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Wartime women giving birth: Narratives of pregnancy and childbirth, Britain c. 1939–1960

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ABSTRACT

Women in Second World War Britain benefitted from measures to improve maternal and child health. Infant and maternal mortality rates continued to fall, new drugs became available, and efforts were made to improve the health of mothers and babies through the provision of subsidised milk and other foodstuffs. However, in return, women were also expected to contribute to the war effort through motherhood, and this reflected wider cultural ideas in the North Atlantic world in the first half of the twentieth century which equated maternity with military service. The aim of this article is to examine the interplay between narratives of birth and narratives of war in the accounts of maternity from women of the wartime generation. It will explore how the military-maternity analogy sheds light on women's experiences of pregnancy and childbirth in Britain during the Second World War, whilst also considering maternity within women's wider role as 'domestic soldiers', contributing to the war effort through their traditional work as housewives and mothers. In doing so, the article reveals the complexity of women's narratives. It demonstrates that they do not simply conform to the 'medical vs. social' binary, but reflect the wider cultural context in which women gave birth. Women incorporated the dominant discourses of the period, namely those around war, into their accounts.

1. Introduction

During the Second World War efforts to increase Britain's population resulted in renewed attention being paid to maternal health.[1] It was not the first time that the experience of war had encouraged concern with maternal and infant welfare. Ann Oakley argues that the Boer War 1899–1902 was a critical moment in the history of antenatal care by revealing what appeared to be a shockingly low standard of health among the male population recruited to fight in that war. This revelation forced political attention on the actual condition of the Empire's citizens.[2] Infant welfare was included in the campaign to improve physical efficiency.[3] Jane Lewis posits that the concern to stop the wastage of infant life 'became even more explicit during World War I.'[4] The loss of population during the war increased awareness of the importance of infant mortality, and child and maternal welfare work was extended to include the antenatal period. When the Ministry of Health was created in 1919, one of its six departments was devoted to maternal and child welfare. Such state intervention was justified in terms of the national good and rational improvement.[5]

The outbreak of the Second World War in 1939 again heightened the value of children for the future of the country. According to Lewis, 'Fears about not only the welfare but also the numbers of people increased.'[6] Irvine Loudon has shown that in consequence of

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[1] Smith (1996, p. 5).
[2] Oakley (1984, p. 35).
[3] Lewis (1980, p. 15).
[4] Lewis (1980, p. 28).
[5] Lewis (1980, p. 16).
[6] Lewis (1980, p. 187).

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this renewed focus on children's wellbeing measures were brought in that were considered too expensive or politically unacceptable in peacetime.[7] The National Milk Scheme introduced in June 1940 made subsidised or free milk available to all pregnant women or nursing mothers. In 1942 the Vitamin Welfare Scheme was extended to include expectant and nursing mothers (and children under five), allowing them free or inexpensive orange juice, cod liver oil or vitamin A and D tablets. By 1943, seventy percent of those eligible were participating in the Milk Scheme; forty-three percent of those eligible took up the orange juice; thirty-four percent the vitamins and twenty-one percent the cod liver oil.[8] In addition, the number of hospital maternity beds rose by fifty percent during the war, thus ensuring that the pre-war trend towards the hospitalisation of childbirth continued. By the end of the war a majority of births took place in an institution for the first time.[9] Within this overall picture of wartime development there were some retrenchments. Jose Harris points out that 'the wartime growth of some social services has to be set against the wartime collapse of others.'[10] Nonetheless maternal and infant health improved during the middle decades of the twentieth century.[11]

The aim of this article is to examine how these transformations in the maternity services in Britain were experienced by women giving birth during the war years. Given that developments in provision and practice were particularly wide-ranging during the war with the wartime experiments serving as a precedent for the National Health Service (NHS), studying the wartime generation is a useful way of assessing how women experienced and articulated change in maternity care. The article will investigate the importance women placed upon changes in the availability of healthcare services (both as a result of the war and the introduction of the NHS) in their narratives. In addition the essay will consider how wartime pronatalism portrayed women as contributing to the war effort through their traditional role as housewives and mothers. It will explore how these discourses were employed in women's stories and the interplay between narratives of birth and narratives of war in their accounts. Finally it will ask whether the military-maternity analogy can shed light on women's experiences of pregnancy and childbirth in Britain during the Second World War, whilst also considering how wartime rhetoric about women's roles as 'domestic soldiers' shaped wider discourses about maternity and motherhood.

