

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?

Jennifer D. Keene
Professor of History,
Chapman University

“LIVING IN THE WAR”: NEBRASKA, JULY 1919

*Willa Cather: from
“Roll Call on the Prairies”*

Although she was born in Virginia and spent most of her life in New York City, Willa Cather had spent much of her early years in Nebraska and set some of her most powerful fiction on its prairies. Her cousin G. P. Cather was killed at Cantigny in May 1918. That summer, Cather returned to the family home in Red Cloud, where she read his letters and began plotting her novel *One of Ours*, published in 1922. Her essay about the effect of the war on the American heartland appeared in *The Red Cross Magazine*.

Not only was the cookery changed in my town and in all other little towns like it, but the whole routine of housekeeping was different from what it used to be. When a woman worked three afternoons a week at the Red Cross rooms, and knitted socks and sweaters in the evening, her domestic schedule had to be considerably altered. When I first got home I wondered why some of my old friends did not come to see me as they used to. How could they? When they were not at the Red Cross rooms, they were at home trying to catch up with their housework. One got used to such telephone messages as this:

“I will be at Surgical Dressings, in the basement of the Court House, until five. Can’t you come over and walk home with me?”

That was the best one could do for a visit. The afternoon whist club had become a Red Cross sewing circle, and there were no parties but war parties. There were no town band concerts any more, because the band was in France; no football, no baseball, no skating rink. The merchants and bankers went out into the country after business hours and worked late into the night, helping the farmers, whose sons were gone, to save their grain.

Wherever I went out in the country, among the farms, the women met at least once a week at some appointed farmhouse

to cut out garments, get their Red Cross instructions and materials, and then take the garments home to sew on them whenever they could. It went on in every farmhouse—American women, Swedish women, Germans, Norwegians, Bohemians, Canadian-French women, sewing and knitting. An old Danish grandmother, well along in her nineties, was knitting socks; her memory was failing and half the time she thought she was knitting for some other war, long ago. A bedridden woman who lived down by the depot begged the young girls who went canvassing to bring garments to her, so that she could work buttonholes, lying on her back. One Sunday at the Catholic church I saw an old woman crippled with rheumatism and palsy who had not risen during the service for years. But when the choir sang “The Star Spangled Banner” at the close of the mass she got to her feet and, using the shoulder of her little grandson for a crutch, stood, her head trembling and wobbling, until the last note died away.

From memory I cannot say how many hundreds of sweaters, drawers, bed jackets, women’s blouses, mufflers, socks came out of our county. Before the day of shipment they were all brought to town and piled up in the show-windows of the shoe store—more than any one could believe, and next month there would be just as many. I used to walk slowly by, looking at them. Their presence there was taken as a matter of course, and I didn’t wish to seem eccentric. Bales of heavy, queer-shaped chemises and blouses made for the homeless women of northern France, by the women on these big, safe, prosperous farms where there was plenty of everything but sons. When a people really speaks to a people, I felt, it doesn’t speak by oratory or cablegrams; it speaks by things like these.

Up in the French settlement, in the north part of our county, the boys had been snatched away early—not to training camps or to way-stations, but rushed through to France. They all spoke a little household French, which was just what the American college boy who had been reading Racine and Victor Hugo could not do. So our French boys were given a few weeks of instruction and scattered among the American Expeditionary Force at the front wherever they were most needed.

Sarka Herbkova, Professor of Slavonic Languages at the

University of Nebraska, did invaluable work in organizing not only the women of her own people, but all the women of Nebraska, American born and foreign born. She went about over the state a great deal for the Women's Council for National Defense and saw what sacrifices some of the farmers' wives made. She told a story of a Bohemian woman, living in one of the far western counties, who had saved fifty dollars of her egg money to buy a new winter dress and a warm coat. A Liberty Bond canvasser rode up to her door and presented her arguments. She heard the canvasser through, then brought her fifty dollars and put it down on the table and took the bond, remarking, "I guess I help fight Austria in my same clothes anyhow!"

Letters from the front usually reached our town on Saturday nights. The "foreign mail" had become a feature of life in Kansas and Nebraska. The letters came in bunches; if one mother heard from her son, so did half a dozen others. One could hear them chatting to each other about what Vernon thought of Bordeaux, or what Roy had to say about the farming country along the Oise, or how much Elmer had enjoyed his rest leave in Paris. To me, knowing the boys, nearly all of these letters were remarkable. The most amusing were those which made severe strictures upon American manners; the boys were afraid the French would think us all farmers! One complained that his comrades talked and pushed chairs about in the Y hut while the singers who came to entertain them were on the platform. "And in this country, too, the Home of Politeness! Some yaps have no pride," he wrote bitterly. I can say for the boys from our town that they wanted to make a good impression.