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Gendering combat: Military women's status in Britain, the United States, and the Soviet Union during the Second World War



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SYNOPSIS

The militarization of women during the Second World War, unprecedented in both quantitative and qualitative terms, has been accounted for variously, though unsatisfactorily, with regard to the impact on the warring nations' gender order. Using national variations in the accessibility of combat functions to women, the degree of pressure exerted on a given war-time society's gender order is explored by comparing Britain, the United States, and the Soviet Union, which differ markedly regarding both the military exigencies placed upon them and the degree of female militarization adopted. The comparative perspective reveals differences in what dimensions are perceived as problematic in the relation of gender and combat and what are the conditions shaping this perception. Secondly, the conditions become apparent under which combat functions are made available to women, and thirdly, the long-term effects of the reconfiguration of the gender order under war-time conditions can be explored.

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Introduction

The two world wars of the twentieth century were total wars in which the belligerent states mobilized all their available resources as well as their populations, regardless of gender and, often, age. Mobilization involved the large-scale militarization of women, who officially participated, in a wide variety of capacities, in the armed struggle, while being placed under military law. This marked a new quality in female involvement in warfare. Previously, the dominance of a dichotomous understanding of gender had led to the perception of the front, where masculine soldiers put their lives on the line, as marked off from the rear, where civilians, mainly women and children, endured the hardships brought on by war. This gendered demarcation, never as clear-cut in fact as it had been in ideology, became porous in the First World War and finally crumbled in the Second World War, when many belligerent states sustained heavy losses among their civilian populations and drew on women to boost their military strength, albeit to varying degrees.

The mass recruitment of women into the armed forces was bound up in many cases with changes in the internal make-up of the military, where non-combat functions, essential for the carrying on of warfare, had proliferated. These were increasingly fulfilled by women so as to free men up for combat. The novel gender composition of the military cast into question its character of masculine preserve and was bound to generate tensions. Thus a shift occurred from involvement in the military to involvement in combat as a new marker of gender. Yet even combat as a masculine preserve came under pressure in the Second World War. Hence the accessibility of combat functions to women, which varied across belligerent nations, may serve to gauge the extent to which a given society's gender order had begun to crumble under conditions of war. Enormous stress was placed on established notions of gender by women's direct involvement in the military, which threatened to jeopardize social stability, a prospect particularly worrying in societies already strained to breaking point by the impact of war. Any attempt to account for the large-scale militarization of women during the Second World War

must therefore pay due attention to the specific ways in which the exigencies of war meshed with gender in a particular society to cast light on the reasons for, the course of, and the particular problems generated by, women's active participation in the war in a military capacity.

This article will do so by adopting a comparative perspective, which is particularly suited to teasing out the complex interplay of gender and combat. A comparative perspective helps reveal differences in what dimensions were perceived as problematic in the relation of gender and combat and what were the factors shaping this perception. Secondly, the conditions become apparent under which combat functions became available for women. Finally, the long-term effects of the reconfigured war-time gender order can be explored in order to establish whether or not women's large-scale militarization during the Second World War delegitimized gender-based inequality subsequently.

In this article, Britain, the United States, and the Soviet Union have been chosen for comparison because of the varied distribution of similarities and differences between them. These are expected to illuminate the tensions surrounding the erosion of the unequivocally masculine connotation of combat particularly clearly. The close collaboration between Britain and the United States extended to the military use they made of women. Britain served as a model for the experimental training of women for anti-aircraft defense that was emulated by the United States, though not implemented in practice. The Soviet Union stands out for taking the militarization of women much further than either of the other two by making combat roles available to many of them. Our findings are based on the analysis of primary sources, including those produced by women war veterans, and the relevant historical literature.

A survey of the comparative historical literature on the issue of gender and combat yields inconclusive results regarding the relative importance accorded to gender (Markwick, 2009; Maubach & Satjukow, 2009), military requirements (Campbell, 1993; Goldman & Stites, 1982), and patriotism (Goldman & Stites, 1982; Markwick & Cardona, 2012; Reese, 2011; Schwarzkopf, 2011) in accounting for women's access to combat roles. By contrast, our comparison comes down firmly in favor of the explanatory value of gender in understanding the course of, and the reasons for, women's militarization in the three countries considered. Our investigation is informed by an understanding of gender as a doubly relational category. This alerts to the tensions generated in both inter- and intra-gender relations by women taking up combat functions. Women's entry into the military had repercussions on the men they were serving with as well as setting them apart from civilian women and those women serving in non-combat roles.

This article will explore why and how the interrelation of masculinity, femininity and the military was reconfigured in novel ways in each of the three countries considered. Light is shed on the ways in which femininity and the military were reconciled and what understandings of each made such reconciliation possible. Our comparison is organized around eight aspects deemed crucial for elucidating the interrelations we intend to analyze. We begin by outlining the framework in which women's militarization took place, by furnishing 'numbers', sketching 'the development of women's involvement in

the military' and 'the degree of women's integration into the military', before turning to the key issue of the interplay of combat and gender. This is illuminated by exploring how and to what extent combat ceased to be an unequivocal marker of gender ('reconfiguring gender and combat'), by investigating the 'gender dynamics in mixed units' and 'female soldiers' self-conception', before considering the place allocated to 'female soldiers in official commemorations of the war'. This is taken as an indication of the possible lasting effects the reconfiguration of a country's gender order during the war may have produced. In conclusion, the dialectics of 'transgression and containment' is suggested as the appropriate conceptualization of the interplay of war and gender. On the level of greater detail, there are points of comparison, such as the impact of fighting and killing on the female subject, which, owing to the uneven nature of the source material available, cannot be explored for each of the three countries considered.

Numbers

In Britain, the number of women in the military peaked at 470,700 or 9.39% of the country's military strength in September 1943 (Central Statistical Office, 1993, 39) or ca. 2% of the UK's female population.¹ In the United States, the Second World War was the first time that 350,000 women served in the US military (Army DCSPER 46, 1945). The focus in this article is on the more than 150,000 women who served in the United States Army and other branches in an official capacity as members of the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC), subsequently the Women's Army Corps (WAC) (Bellafaire, 1993, 15, 72). Their number represents ca. 0.13% of the US female population.²

The most recent estimates put the number of Soviet women in the military at 1 million (Markwick & Cardona, 2012, 150), which amounts to ca. 3% of Army personnel. Of the nearly 500,000 women who served as regular soldiers, ca. 120,000 fulfilled combat functions, such as snipers, pilots, tank-drivers, mortar operators, and machine-gunners. The number of female soldiers in the Red Army (only the field army without the navy) amounted to 348,309 in 1943, peaked at 473,040 in 1944, and had fallen to 463,503 by 1945 (Krivosheev, 2005, 33). They represented 0.8% of the female population at their peak in 1944.³

In merely quantitative terms, the Red Army stands out as counting the largest absolute number of women in its ranks. Taking relative numbers into account, however, places the British military in first rank, followed by the Soviet Union, while the U.S. ranks third. Yet in all three cases, there is a discrepancy between the size of the female population and the proportion of military women. This imbalance alone implies that women's militarization was anything but unproblematic and did not occur as a matter of course. This is further borne out by the way in which women's involvement in the military developed in the course of the war.

The development of women's involvement in the military

When the British government began to prepare for the event of war, provisions were made for the deployment of women behind the lines on the precedent set by the First

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