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Call to Duty: Women and World War I

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Call to Duty

Women and World War I

By Jennifer D. Keene

How women adapted to a world at war



*Women Awake!
Your Country
Needs you.*

Saying good-bye to her fiancé Roland Leighton in London as he headed to the Western Front was an emotional experience for Vera Brittain. Her fear for his safety bubbled forth as she angrily confronted him about why he had decided to fight. In her 1933 memoir, *Testament of Youth*, she recalled:

He replied that he hardly knew.... He neither hated the Germans nor loved the Belgians; the only possible motive for going was “heroism in the abstract,” and that didn’t seem a very logical reason for risking one’s life.

Watching loved ones depart, uncertain if they would return—this was an experience that women around the world shared during the Great War. The continual scene of women sending men off to fight was troubling; paradoxically, it was also a familiar, traditional ritual that reinforced gender roles within western societies.

Promoting Patriotism

A tremendous amount of wartime propaganda urged women to send their men off bravely. The exchange between Vera and Roland helps explain why governments believed this propaganda was necessary—to ensure that enough men would agree to leave their loved ones to fight. British posters entreated men to enlist to protect family honor. Propaganda leaflets urged women to ask their menfolk if “they were not worth fighting for.” The poster captioned “Daddy, what did *YOU* do in the Great War?” (displayed in sidebar at right) forecasts a future where children hold their fathers accountable for wartime actions—or inaction. Admiral Charles Penrose Fitzgerald suggested that young British women hand out white feathers (a symbol of cowardice) to publicly shame young able-bodied men in civilian dress.

U.S. propaganda posters pictured voluptuous women encouraging men to enlist, reflecting an emerging advertising culture that relied on sex appeal to sell products. German posters took a more traditional stance, depicting women as dutiful mothers and wives willing to serve the nation in any capacity. Consensus and unity were dominant German themes rather than American-style sexual adventure and virility. French posters addressed the nation’s preoccupation with its declining birthrate. A French woman’s patriotic duty did not end with sending her husband off to war. She was also instructed to procreate, safeguarding France’s future by building the next generation of soldiers.

Danger and Deprivation

You love us when we're heroes, home on leave
Or wounded in a mentionable place;
You worship decorations, and believe
That chivalry redeems the war's disgrace.

These words from British poet Siegfried Sassoon's poem "The Glory of Women" reveal the dichotomy in wartime roles for men and women. Men fight and women support them. Men learn about the horrors of war; women on the home front remain innocent and somewhat foolish by continuing to believe in the glory of battle. Reality was more complicated.

For many women there was no distinction between battlefield and home front. Either way, the war came to them. The German invasion and occupation brought the very real danger of rape and death to the doorsteps of women living in Belgium and northern France. Along the Eastern Front, large swaths of territory changed hands frequently between Allied and Central Power forces. To escape the paths of advancing armies, hundreds of thousands of civilians in the Russian and Austro-Hungarian Empires fled, often traveling far behind the lines. This massive refugee crisis disproportionately affected women, who lost their homes and livelihood and were left struggling to shelter, feed, and clothe their children. The plight of women along both the Western and Eastern Fronts aroused the sympathies of aid societies (often run by women) in the United States and British Empire who mobilized to send humanitarian aid overseas.

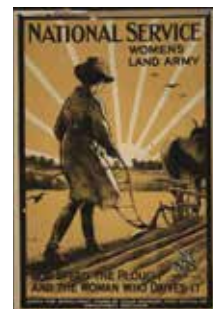
The novel methods used to wage war also brought physical suffering and even death into the daily lives of many women. German Zeppelin raids on London and aerial attacks on Paris killed women going to church or taking their children to school. In Germany and Austria-Hungary, the ever-tightening Allied blockade forced millions of women to spend hours each day waiting in bread lines. "Our thoughts are chiefly taken up with wondering what our next meal will be," noted one woman in Berlin in 1917. Some lost patience. Food riots were not uncommon. In Russia, where the war disrupted agricultural production, authorities recognized the political implications of women's rising desperation. On the eve of the 1917 Russian Revolution, one official report warned: "The mothers of families, who are exhausted by the endless standing in line at the stores, who are worn out by the suffering of seeing their children half-starved and sick, may be much closer to revolution."

Food shortages prompted officials to regulate women's shopping and cooking activities. From London to New York and Africa to Australia, propaganda urged women to readjust their families' diets. Germany, France, and Britain implemented rationing to limit supply. In the United States, a major food producer for the Allies, the Food Administration launched a massive campaign to stimulate food conservation. 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. These peer-pressure tactics proved quite effective. Enlisting women to monitor the housekeeping practices of their neighbors, the Food Administration expanded its reach into kitchens across the nation.

