Women’s Support Roles in the World Wars Right up to the outbreak of World War I, feminists on both sides pledged themselves to peace, in transnational women’s solidarity. Within months of the war’s outbreak, however, “all the major feminist groups of the belligerents had given a new pledge – to support their respective governments.” Suddenly, campaigners for women’s suffrage became avid patriots and organizers of women in support of the war effort. Many of these feminists hoped that patriotic support of the war would enhance the prospects for women’s suffrage after the war, and this came true in a number of countries. (On women factory workers, see pp. 384–96.)

The more than 25,000 US women who served in Europe in World War I did so on an entrepreneurial basis, especially before 1917. They helped nurse the wounded, provide food and other supplies to the military, serve as telephone operators (the “Hello Girls”), entertain troops, and work as journalists. Many of these “self-selected adventurous women ... found their own work, improvised their own tools ... argued, persuaded, and scrounged for supplies. They created new organizations where none had existed.” Despite hardships, the women had “fun” and “were glad they went.” Women sent out to “canteen” for the US Army – providing entertainment, sewing on buttons, handing out cigarettes and sweets – were “virtuous women” sent to “keep the boys straight.” Army efforts to keep women to the rear proved difficult. “Women kept ignoring orders to leave the troops they were looking after, and bobbing up again after they had been sent to the rear.” Some of the US women became “horribly bloodthirsty” in response to atrocity stories and exposure to the effects of combat. Looking back, the American women exhibited “contradictory feelings” of sadness about the war, horror at what they had seen, and pride in their own work. Mary Borden, a Baltimore millionaire who set up a hospital unit at the front from 1914 to 1918, wrote: “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 ... 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 until they are dead.”

American Elsie Janis performed for British and French troops starting in 1914, and “anticipated Bob Hope in her devotion to entertaining the soldiery.” Women entertainers were treated chivalrously by troops, not as sex objects. Doughboys behaved badly towards French women, but put American ones “on a pedestal that grew and grew,” as Janis put it. One woman who stayed with 200 doughboys in a canteen near the front said she would feel comfortable leaving a 16-year-old daughter there alone, because “if any man touched her with his finger, these boys would tear him into a thousand pieces.” Women entertained troops not only with song and dance but with lectures, dramatic readings, and poetry. “Troops clamed for Ella Wheeler Wilcox’s readings of her own sentimental poems” urging sexual purity: “I may lie in the mud of the trenches, / I may reek with blood and mire, / But I will control, by the God in my soul, / The might of my man’s desire.” A soldier described seeing Sarah Willmer perform (after a 10-mile ride through a storm had, she thought, ruined her dress): “I shall never forget as long as I live the blessed white dress she had on the night she recited to us. We had not seen a white dress ... in years. There we were with our gas masks at alert, all ready to go into the line, and there she was talking to us just like a girl from home. It sure was a great sight, you bet.”

Harriot Stanton Blatch in 1918 (with an endorsement by Teddy Roosevelt) urged American women and the government alike to “mobilize woman-power” for World War I. One reason for US women to support the war effort, she argued, was the character of Prussian culture which glorified brute force, supported men’s domination of women, and treated children harshly. To men dubious of women’s entry into the labor force, Blatch argued that “[e]very muscle, every brain, must be mobilized if the national aim is to be achieved.” Blatch praised women’s contributions in Britain, where participating in the war effort had made women “capable ... bright-eyed, happy.” She described England as “a world of women – women in uniforms; ... nurses ... messengers, porters, elevator hands, tram conductors, bank clerks, bookkeepers, shop attendants ... Even a woman doing ... womanly work ... dusted a room for the good of her country ... They were happy in their work, happy in the thought of rendering service, so happy that the poignancy of individual loss was carried more easily.” This happiness seems dubious as a general proposition (see pp. 384–85), but for some individuals it must have been true. One woman wrote that she was “nearly mad with joy” at being sent to Serbia to do war work. Women at the front used very different language than those at home – receiving, in the words of one, “something hidden and secret and
supremely urgent ... [Y]ou are in another world, and ... given new senses and a new soul.”

