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# An Army of Housewives: Women's Wartime Columns in Two Mainstream Israeli Newspapers

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AN ARMY OF HOUSEWIVES:  
WOMEN'S WARTIME COLUMNS  
IN TWO MAINSTREAM ISRAELI NEWSPAPERS

Shira Klein

At the height of Israel's 1948 war, women's columns in the newspapers *Ha'aretz* and *Ma'ariv* offered readers advice, stories, and letters. They focused on domestic practices such as preparing food, sewing clothes, dressing fashionably and providing comfort. At first glance, they completely ignored the war raging around them. However, this essay shows that the columnists portrayed housewives' roles, no less than men's front-line fighting, as an important part of the nation's wartime effort. The columnists and their responding readers took the housewives' domestic practices, which made them seem so unfit for battle and turned them into a battlefield of their own. Through these "feminine" roles, seemingly irrelevant during wartime, they produced their own set of heroines, saviors and victims. Although most of the columnists' advice fell into line with the Zionist nationalist and militarist climate of 1948, this essay shows that the women's columns revealed a few surprising voices of dissention. Finally, the style and content of the columns did not differ greatly from those of women in other wartime settings in the 1930s and 1940s. Rather, their domestic nationalism in wartime followed the pattern of housewives elsewhere in the world.

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In early summer 1948, at the height of the Israeli-Arab war, "Tamar" took her turn at writing the women's column in the daily newspaper *Ma'ariv*. "The heroism of the soldiers fighting at the front is extolled by military reporters," she claimed, "but the heroism of women concealed in the house – in city and village, in *moshav* and *moshava* [collective settlements] – will not be told in public."<sup>1</sup> Female soldiers might receive some media attention, but no reporters wrote about the majority of Jewish women during the war, the housewives at home.<sup>2</sup> The women's columns in the newspapers, as well as published responses from female readers, provided exceptions to the general trend so aptly observed by "Tamar."

Written by and for women, on a weekly or daily basis, the articles gave advice to housewives in the newly-born state of Israel. Most of the writers dealt with fashion and beauty products, cooking and food supplies, sewing clothes, neighborly relations and other domestic matters. At first glance, these columns seem disconnected from the nation's wartime struggle, focusing as they did on purely "feminine" and domestic concerns. In fact, they entrenched these housewifely duties in the national endeavor.

In what ways did the women reflected in these columns view their domestic role as a

contribution to the nation's wartime effort? Did they ever dissent from the dominant militarist and nationalist atmosphere of the time? Were the columnists' concerns typical of those of women in other wartime or nationalist contexts in the same period, or did they express reactions specific to the 1948 Zionist endeavor?

### *Women's National Participation*

In the past two decades, scholars have paid increasing attention to women's roles in nationalist settings.<sup>3</sup> Historians have studied women's participation by focusing, for example, on their agency and activism in military service, production and employment.<sup>4</sup> These works have revealed women who overcame some gender-based limitations and participated in nation-building in the public sense, in traditionally male domains.

The housewives' role as portrayed in the columns belonged to a different sort of national participation. The columns espoused a domestic ideal characterized by bourgeois values, according to which women should remain at home and leave the men to deal with the more public realm of politics and commerce. However, this notion of the "separate spheres" remained no more than an ideal, as most women constantly crossed the line between private and public. Recent scholarship has discussed the conscious mobilization of domestic practices for national ends in the Zionist context.<sup>5</sup> Sachlav Stoler-Liss, for instance, shows how Israeli mothers embraced their national duty as "mothers of the nation" during wartime;<sup>6</sup> Yael Raviy and Orit Rozin discuss women's national role as food providers both before and after statehood;<sup>7</sup> and Bat-Sheva Margalit Stern highlights the role of women's beauty pageants in the 1920s and 1930s in promoting Zionist ideals.<sup>8</sup>

