

**Christa Häggerle, Oswald Überegger & Birgitta Bader Zaar, eds. *Gender and the First World War*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. 265 pp. Index. Illustrations. Cloth.**

Reviewed by: Alison Rowley, Concordia University, Montreal

The chapters in this volume derive from a 2011 conference on “The First World War in a Gendered Context – Topics and Perspectives.” As with any collected volume, there are still areas that the contents do not cover – in this instance I wish at least one of the papers had focused on Russia – but the editors are to be commended for making sure the book had a wider geographic lens than most studies of the First World War. Alongside the chapters that explore the French and British contexts, we find articles on Italy, Germany, parts of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and even Lithuania. This broad geographic approach allows the authors to test the applicability of certain ideas (such as the “double helix”<sup>1</sup>) that have been referred to extensively in the literature on Western European women and the war for decades.

A similarly wide definition of “gender” means that, in this book, the word is not merely used as a substitute for “women.” Instead, the volume includes two strong papers about masculinity and one on the gendered experiences of children during the war. Jason Crouthamel, for example, asks how men negotiated different kinds of masculinity and sexuality, especially since the idealized construct of comradeship among soldiers did entail some nurturing elements. He notes that the acceptance of emotional bonds between men in times of war was seized upon by gay men to argue that they were not “deviant” but rather patriotic and dutiful soldiers. At the other end of the spectrum, Julia Barbara Kline’s article considers how scientific cinematography – which filmed soldiers suffering from what we would term PTSD – affected constructions of the ideal warrior and raised questions about how the military functioned. To reassure the general public that there was not a crisis of masculinity among soldiers, the patients, who had been feminized in the films, had to be shown to be “cured.” Manon Pignot’s contribution – a micro-history approach to children’s experiences of war in France – also shows the blurring of gender lines. Prior to the war, boys and girls were divided into neat categories and presented with only “appropriate” behaviors, meaning for example that boys were trained to be future soldiers in gym classes, while it was suggested that girls model their future wartime service after nurses or that they could knit items for the front. These hard and fast lines broke down once France was occupied by the Germans. Occupied areas became “feminized battlefields, focused on the domestic sphere.” (p. 171) Moreover, young girls came to realize that women who resisted the enemy were just as heroic as the men who fought at the front.

The erasure of the binary “front line/home front,” as well as the silences it created in post-war historical narratives, is a theme that runs throughout *Gender and the First World War*. Matteo Ermacora’s first-rate study of lower class women who worked as “portatrici” carrying supplies to soldiers in remote places in the northern border region of Italy called Friuli is a case in point. Despite the fact that state and church authorities worked desperately to maintain traditional gender roles, the lived experiences of these women defied them. The portatrici came under enemy fire and worked in all weather conditions. But after the war, their contributions were not

celebrated, since they stretched too far beyond what was acceptable for women. The same was true for the Austrian nurses who are the subject of Christa Hä默le's article later in the volume. Their experiences were not discussed once the fighting was over, nor were their accounts published. Hä默le's research recovers their stories and explores the coping mechanisms nurses used to deal with the traumatic events going on around them. She argues that field hospitals should be considered "second battlefields," but she does not stretch her analysis to show the ways in which nurses' coping mechanisms were, in fact, the same ones used by front-line soldiers. Alison S. Fell's article addresses the position of British and French war heroines. The most interesting part of her analysis is the sections on Emilienne Moreau, Elsie Knocker, and Mairi Chisholm. There, she shows that while "the prestige of the heroine-martyrs who had died during the war was assured, and could remain untarnished, it was more difficult for the heroines who survived to maintain their public image in the post-war years." (p. 123) Women who crossed over the line and became combatants in some way were simply not accepted as veterans after the war. Finally, Susan Grayzel's piece, which focuses on propaganda and civil defense, demonstrates how changing technology, particularly the advent of aerial combat, obliterated any division between home and front. As she so aptly puts it: "a state preparing to protect infants from chemical warfare was a state that had conceded that the home was now a war zone." (p. 140)

Another cluster of articles addresses women's activism during the war. Bruna Bianchi looks at pacifist journals edited by women. As she notes, peace groups led by men dissolved in 1914, which left lacunae to be filled by women. Women were instrumental in the new pacifism that emerged as the war raged across Europe. Often using biologically-based arguments, the pacifist journals presented a picture of women as care-givers working to counter the horrors wrought by men. Activists also used these journals to keep in touch with one another, in other words, to keep the internationalist spirit alive at a time of virulent nationalism. Ingrid Sharp's research shows how deeply divided the German women's movement was. Pacifist women strongly believed that peace could only be ensured if women had the right to vote. Yet most German feminists rejected pacifism once the war began. They argued that contributing to the war effort demonstrated to the government that women were competent, but also that it was inappropriate to dwell on the question of suffrage when men were fighting and dying. These insurmountable divisions meant that, even though German women did get the right to vote in 1918, women's organizations were not in a good position to press further for rights or a greater presence in the political sphere.

The final two papers of the volume – those by Virginija Jurenienė and Tina Bahovec – extend this discussion of women's organizations deeper into Eastern Europe. Jurenienė's article is a history of the Lithuanian women's movement from the turn of the century, when the area was part of the Russian Empire, to the end of the war when Lithuania became an independent country. She notes that Lithuanian women experienced the war quite differently depending on whether they fled into Russia from the advancing German army (in which case they lived as refugees for an extended period of time but could make contact with Russian women's organizations), or whether they remained at home living under German occupation. The importance of shifting international borders is further underscored in Tina Bahovec's article, which considers the history of Slovene women in Carinthia. Bahovec shows how gender, and especially gendered rhetoric, played a significant role in state and nation building as the Austro-Hungarian Empire was replaced by new countries like Austria and Yugoslavia. But her work also demonstrates how quickly women's issues were forgotten amidst the chaos of the ensuing 1920s.

<sup>1</sup> See Margaret Higgonet, *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987.