The World Wars shook up gender relations, but only temporarily. Individual British women in the World Wars found new freedoms and opportunities in wartime – “like being let out of a cage,” in one woman’s words. However, gender changes were short-lived. “[A]ttitudes towards [women’s] roles at home and at work remained remarkably consistent over nearly fifty years. Both wars put conventional views about gender roles under strain,” but no permanent change occurred in hostility to women in male-dominated jobs, the devaluation of female labor, and the female-only responsibility for home life.

The “reconstruction of gender” in Britain after World War I constrained women’s roles and reinvigorated the ideology of motherhood. The feminist movement never regained after the war the status as a mass movement it had held before the war. Where prewar feminists had fought against separate male and female spheres and different constructions of masculinity and femininity, feminists in the interwar period gradually “accepted theories of sexual difference that helped to advance notions of separate spheres.” After the “horrific events” of World War I, British society “sought above all to reestablish a sense of peace and security” and this precluded the egalitarian feminism of the prewar years, mandating instead a feminism of separate spheres to avoid “provok[ing] the men to anger.”

Several major differences distinguish the two World Wars’ effects on women. The first war had more concentrated action, on the Western front and in static trench warfare, leaving civilians relatively safe, whereas the second war was more “total” (drawing in civilians) and more mobile. In Britain, World War I soldiers were “invisible” whereas in World War II the US and British forces were a highly visible presence, the blitz targeted London, and fighter pilots could battle the enemy by day and drink at pubs near air bases by night. The first war was more of a surprise to Britons. Although both wars led to shortages of essential goods, the second war made it much harder for homemakers to compensate. Most importantly, in terms of gender roles, women in the military in the first war were “largely confined to very mundane work like cleaning, cooking, clerical work, waitressing, and some driving ... But in 1939–45 in addition ... women handled anti-aircraft guns, ran the communications network, mended aeroplanes and even flew them from base to base.” Nonetheless, gender relations quickly reverted to tradition after World War II as after World War I.

Russia During World War I, some Russian women took part in combat even during the Czarist period. These women, motivated by a combination of patriotism and a desire to escape a drab existence, mostly joined up dressed as men. A few, however, served openly as women. “The [Czarist] government had no consistent policy on female combatants.” Russia’s first woman aviator was turned down as a military pilot, and settled for driving and nursing. Another pilot was assigned to active duty, however.

The most famous women soldiers were the “Battalion of Death.” Its leader, Maria Botchkareva, a 25-year-old peasant girl (with a history of abuse by men), began as an individual soldier in the Russian army. She managed (with the support of an amused local commander) to get permission from the Czar to enlist as a regular soldier. After fighting off the frequent sexual advances and ridicule of her male comrades, she eventually won their respect — especially after serving with them in battle. Botchkareva’s autobiography describes several horrendous battle scenes in which most of her fellow soldiers were killed running towards German machine-gun positions, and one in which she bayoneted a German soldier to death. After two different failed attacks, she spent many hours crawling under German fire to drag her wounded companions back to safety, evidently saving hundreds of lives in the course of her service at the front. She was seriously wounded several times but always returned to her unit at the front after recuperating. Clearly a strong bond of camaraderie existed between her and the male soldiers of her unit.

After the February 1917 revolution, Alexander Kerensky as Minister of War in the provisional government allowed Botchkareva to organize a “Battalion of Death” composed of several hundred women. The history of this battalion is a bit murky because both anti- and pro-Bolshevik writers used it to make political points. (By contrast, the earlier phase of Botchkareva’s military career is more credible.) Botchkareva’s own 1919 account was “set down” by a leading anti-Bolshevik exile in the United States, who says he listened to her stories in Russian over several weeks and wrote them out simultaneously in English. The narrative is just a bit too politically correct (for an anti-Bolshevik); the stories of her heroic deeds are a bit too consistently dramatic. The language and analysis at times do not sound like the words of an illiterate peasant and soldier, and the book explicitly appeals for foreign help for Russian anti-Bolsheviks. (Louise Bryant’s pro-Bolshevik account is equally unconvincing.)