The Israeli housewives featured in the women's columns in 1948 fall into this same category of domestic and simultaneously public and national involvement. If newspaper columns, a form of mass media, offered advice on women's household concerns, this placed practices of food and fashion within the range of public affairs. Moreover, although the authors advocated staying at home, the content and tone of their advice urged their readers to serve the nation publicly. In matters concerning food, clothes and fashion, the columnists, as well as readers whose letters were published, conveyed their understanding of housewives' national contribution. Authors urged women to combat the black market in food as warriors, to keep up the national morale with their good looks, to maintain a regime of national khaki-knitting and to serve in the housewife-neighbor "army" by providing comfort and consolation. Their approach towards motherhood provided an exception. Perhaps because most of the authors had long passed childbearing age, they did not portray women as nurturers of the nation's children.<sup>9</sup> However, in all other matters, the columnists encouraged housewives to embrace domesticity and tailor it towards the national wartime effort. The housewives featured in these newspapers stepped beyond the seemingly limited boundaries of the home to become strong, domestic saviors of the nation.

### *Women's Newspaper Columns*

In 1948 Israel, the Jewish daily press consisted of fourteen newspapers. Of these, eleven were in Hebrew, two in German, and one, *The Jerusalem Post* (called *The Palestine Post* prior to 1948), appeared in English.<sup>10</sup> At the time, political parties and large public institutions controlled most

of the press, each issuing its own daily newspaper. The most prominent of the party-controlled newspapers was *Davar*, issued by the Labor Federation (the *Histadrut*), which usually followed the line of the majority labor party (*Mapai*). *Davar* and the two privately issued dailies *Ma'ariv* and *Ha'aretz* enjoyed the largest circulations; *Ma'ariv* topped the list at 33,000, followed by *Davar* with 25,000 and *Ha'aretz* with 23,500.<sup>11</sup> *Davar*, however, featured no women's column. (The third private daily, *Yedioth Ahronoth*, was in a crisis at the time following the departure of a large group of journalists to start the rival *Ma'ariv*.)

Founded in 1948, the afternoon paper *Ma'ariv* ("Evening," alluding to the name of the Jewish evening prayer service, though the newspaper had no religious cast) aimed at a popular readership through its choice of content and style.<sup>12</sup> The much older, well-established morning newspaper *Ha'aretz* ("The land") addressed a more learned audience.<sup>13</sup> Its writers and editors represented the liberal Zionist middle class. Although women wrote for these and other newspapers, they were not integral to the press. In *The Palestine Post*, for instance, women appeared only as images in advertisements.

In 1948, both *Ma'ariv* and *Ha'aretz* rarely ran more than ten pages per issue, of which the women's columns took up a relatively small proportion. In *Ma'ariv* they appeared every day, taking up one sixth of the third page, while those in *Ha'aretz* came out every Tuesday and filled up half of the third page. The column in *Ma'ariv*, "A Woman to Her Friend" (Ishah lere'utah), often carried chatty, personal stories, almost like diary entries, such as "My Daughter Leaves for the Army," "My Acquaintances Argue," and "My Granddaughter Looks at My Picture."<sup>14</sup> In *Ha'aretz*, "For Woman and Home" (La'ishah velabayit), established in 1941, offered friendly advice, usually on domestic matters, and also supplied occasional opinion and political pieces. Dr. Elsa Lindenstrauss, one of the few columnists who enjoyed the privilege of writing under her full name and title, produced lucid essays on women's status and rights: "Women in the Constitution of the State of Israel," "Are Regulations to Protect the Working Woman Necessary?" and "We, Too, Need a [Women's] Consumers' Association."<sup>15</sup>

The Zionist content and Hebrew language of these newspapers would have excluded Arab women from the columns' readership, both before 1948 and certainly during wartime, and it would also have been prohibitive to most of the new immigrant women who began arriving in masses from 1948 onward, usually with limited or no command of Hebrew. Much of the advice in the women's columns, such as that on buying cloth, making new dresses, daily volunteering and entertaining guests, might not have been accessible or affordable to working women. However, the variety of readers' letters indicates that working women read these columns along with women who stayed at home.