1.1. 'Domestic soldiers' and the military-maternity analogy

In an essay entitled 'The Matrix of War: Mothers and Heroes', the novelist Nancy Huston highlighted the 'striking equivalence' between maternal and military service.[12] The anthropologist Omi Morgenstern–Leissner terms this the 'military-maternity analogy'.[13] Indeed anthropologists such as Morgenstern–Leissner and Robbie E. Davis-Floyd have explored how childbirth, and particularly hospitalised birth, can be seen as a rite of passage for women that has its parallel in military service for men.[14] Historians have also demonstrated the strength of this military-maternity analogy in Western countries in the first half of the twentieth century. For example Susan Grayzel has shown that in First World War France proponents of pronatalist arguments suggested the equivalence of mothering and soldiering in order to demonstrate the need for the protection of maternity. She argues that the concept of 'mobilization' signified an association between society's preparation for war and for childbirth.[15] Cornelie Usborne has drawn attention to similar arguments in Germany at this time which equated women's sacrifice to the fatherland in bearing and raising childbirth as equal to men's military service.[16] Likewise Patricia Stokes asserts that in Weimar Germany there was a 'widespread cultural trope that equated women's 'service' in childbirth with men's risking their lives in battle',[17] and Nazi pronatalism has been discussed by Gisela Bock.[18] Such ideas had also crossed the Atlantic. Elizabeth Temkin has noted that wartime pronatalism served as fertile ground for the growth of a national health programme for mothers and infants in the United States. 'In the rhetoric of the day, the family took on political significance as an integral component of national security. Mothering, in particular, was portrayed as part of the war effort.'[19]

British women during the Second World War were also called upon to contribute to the war effort in their traditional roles as mothers. Although those women who stepped into male roles have been remembered most prominently in accounts of women's wartime work,[20] the majority of women were still doing 'women's jobs', either at home taking care of their families or in forms of employment such as nursing, shop or factory work.[21] Women's labour was in demand during the war; in December 1941 the government passed the National Service Act (No 2), which made provision for the conscription of women. However traditional gender assumptions remained. Indeed women were extolled to use their skills in mothering to aid the war effort through acting as foster mothers to evacuees, childminders for mothers engaged in war work or staffing war nurseries. Women's domestic role was championed. In a radio broadcast in 1940 Lord Woolton, Minister of Food, addressed women directly: 'It is to you, the housewives of Britain that I want to talk tonight…We have a job to do, together you and I, an immensely important war job. No uniforms, no parades, no drills, but a job wanting a lot of thinking and a lot of knowledge, too. We are the army that guards the Kitchen Front in this war.'[22] The war meant that women's traditional work took place in an entirely new context, though.[23] In her diary for Mass Observation Nella Last wrote of her

[7] Loudon (1991, p. 47).
[8] Oakley (1984, p. 124).
[9] Loudon (1992, p. 265).
[10] Harris notes that many schools had to close for long periods, and there was widespread disruption of school health services, maternity clinics and all forms of non-acute medicine. (Harris, 1992, p. 26).
[11] Longmate (2002, pp. 174–175) and Loudon (1991, pp. 42–43).
[12] Huston (1985, p. 153).
[13] Morgenstern-Leissner (2006, p. 203).
[14] Davis-Floyd (1992) and Morgenstern-Leissner (2006).
[15] Grayzel (2002, p. 107).
[16] Usborne (1988, p. 400).
[17] Stokes (2000, p. 373).
[18] Bock (1983, pp. 402–403).
[19] Temkin (1999, p. 588).
[20] Britain was the only country in the Second World War to conscript women into the war effort. (Sheridan, 2000, p. 2).
[21] Purcell (2010, pp. 4–5) and Sheridan (2000, p. 2).
[22] Lord Woolton, BBC broadcast, 8 April 1940 as cited in Purcell (2010, p. 99).
[23] Purcell (2010, pp. 4–5) and Sheridan (2000, p. 2).

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