Botchkareva was aligned with Kornilov’s faction, which wanted to restore discipline in the army and resume the war against Germany, contrary to the Bolshevik program of ending the war and carrying out immediate land reform and seizure of factories at home. During mid-1917, army units elected “committees” to discuss and decide on the unit’s actions. Botchkareva insisted on traditional military rule from above in her battalion, and got away with it (though with only 300 of the original 2,000 women) because the unit was unique in the whole army. This endeared Botchkareva to many army officers and anti-Bolsheviks. It also put her
battalion at the center of the June 1917 offensive – she says that it was the only unit capable of taking offensive action.

The battalion was formed in extraordinary circumstances, in response to a breakdown of morale and discipline in the Russian army after three horrible years of war and the fall of the Czarist government. By her own account, Botchkareva conceived of the battalion as a way to shame the men into fighting (since nothing else was getting them to fight). She argued that “numbers were immaterial, that what was important was to shame the men and that a few women at one place could serve as an example to the entire front....[T]he purpose of the plan would be to shame the men in the trenches by having the women go over the top first.” The battalion was thus exceptional and was essentially a propaganda tool. As such it was heavily publicized: “Before I had time to realize it I was already in a photographer’s studio.... The following day this picture topped big posters pasted all over the city.” Bryant wrote in 1918: “No other feature of the great war ever caught the public fancy like the Death Battalion, composed of Russian women. I heard so much about them before I left America....”

The battalion began with about 2,000 women volunteers and was given equipment, a headquarters, and several dozen male officers as instructors. Botchkareva did not emphasize fighting strength but discipline (the purpose of the women soldiers was sacrificial). Physical standards for enlistment were lower than for men. She told the women, “We are physically weak, but if we be strong morally and spiritually we will accomplish more than a large force.” She was preoccupied with upholding the moral standards and upright behavior of her “girls.” Mostly, she emphasized that the soldiers in her battalion would have to follow traditional military discipline, not elect committees to rule as the rest of the army was doing. “I did not organize this Battalion to be like the rest of the army. We were to serve as an example, and not merely to add a few babs [women] to the ineffective millions of soldiers now swarming over Russia.” When most of the women rebelled against her harsh rule, Botchkareva stubbornly rejected pleas from Kerensky and others – including direct orders from military superiors – to allow formation of a committee. Instead she reorganized the remaining 300 women who stayed loyal to her, and brought them to the front, fighting off repeated attacks by Bolsheviks along the way. The battalion had new uniforms, a full array of war equipment, and 18 men to serve them (two instructors, eight cooks, six drivers, and two shoemakers).

The battalion was to open the offensive which Kerensky ordered in June 1917. (Since the February revolution, there had been little fighting and growing fraternization on the Russian–German front.) The Bolsheviks opposed the offensive, and the tired, demoralized soldiers were not motivated to participate in it. By sending 300 women over the top first, Botchkareva envisioned triggering an advance along the entire front – 14 million Russian soldiers – propelled by the men’s shame at seeing “their sisters going into battle,” thus overcoming the men’s cowardice. When the appointed time for the attack came, however, the men on either side of the women’s battalion refused to move. The next day, about 100 male officers and 300 male soldiers who favored the offensive joined the ranks of the women’s battalion, and it was this mixed force of 700 that went over the top that night, hoping to goad the men on either side into advancing too. Locally, the tactic worked, and the entire corps advanced and captured three German lines (the men stopping at the second, however, to make immediate use of alcohol found there). As the Russian line spread thin, however, another corps which was supposed to move forward to relieve them refused to advance. A costly retreat to the original lines ensued. The shame tactic had failed, except for a local effect, which anyway may have been caused as much by seeing comrades under fire as by feeling shame about women going first. Ultimately, Botchkareva concludes about the Russian army, “the men knew no shame.”