The authors of "A Woman to Her Friend" in *Ma'ariv* usually used only a first name, like "Daniela," "Aviva" or "Tamar," and sometimes no name at all. The choice of these pseudonyms, especially the latter two, reflected the prestige of Hebrew names in Zionist society. These names evoked the "true" natives or Sabras, in contrast to "Diasporic" Jews.<sup>16</sup> The pseudonym "Tamar" might have represented several different authors, but it could also be that "Daniela," "Aviva" and "Tamar" were just one woman writing under changing names so as to create the impression of a buzzing board of writers. Theoretically, the columnists could even have been men writing under women's names. However, real women's names did appear in "For Woman and Home" in *Ha'aretz*, though only those of well-known women, such as Lillian Cornfeld, famous for her best-selling cookbooks.<sup>17</sup> The women's columns therefore stood in contrast to articles by male reporters in *Ha'aretz* and *Ma'ariv*, which more often than not included the journalists' full names, or at least their initials. Whether it was an editorial board that decided that female authors did not

deserve full recognition, or whether the women writers themselves preferred to publish anonymously, the fact remains that only names which in some way carried authority, such as *Dr. Elsa Lindenstrauss* and *famous author Lillian Cornfeld*, made it to print.

It is impossible to know how many Hebrew-reading Jewish women actually read the columns, or how many of those readers actually identified with the proffered articles, stories and advice. Women sent in questions and comments, but the columnists, already confined to just a few inches of print space, included only very short letters, always written under first-name pseudonyms. Not surprisingly, the readers' letters they included usually followed the columns' style and content in focusing on domestic wartime duties.

### *Outbreak of War*

In May 1948, after five months of violence between the Jews and Arabs of Palestine,<sup>18</sup> the British Mandate came to an end. The last British High Commissioner, Alan Cunningham, sailed away from Haifa on 15 May. One day before that, a provisional legislative council had convened in Tel Aviv to approve the Proclamation of Independence, establishing the State of Israel.<sup>19</sup> Immediately afterwards, Egyptian forces, and later troops from Syria, Lebanon and Transjordan (renamed Jordan in 1949), joined the battle. Although the war did not come as a surprise, newspapers in Israel bubbled with urgency. Military notices called on men to enlist in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) as fast as possible,<sup>20</sup> photographs and articles depicted battles down to the last detail, and virtually every part of the paper related, in some way, to the war.<sup>21</sup>

On the face of it, the men alone had to face the danger, for they constituted the bulk of the army and certainly of the combat units. Women enlisted as well, but from the newspapers it appeared that they were no more than auxiliaries. "Another [female] soldier to the Women's Corps [is] another [male] soldier to the front," announced one enlistment notice.<sup>22</sup> Insofar as the national war effort meant joining the front lines, most women simply enabled men to do the "real" fighting. The columnists seemed to agree that women had no business in battle. They did not devote much attention to the war, at least not in the same way as the rest of the newspaper. On the contrary, with occasional exceptions, such as feminist essays or stories of women in the army, they kept to cooking, mending, fashion, neighbors and other issues of "feminine" concern.<sup>23</sup> But within this domestic sphere, women's connection to nationalism found strong expression. Women's columns and readers' letters called on women to fight in their own way, by providing food, washing clothes, dressing fashionably and comforting their neighbors.

### *Food*

First and foremost, the women's columns talked of food. Women, whether they went to work or stayed at home, carried the responsibility for running the household and feeding the family. Although the hardest months of *tzena* (government-imposed austerity measures) did not begin until around 1950, state-run rationing and supervision already existed before and during the 1948 war.<sup>24</sup> In almost every single newspaper issue in which they appeared, the women's columns complained of scarcity of food in the stores and soaring prices.<sup>25</sup> When rations decreased, the black market increased.

The war accentuated the patriotic duty to avoid the black market. As food providers, this duty

fell on women, and columnists did not hesitate to point an accusing finger at those who failed to comply.

How dare they [the housewives] buy groceries on the black market, and even more than they need? ... at the expense of the needy, and perhaps, as is well known, at the expense of *our sons at the front line*? It is time to fight the disease of the black market to the bitter end. Fight it as *soldiers* and as citizens loyal to the state.<sup>26</sup>

At this time of war, the columnist's militant language stands out. The housewife must fulfill her national duty and stop hurting the soldiers protecting her. Indeed, she must herself become a soldier and fight, or even conquer, the black market.

