and it required constant vigilance to deflect unwanted advances or physical assaults from male patients.

Personal sacrifice, therefore, was a common thread that connected women's experiences on both sides of the Atlantic. The reliance on female labor (voluntary and paid) and the willingness of women to travel overseas and share in the hardships of war, begged the question of why most states continued to deny women the vote. The suffrage movement was divided on the best strategy for securing an amendment to the Constitution. The moderate wing issued calls for the nation to thank women for their wartime work with the vote. Radical suffragists engaged in street protests, picketing the White House with signs that turned President Woodrow Wilson's wartime rhetoric against him. "We, the Women of America, tell you that America is not a democracy," read one sign. Enraged spectators, accusing them of disloyalty, regularly attacked the protesters. Refusing to be silenced, this generation of female activists left their mark. First Wilson and then a two-thirds majority in Congress announced support of female suffrage. Finally, on August 26, 1920 (almost two years after the war ended) the Nineteenth Amendment granting women the right to vote was added to the Constitution.

What are we to make of these varied experiences? Is there a

“women’s experience of war”? And how much has changed since World War I in the roles that women play during times of national conflict? Is their support as essential on the home front as it was in World War I? Finally, is war a transformative force in women’s lives?

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BROKEN AND MENDED:
BELGIUM AND FRANCE, 1915-1916

Mary Borden: from The Forbidden Zone

A Chicago-born heiress and Vassar graduate, Mary Borden had married George Douglas Turner, a Scottish missionary, in 1908. Already the mother of three children, the author of two pseudonymous novels, and a committed suffragist, Borden funded and managed the French military hospital at Rousbrugge, Belgium, which began operations in July 1915 with a staff of seventeen, including the American nurse Ellen N. La Motte. Borden became the director of another military hospital at Bray-sur-Somme in August 1916, treating the wounded from the ongoing Somme campaign. In 1929 she published *The Forbidden Zone*, a collection of sketches and poems drawn from her wartime experiences.

CONSPIRACY

IT IS ALL carefully arranged. Everything is arranged. It is arranged that men should be broken and that they should be mended. Just as you send your clothes to the laundry and mend them when they come back, so we send our men to the trenches and mend them when they come back again. You send your socks and your shirts again and again to the laundry, and you sew up the tears and clip the ravelled edges again and again, just as many times as they will stand it. And then you throw them away. And we send our men to the war again and again, just as long as they will stand it; just until they are dead, and then we throw them into the ground.

It is all arranged. Ten kilometres from here along the road is the place where men are wounded. This is the place where they are mended. We have all the things here for mending, the tables and the needles, and the thread and the knives and the scissors, and many curious things that you never use for your clothes.

We bring our men up along the dusty road where the bushes grow on either side and the green trees. They come by in the mornings in companies, marching with strong legs, with firm

steps. They carry their knapsacks easily. Their knapsacks and their guns and their greatcoats are not heavy for them. They wear their caps jauntily, tilted to one side. Their faces are ruddy and their eyes bright. They smile and call out with strong voices. They throw kisses to the girls in the fields.

We send our men up the broken road between bushes of barbed wire and they come back to us, one by one, two by two in ambulances, lying on stretchers. They lie on their backs on the stretchers and are pulled out of the ambulances as loaves of bread are pulled out of the oven. The stretchers slide out of the mouths of the ambulances with the men on them. The men cannot move. They are carried into a shed, unclean bundles, very heavy, covered with brown blankets.

We receive these bundles. We pull off a blanket. We observe that this is a man. He makes feeble whining sounds like an animal. He lies still; he smells bad; he smells like a corpse; he can only move his tongue; he tries to moisten his lips with his tongue.

This is the place where he is to be mended. We lift him on to a table. We peel off his clothes, his coat and his shirt and his trousers and his boots. We handle his clothes that are stiff with blood. We cut off his shirt with large scissors. We stare at the obscene sight of his innocent wounds. He allows us to do this. He is helpless to stop us. We wash off the dry blood round the edges of his wounds. He suffers us to do as we like with him. He says no word except that he is thirsty and we do not give him to drink.

We confer together over his body and he hears us. We discuss his different parts in terms that he does not understand, but he listens while we make calculations with his heart beats and the pumping breath of his lungs.

We conspire against his right to die. We experiment with his bones, his muscles, his sinews, his blood. We dig into the yawning mouths of his wounds. Helpless openings, they let us into the secret places of his body. We plunge deep into his body. We make discoveries within his body. To the shame of the havoc of his limbs we add the insult of our curiosity and the curse of our purpose, the purpose to remake him. We lay odds on his chances of escape, and we combat with Death, his saviour.

It is our business to do this. He knows and he allows us to do it. He finds himself in the operating room. He lays himself out. He bares himself to our knives. His mind is annihilated. He pours out his blood, unconscious. His red blood is spilled and pours over the table onto the floor while he sleeps.

After this, while he is still asleep, we carry him into another place and put him to bed. He awakes bewildered as children do, expecting, perhaps, to find himself at home with his mother leaning over him, and he moans a little and then lies still again. He is helpless, so we do for him what he cannot do for himself, and he is grateful. He accepts his helplessness. He is obedient. We feed him, and he eats. We fatten him up, and he allows himself to be fattened. Day after day he lies there and we watch him. All day and all night he is watched. Every day his wounds are uncovered and cleaned, scraped and washed and bound up again. His body does not belong to him. It belongs to us for the moment, not for long. He knows why we tend it so carefully. He knows what we are fattening and cleaning it up for; and while we handle it he smiles.

He is only one among thousands. They are all the same. They all let us do with them what we like. They all smile as if they were grateful. When we hurt them they try not to cry out, not wishing to hurt our feelings. And often they apologise for dying. They would not die and disappoint us if they could help it. Indeed, in their helplessness they do the best they can to help us get them ready to go back again.

It is only ten kilometres up the road, the place where they go to be torn again and mangled. Listen; you can hear how well it works. There is the sound of cannon and the sound of the ambulances bringing the wounded, and the sound of the tramp of strong men going along the road to fill the empty places.

Do you hear? Do you understand? It is all arranged just as it should be.

THE BEACH

The beach was long and smooth and the colour of cream. The woman sitting in the sun stroked the beach with the pink palm of her hand and said to herself, 'The beach is perfect, the sun