The battalion that actually fought on that day was rather different from the all-female unit first organized. The battalion arrived at the front with 300 women and two male instructors. Before battle, it received 19 more male officers and instructors, and a male “battle adjutant” was selected. During final preparations, a “detachment of eight machine guns and a [male] crew to man them” were added. Lined up in the trenches for the first night’s offensive that did not materialize, six male officers were inserted at equal intervals, with Botchkareva herself at one end and her male adjutant in the center. In the force that actually went over the top the next night with 400 male soldiers and officers added, the “line was so arranged that men and women alternated, a girl being flanked by two men.” Botchkareva notes that in advancing under withering fire, “my brave girls [were] encouraged by the presence of men on their sides.” Although the women fighters clearly were brave, and one-third of them were killed or wounded, their effect (and indeed their purpose) lay not in their military value – 300 soldiers could hardly make a difference among millions – but in their propaganda value. However, this latter effect did not materialize as hoped.

Other women’s battalions were formed in several other cities – apparently less than 1,000 women in all – but they suffered from a variety of problems, ranging from poor discipline to a lack of shoes and uniforms. These other units never saw combat. There was not another offensive before the Bolsheviks took power in October and sent most of the women soldiers home, telling them “to put on female attire.”

The Battalion of Death, then, never tested an all-female unit’s effectiveness in combat. Nonetheless, on one day in 1917, 300 women did go over the top side by
side with 400 male comrades, advanced, and overran German trenches. The women apparently were able to keep functioning in the heat of battle, and were able to adhere to military discipline. These women were, of course, an elite sample of the most war-capable women in all of Russia. Nonetheless, they did it – advanced under fire, retreated under fire, and helped provide that crucial element of leadership by which other nearby units were spurred into action, overcoming the inertia of fatigue and committee rule. The Battalion of Death did this not as scattered individual women but as a coherent military unit of 300 women — instructed by Botchkareva that “they were no longer women, but soldiers.”

**United States** In World War I, 13,000 women enlisted in the US Navy, mostly doing clerical work—“the first [women in US history]...to be admitted to full military rank and status.” The Army hired women nurses and telephone operators to work overseas, but as civilian employees (although in uniform). Plans for women’s auxiliary corps – to perform mostly clerical, supply, and communications work – were shot down by the War Department. So were plans for commissioning women doctors in the Medical Corps. The end of the war brought an end to proposals to enlist women in the Army.

During World War I, a number of women participated individually in several armies. One of the most famous, Englishwoman Flora Sandes, fought with the Serbian army on the same terms as the men, and took an Austrian speaking tour in 1920.

**Women shaming men into war** Women are often active participants in shaming men to try to goad them into fighting wars. Recall the Russian women in World War I who went “over the top” to try to shame exhausted Russian soldiers into fighting again (see pp. 73–75). In Britain and America during that war, women organized a large-scale campaign to hand out white feathers to able-bodied men found on the streets, to shame the men for failing to serve in combat. Not all women supported it: “Dealer in white feathers / ... Can’t you see it isn’t decent, / To flout and goad men into doing, / What isn’t asked of you?” However, the Women of England’s Active Service League pledged never to be seen in public with an able-bodied man not serving in the military, and British recruiting posters told young men their women would reject them if they were “not in khaki” and meanwhile told the young women that men who refused to fight and die for them were not worthy of their affections. (The white feather campaign was briefly resurrected in World War II, and the British government had to issue badges for men exempt on medical grounds.) Some scholars object to blaming women for goading men into World War I. They argue that the poster claiming “Women of Britain Say, ‘Go!’” (see Figure 5.3) was propaganda devised by men to affect other men. “[M]any women tried to get their sons out of the army. Others were agitating to prevent conscription.”