Much in the same spirit, the housewives felt it their patriotic duty to adapt to the state of emergency. With the men at war, defending their country, the women had to face reality. In terms of food provision, adapting to the nation's struggle meant cooking thriftily and wisely. The columns accordingly advertised recipes to suit the food products that happened to be in supply that week. Suiting their creativity to wartime reality, columnists instructed readers on "Making omelets with no eggs,"<sup>27</sup> "How to cook fast [under pressure of the sirens],"<sup>28</sup> and "Entertaining guests during blackouts."<sup>29</sup> At a time when most women kept to their homes for fear of attack, the columnists praised those who went out looking for bargains, noting their "courage" and "heroism."<sup>30</sup> While the young people enlist in the army, wrote an author, "the mothers run about managing *their war* on the home front, a war of procuring food to provide for the family."<sup>31</sup> The columnists perceived women as real and active participants in battle.

For whom did women fight to prepare food, if not the soldiers in the family? One author prepared an article on "Sandwiches for the Mobilized Soldiers," listing six different healthy and tasty spreads.<sup>32</sup> Lillian Cornfeld advised what drinks best suited the father or son on duty,<sup>33</sup> while a third author told of a hungry soldier coming home with his wife after they had spent their honeymoon fighting together in the war. "Come, stop shedding tears like a fountain, Mom!" he tells his mother playfully. "Open the fridge and we'll feast a bit!"<sup>34</sup>

Although women concerned themselves primarily with feeding soldiers within their own families, the 1948 war widened the concepts of "family" and "children." Even more during wartime, women acted as "mothers of the nation," while soldiers became "sons of the nation."<sup>35</sup> An emotional account recounts the heroism of a "simple [female] neighbor, who heard the sounds of the Palmach [fighting force] returning at night from operations and went out to make them a hot cup of tea. And the shells were blowing up between the glasses and the tables. And she would not budge until all the 'children' received this refreshment."<sup>36</sup> The soldiers represented the nation's children, and this anonymous woman fed them as their own mothers would and should.

This national sense of duty also found expression in women's concern over food in the army. Was the soldiers' food sufficiently nutritious? Were their kitchens hygienic? Women worried most about faraway military bases, where male soldiers cooked their own food. Soldiers' meals depended on "the talent and experience of the [male] kitchen manager," commented Lillian Cornfeld, whose own talent and experience enjoyed a great reputation. Therefore, she continued, "I'll take the liberty to specify a weekly menu ... and will be glad if the [male] kitchen manager out there finds it helpful."<sup>37</sup> Women could also help prevent wastefulness. "In large kitchens a lot of food is wasted, especially in military kitchens where men cook. Men are usually more wasteful than women."<sup>38</sup> At a time when men rarely cooked, housewives had reason to believe in their superiority in all food-related matters.

One author reported that eleven girls aged 16–19 had graduated from an intensive cooking course in order to serve in Palmach units.<sup>39</sup> “It is a most important job to be a cook,” wrote another author, “and it is a job that women are most likely to do well.” She urged women to set up kitchens to feed the brigades.<sup>40</sup> According to the columnists, men could never replace women in providing and preparing food. They stressed both how much women desired to serve the nation through their domestic skills, and how much the nation, in turn, *needed* women’s service.

### *Clothes*

After food, the women’s columns often talked of clothes. Washing, knitting, mending and sewing clothes provided them with another locus for wartime sentiments. Already in January, in “Letters to Shulamit” – readers’ comments on various topics – a certain “Aviva from Tel Aviv” wrote in praise of the women who “now knit for the soldiers defending us, rather than spend their time playing cards.” However, according to Aviva, some women knit only for themselves, their children and their friends. “It won’t hurt a woman to have only 4 sweaters and not 5,” she chided. “We must introduce a national knitting regimen. Every woman seen knitting something civilian [*ezrahi*] should be put publicly to shame, until our coffee shops are filled with women knitting khaki clothes only.” In short, she concluded, “the national knitting regimen is a binding duty!”<sup>41</sup> Aviva’s militant demand was echoed in June, in the course of an interview with Dina B., a seamstress in search of employment. “The only garments in demand these days are khaki shirts and khaki pants,” she asserted. “It is a war effort.”<sup>42</sup> Clothes-making, considered a “feminine” domain, provided housewives with a means of participating in the war endeavor.