"For the first time I was going to be someone, I would have a personal role to play, I would count in the world."



Vera Brittain's fiancé, Roland Leighton, and her brother, Edward, volunteered for the British army and were dispatched to fight at the Western Front. Wanting to join their efforts, she left her studies at Oxford to become a nurse with the Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD). Image courtesy The First World War Poetry Digital Archive (oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit), University of Oxford; © copyright Literary Executors, Vera Brittain Estate and The Vera Brittain Fonds, McMaster Univ. Library, Canada.



Governments used peer pressure, guilt, sex appeal, and other tactics to compel citizens to fulfill the needs of the war effort. "Enlist!" was the major message to men. Women were called to "duty" everywhere—at the office, in the fields, at the war front, and at the family dinner table. Top row, left: *Daddy, what did YOU do in the Great War?* Parliamentary Recruiting Committee, London, 1915. Right: *I Want You for The Navy*, Howard Chandler Christy, 1917. Middle row, left: *Stenographers! Washington needs you!*; Prudential Litho. Co., 1917. Right: *National Service, Women's Land Army. God Speed the Plough and the Woman Who Drives It*, H.G. Gawthorn, 1917, London. Bottom row, left: *Third Red Cross Roll Call*, Haskell Coffin, 1918. Right: *Eat less, and let us be thankful that we have enough to share with those who fight for freedom*, A. Hendee, 1918. Courtesy Library of Congress.



Daring Discrimination

Rather than simply wait for loved ones to return and normal routines to resume, many women chose to put on uniforms. In the heroic spirit of Joan of Arc and Florence Nightingale, women volunteered to serve in medical units as nurses or ambulance drivers. With no news as to the fate of her fiancé or brother, Vera Brittain's decision to become a nurse, she said, brought "tranquility to exactly the extent that it diverted my mind from the letter that had not come or the telegram that might be coming."

"A young girl in ordinary life is nothing or next to nothing," noted one young French woman, offering a different reason to become a nurse. "For the first time I was going to be someone, I would have a personal role to play, I would count in the world." Women, however, did not escape discrimination by joining the nursing corps. Male doctors and orderlies refused to recognize their authority, and it required constant vigilance to deflect unwanted advances or physical assaults from male patients. American nurses argued, to no avail, that giving nurses military rank was one way to solve these inter-connected problems.

A mixture of patriotism, hopes for adventure, and the desire to share a male relative's experiences prompted some women to serve as soldiers, most famously in Russia. Nearly five thousand Russian women fought, some clandestinely by donning male clothing and others after making a personal appeal to the Tsar to serve in male units. The female Russian soldier's body was often violated by both the enemy and male comrades. Maria Botchkareva, for instance, suffered a spinal injury in combat—after already serving in a male regiment where fellow soldiers continuously pinched, jostled, and rubbed against her. The government formed in the wake of the February 1917 revolution organized these women into all-female battalions. Their exploits drew tremendous press coverage. For the fledgling democratic Russian government (overthrown in the November 1917 Bolshevik Revolution), the propaganda value of these female battalions was two-fold: the government hoped both to shame male deserters into returning to the line and to galvanize public support for continuing the war.

The general loosening of morals during wartime made it difficult for authorities to tell the difference between women who slept with men for money and those embracing the opportunity for sexual liberty.

Row 1, left: Women's regiment from Petrograd relaxing in front of their tents, Feb. 1918. Right: Navy girls on review, Washington, D.C., with three naval officers between rows of Yeomanettes, c. 1918. Row 2, left: Members of the Woman's Radio Corps stand beside an Army car, Feb. 1919. Right: A woman activating the filter press in a glucose factory, Lancashire, England. Row 3, left: Two young women operate machinery, Armstrong Whitworth's and Co., Elswick, England. Right: A woman carries a hundredweight sack of coal, London, 1918. Row 4, left: Members of the Women's Land Army raise their hoes in salute. Right: A pupil at the Cheshire Agricultural College at Holmes Chapel being taught how to handle cattle. Row 5, left: Members of the Women's Royal Air Force (WRAF), based in Cologne, France, as part of occupying forces, boarding Air Force tenders. Right: Women's Auxiliary Army Corps at Etaples, France, uniformed in heavy coats and sturdy boots. First three images courtesy Library of Congress. Remaining images courtesy The First World War Poetry Digital Archive (oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit), University of Oxford; © copyright The Imperial War Museum.

Female nurses and soldiers took pains to distinguish themselves from prostitutes, and this often involved an explicit disavowal of any sexual impulses. The chastity of the uniformed female participant stood in stark contrast. Female soldiers dressed like men, while nurses wore white starched uniforms that resembled nuns' habits.