![Figure 5.3 “Women of Britain say, ‘Go!’” poster, World War I. [Courtesy of the Imperial War Museum, London.]](image)

**Factory Workers**

The armies of twentieth-century total war depended on women in new ways, not only within the army (see pp. 64–76, 88–92) but in the civilian workforce (and in addition to the ongoing responsibilities of women for domestic, reproductive, and
sexual work). In 1914, feminist Carrie Chapman Catt warned that “[w]ar falls on the women most heavily, and more so now than ever before.” Both Britain and the United States mobilized substantial numbers of women into war-related industries, and into the workplace generally to make male workers available for military use. These arrangements, although effective in boosting the war effort, almost everywhere were cast as temporary. They used, rather than challenged, existing gender stereotypes.  

In World War I Britain, about 1 million mostly lower-class women worked in munitions jobs. They were called “munitionettes” or “Tommy’s sister.” Unlike nurses, the munitions workers could not profess pacifism since their work directly contributed to the fighting. In fact, in 1918, Scottish women working at a shell factory raised money and bought a warplane for the air force. However, the munitionettes’ main motivation was financial, contrary to the popular belief that it was patriotic. The women found the wages “at first livable and later lucrative.” Compared with domestic work, war work “offered escape from jobs of badly paid drudgery.” However, although they earned more than they would have doing women’s work, the women received nowhere near the fortunes they had been led to expect when deciding to take war work.

Eric Leed argues that World War I created for women “an enormously expanded range of escape routes from the constraints of the private family” because the war caused “the collapse of those established, traditional distinctions” that had restricted women. A Punch cartoon of the time shows a soldier’s wife who receives an allowance: “This war is eaven – twenty-five shillings a week and no ‘usband bothering about!” Costello credits World War I with winning women both the vote and a “new liberation” in fashion and behavior (smoking, bobbed hair, short skirts, and hedonism). But for British women war workers in World War I, “no doubt conditions varied a lot.” Conditions worsened over time, making 1917–18 “the hardest year of the war for civilians,” especially in the pan-European 1918 influenza epidemic. Some women complained of barracks-like hostels with poor food and little heat, whereas others found accommodations clean, if crowded, and occasionally even comfortable. Most often, though, the woman war worker had “little in her life now except work and sleep.” Work shifts of 10–12 hours were “not uncommon.” Conditions in factories were, for women, an “alien environment” of deafening noise and depressing grime, encased by blacked-out windows.

Other scholars doubt that World War I was an exhilarating, erotic release for women who took on traditionally male roles. Some women who drove “trucks, cranes, cars, and motorbikes in Britain during the war did find it thrilling,” but many others were “killed, injured, and poisoned” in munitions factories. German women in World War I “shouldered double burdens,” working at heavy machinery but still responsible for their domestic duties.

Germany In World War I, when the expected quick victory turned to protracted war, German women entered industrial jobs (about 700,000 in munitions industries by the end of the war), and served as civilian employees in military jobs in rear areas (medical, clerical, and manual labor; women trained for jobs in the signal corps late in the war but never deployed). German women won the vote after World War I, and some kept their jobs in industry.

Women’s peace movements In the twentieth century, the exemplary women’s peace organization is the Women’s Peace Party (WPP), founded during World War I and later renamed the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF). The WPP grew out of the international women’s suffrage movement. It was catalyzed by a US tour in Fall 1914 of a Hungarian woman and a British woman (from enemy sides in the new war). The WPP women “turned a good deal of their energies, in the midst of the suffrage campaign – which they did not abandon – to address the causes and cures of war.”

The WPP held an International Conference of Women at the Hague (Netherlands) nine months into World War I in 1915 (three months after the WPP’s founding). The conference called for mediation to end the war. Jane Addams chaired the conference, and the WPP. In spite of travel problems and government obstacles, 1,136 voting delegates from 150 organizations in 12 countries attended. The conference brought together women from enemy and neutral countries, a feat that one delegate contrasted with the failure of others: “Science, medicine, reform, labor, religion – not one of these causes has been able as yet to gather its followers from across dividing frontiers.” The participants were “a quite extraordinary group of gifted, courageous, and altruistic pioneers.” Critics, however, found “conspicuously absent ... representatives of English, French, German, and Russian feminism.” Theodore Roosevelt called the meeting “silly and base.” Winston Churchill closed the North Sea to shipping, preventing most British delegates from attending. The British Admiralty also detained the US delegation’s ship – which the British press called a “shipload of hysterical women” and “feminine busybodies” – until the last minute.