Tending to clothes for soldiers allowed women to feel as if they had a part in the battle. A story in *Ma’ariv*, dedicated to “an anonymous washerwoman who fell in the bombing of Tel Aviv,” told of a woman who lost her life after refusing to stop her work and go down to the shelter. The story is told partly in the voice of the victim, depicted as a Yemenite woman called Rumia:

No, ma’am, I came here to wash white underclothes, and wash those clothes I will. Your son needs clean white vests, your husband needs clean clothes; and I don’t care about the siren ... I, too, am a soldier – by the tub.

Soon after, the tub water turned red with her blood, as she fell “like all soldiers fall.”<sup>43</sup> According to this story, by washing soldiers’ clothing, even washerwomen could become war heroines.

The patriotic Yemenite washerwoman is portrayed as rather simple, speaking broken Hebrew. This ambivalent portrayal evokes the likelihood that the story’s pseudonymous author, “Tamar,” was an Ashkenazi woman (i.e., of Central or east European background) who assumed a mainly Ashkenazi readership. There is no way to know this for sure, but her tone falls into line with Ashkenazi women’s attitudes towards Jews from Arab countries at the time.<sup>44</sup>

### *Fashion and Beauty*

Every week, readers received detailed tips on how to keep up with the latest trends, popular patterns and seasonal wardrobes, as well as criticism or praise of new styles. A central theme in

the columnists' fashion advice involved how to look beautiful. At first glance, this had nothing to do with the war; on the contrary, it seemed just the kind of petty concern that proved women's unfitness for battle. However, during wartime, the writers discussed women's beauty in nationalist terms, stressing the importance of maintaining an attractive appearance in troubled times. "This is not an easy year for us. ... However... we must, we really must, take notice of what we wear and how we look ... perhaps especially in this period."<sup>45</sup> Another columnist, in an article called "Watch Your Looks," wrote that women's obligation to avoid neglecting their bodies grows stronger precisely in "times like this," and that the reaction to the worries of life must be "order and freshness."<sup>46</sup>

This tone stands out in contrast to that of the militant knitters, whose demand that readers knit less for their private wardrobes implied an objection to some women's excessive concern for their looks. The fashion devotees, however, preached constant preening. Indeed, Zionist ideology strongly emphasized and idealized concepts of beauty, health and youth, so that both groups – the militant knitters and the fashion advocates – were declaring, each in its own way, what their members had absorbed and internalized from Zionist education and propaganda.<sup>47</sup> The housewives concerned with beauty believed that by working hard on their appearance, they were raising the nation's morale and thus contributing, in their own "feminine" way, to the national struggle. Improving their appearance also helped women boost their own morale, which no doubt suffered as the war dragged on.

### *Comfort and Solidarity*

In addition to food and fashion, columnists advised housewives on yet another strategy for contributing to the wartime effort: providing comfort to soldiers. As the mass immigration of refugees to Israel got underway, many of the soldiers did not have families to care for and comfort them, and the demand for motherly support intensified.<sup>48</sup> Writers encouraged housewives to volunteer in "soldiers' clubs," centers where a soldier could go to take a nap, be served a nutritious meal or just feel at home. Entertainment in these clubs relied heavily on the housewives, who fed and pampered the men. They prepared comfortable chairs for the soldiers to rest on, tended to the garden where they could relax in the shade, and of course baked cakes. Men, one columnist wrote, could sew on a button by themselves, "but who wouldn't enjoy it more if a woman were to sew it on for him?"<sup>49</sup>

If volunteering in soldiers' clubs interfered with a housewife's domestic tasks, she could invite a soldier home, where, beyond a cooked meal and a bed to sleep in, the soldier would enjoy his time in a family atmosphere.<sup>50</sup> "In the field of entertaining," one author wrote, "woman is the breath of life."<sup>51</sup> The columnists thus urged women to take advantage of their "womanly" skills to comfort the soldiers, brighten their time, make them feel at home and thus actively participate in the defense of the country. Although this request could imply the provision of sexual comfort as well, the columns made no mention of this, ignoring the possibility altogether – thus also failing to warn readers that this particular "national duty" could lead to sexual abuse.