Women's Work

Very few women could vote, so they found other means for voicing political views. The international ties that western female suffragists had created to share ideas and tactics in the pre-war era laid the foundation for an international women's peace movement. In April 1915, female activists from most warring nations and many neutral ones, including American Jane Addams, met at The Hague to hold the Women's Peace Congress. Claiming to speak on behalf of mothers whose children perished in the war, the Women's Peace Congress urged world leaders to seek a negotiated peace settlement. Most delegates received a hostile reception when they returned home. Even in the neutral United States (which had not yet entered the war), the press vilified Addams as an ignorant, naïve old maid for venturing into the male domain of diplomatic relations.

Women also stepped into new economic roles during the war. How would a family survive if the male breadwinner left to fight? Governments tried to allay this fear by providing financial support for soldiers' dependents. For reasons of both necessity and opportunity, many women took on traditionally male jobs during the war. In rural areas women had to harvest crops and feed livestock. In urban areas, burgeoning orders for guns and artillery shells created a surplus of high-paying, skilled jobs.

By 1917, Russian women were forty-three percent of the industrial workforce; French women filled one-third of the positions in munitions factories. Women's labor was so important to the war effort that British and German officials even discussed the possibility of conscripting women to work in war-related industries. Some women entered the workplace for the first time, but most were already working. The war gave them a chance to move into better paying, higher prestige jobs. The shift from domestic, clerical, or agricultural work to factory jobs was only temporary, however. After the war, laws in many nations returned those jobs to male veterans.

The reliance on female labor and support for the war begged the question of why western societies continued to deny women the vote. Radical suffragists saw the war as a moment to press forward, while moderate activists counseled restraint lest women be seen as unpatriotic. End results were mixed. Revolutionary Russia granted women suffrage, as did postwar governments in the United States and Germany. Britain granted women over 30 the vote, essentially ignoring the fact that young women in their twenties had provided the bulk of wartime military and industrial service to the state. The French Parliament briefly debated granting female survivors of fallen soldiers the vote, but in the end French women remained disenfranchised until 1944.

Forever Changed

The war produced nearly three million widows: 600,000 in France and Germany; 239,000 in Britain; and 33,000 in the United States. These women faced numerous challenges, including

single-parenthood, economic insecurity, and grief. Mourning, however, evolved into a carefully scripted public ritual. Widows were expected to exhibit stoic acceptance of their fate, modeling how entire nations should accept personal loss as necessary for the community's survival. Grieving took place in private.

Reuniting with a loved one who survived brought joy and relief to many families. For others, the years of separation or the lingering effects of battle became permanent scars. Women had balanced the household budget, tilled the fields, and made decisions about schooling the children. Relinquishing these responsibilities was difficult when the family patriarch returned from war. Most governments offered some aid to disabled soldiers. Nonetheless, many veterans convalesced at home, out of public view, where women remained the primary caregivers.

After reluctantly seeing her brother and fiancé off to war, Vera Brittain had become a nurse in hopes of staying close to them in body and spirit. She received the news of Roland's death in 1915. Her brother, Edward, was killed in 1918, just a few months before the Armistice ended hostilities. Walking amid the cheering crowds in London at war's end, she recalled:

For the first time I realized, with all that full realization meant, how completely everything that had hitherto made up my life had vanished with Edward and Roland.... The War was over; a new age was beginning; but the dead were dead and would never return.

These words aptly note the sweeping change brought to women's lives and the lingering shadow of The Great War.

JENNIFER D. KEENE is professor and chair of the History Department at Chapman University. She is the author of three books on World War I, including *Doughboys*, *the Great War*, and *the Remaking of America* (2001).

EXTRA! | READ | THINK | TALK | LINK

- ▶ *The First World War Poetry Digital Archive*, University of Oxford. An extraordinary resource. The Vera Brittain Collection contains correspondence, images, and extracts from her war diary. Other collections include biographies, photos, and verse by major poets of the period; a wide network of film and audio clips; and WWI-period photographs linked to Google Maps to pinpoint locations. [oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit](https://www.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit)
- ▶ *First World War* collection, Imperial War Museums. Online exhibits of wartime photos, art, and propaganda, including sections on "The Women War Workers of the North West" and "The Women's Land Army in Pictures." iwm.org.uk/history/first-world-war-home-front
- ▶ *American Women Rebuilding France, 1917-1924*, National World War I Museum at Liberty Memorial. Online exhibit follows 350 American women volunteers who traveled and worked to restore war-ravaged areas in northeastern France. theworldwar.org (click on the *Explore* tab; select *Exhibitions*, then select *Online Exhibitions*)