When the United States entered World War I, some feminists remained antiwar activists, but faced difficult challenges as most of their colleagues supported the
war effort. The YWCA’s work supporting soldiers in World War I “strained against – and temporarily overwhelmed – its historic pacifism.” Addams’s efforts to galvanize US opposition to World War I backfired as she “alienated American public opinion by daring to question the ‘heroism’ of war.” She was “instantly accused of besmirching the heroism of men dying for ‘home, country, and peace itself.’” She argued, based on visits to military hospitals in Europe, that soldiers were not natural killers and were victims of the sheer horror of mechanized war. Her critics took this to mean she thought men incapable of heroic self-sacrifice. After 1917, Addams “was increasingly isolated” in opposing the war. She admitted moving “from the mire of self-pity to the barren hills of self-righteousness and … hat[ing] herself equally in both places.” After the war, she was branded a traitor, Communist, and anarchist. However, she won the 1931 Nobel Peace Prize.\(^{183}\)

Addams believed that mothers would be the first to protest the slaughter of their children in war, and that “women of civilization” could help end this senseless killing. However, she did not hold a polarized gender conception of war and peace. In 1915, she dismissed the “belief that a woman is against war simply because she is a woman … In every country there are women who believe that war is inevitable and righteous; the majority of women as well as men in the nations at war doubtless hold that conviction.”\(^{184}\)

The first woman to serve in the US Congress, Jeannette Rankin, was a pacifist who voted against US participation in both World Wars.

Source: http://www.warandgender.com/wgwomwwi.htm

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\(^{28}\) Tuten 1982, 48–49.
\(^{34}\) Botchkareva 1919, 154–71; Stites 1978, 280; White 1994, 4–5, 13; Bryant 1918, 212, 216–18.
\(^{35}\) Shame: Botchkareva 1919, 157, 207, 211, studio 161; Bryant 1918, 10.
\(^{37}\) Botchkareva 1919, sisters 207, knew 262.
\(^{38}\) Botchkareva 1919, adjutant 205, 208–12.
\(^{39}\) Bryant 1918, 212–13.
\(^{40}\) Botchkareva 1919, soldiers 165.

\(^{119}\) Woollacott 1994, 2, 7, belief 8, lucrative 1, drudgery 4, 10–11; Woollacott 1996; Braybon and Summerfield 1987, fortunes 57–58.
\(^{140}\) Leed 1979, expanded 45; Blatch 1918, bothering 56; Costello 1985, bobbed 3–4, little 156, shifts 159, grime 168; Braybon and Summerfield 1987, varied–comfortable 101–2; Woollacott 1994, 4, 8, 50–58.
\(^{141}\) Woollacott 1994, poisoned 209–11; Blatch 1918, burdens 81.
\(^{173}\) Schneider and Schneider 1991, devotion 156, pedestal 267, finger 158, poems 161, dress 163.
\(^{174}\) Blatch 1918, 11–14, 35–59, happy 54, loss 55, 60–85; Kent 1993, mad 51, soul 52.
\(^{175}\) Braybon and Summerfield 1987, cage ii, strain 2, 6; Tylee 1990, 7; Enloe 1989, 22.
\(^{176}\) Kent 1993, 4–6.
\(^{182}\) International Women’s Committee of Permanent Peace 1915; Costin 1982; Addams 1922; Bussey and Tims 1965, frontier 17; Oldfield 1995, gifted 159; Stites 1978, absent 281; Oldfield 1995, busybodies 159.