Women extended their role as comfort-givers by tending to wounded soldiers in hospitals. As housewives untrained in medicine, they could not administer professional treatment, but columnists perceived their female readership as "naturally" capable of providing "social care." One writer, hoping to persuade women to join this effort, listed what it involved.

Women ... can volunteer to do some humane job: They can wander among the wounded and encourage them by way of amusing conversation, serve as a link between them and their families, write letters for them, provide them with newspapers and books, or entertain them in various ways.

The author called this job “social treatment of the wounded” and hoped as many women as possible would volunteer.<sup>52</sup> In line with 1940s gender norms, the columnists portrayed their female audience as motherly, nurturing and therefore perfectly qualified to cheer and comfort the wounded soldiers.

Finally, the columnists believed women could help the national cause by supporting and comforting not only the soldiers, but one another as well. In her emotional account of women’s heroism, “Tamar” addressed their neighborliness. Who but a neighbor would call a doctor for a sick child? Who would offer the best advice? And, finally, who but a neighbor would relieve a woman’s loneliness? Neighborliness played an especially crucial role in wartime, the author said.

Go and pass among the buildings, go from floor to floor, and you will find a whole world of women, a world of neighbors bearing the heavy burden of mothers whose husbands have left for war. ... How would they bear this burden without the mutual support and kind neighborliness that lightens the load, encourages and helps?<sup>53</sup>

The columnists endorsed neighborliness as part of the wartime effort, as their militant jargon reveals. “An *army* of anonymous women is the *army* of neighbors; an *army* of workers and builders.” Women’s wartime solidarity appeared again in a condolence letter to “a bereaved mother.” The author writes to her neighbor (via the newspaper) how badly she had wanted to console her, but she did not know what to say. Now, however, she finds the courage to tell her that her son has died for a just cause.<sup>54</sup> Thus, by promoting a certain kind of neighborliness, comfort and consolation, the columnists once more expressed their nationalist inclinations.

### *Dissenting Voices*

Much of the columnists’ advice to housewives appears not only nationalistic, identifying with Zionist aims and ideals, but also militaristic, emphasizing military culture. Short of advocating war, the housewives featured in the columns readily adopted the Zionists’ militant, explicit jargon of a state at war.<sup>55</sup> Dying for nation and land seemed appropriate enough to most of the columnists. The women’s columns did, however, reveal some dissenting voices. Although rare, these accounts stand out jarringly in comparison to most of the articles.

One story, called “Now He Is Mine,” told of a mother whose wounded son came home to rest. He lay in bed and couldn’t move, and as his mother sat devotedly by his side, her thoughts wandered back to when he had been a child and still shared a close bond with her. But very soon the youth movement took him away and filled her place as a parent. He spent his days doing things he could not share with her, so that she, “who could not go beyond this fence ... remained standing before a closed book.” The pain only increased, the mother continued, when he joined the army.

Then came the war and took him completely away from home. He would come back on leave,

and he was so different – adult, hard. ‘Mother, we have to win,’ he would tell me confidently. ... And I would look at him from the side, while he sat and told of battles and attacks, and I would gaze into a face whose cheek only yesterday, it seemed, my lips had touched while putting him to bed. I would look and think: Is this my son? Is this the boy? Who covered him with this harsh crust? Who thrust on his shoulders all the weight of our struggle and did not leave him a shred of his youth and childhood? Who erased all the softness from his face? And I will tell you the truth: there is a searing pain, the pain of a mother who has been robbed of her child.

The account ended on a positive note. For the time being, she enjoyed spending time at home with her convalescing son. However, the woman’s pain and criticism of a system that had made her son a warrior stood out clearly. Her anguish came not so much from her son’s wounds, his physical pain or the chance that he might not heal. On the contrary, she even said she was grateful to the wounds for bringing him close to her once more. ‘‘Until his wounds heal,’’ she concluded, ‘‘he doesn’t belong to his friends, the war, or the homeland ...And I don’t care if the wounds mend slowly. He will heal and fly off once more. But for now he is mine... And what you see in my eyes are tears of happiness.’’ Her real grief stemmed from the kind of person the army and the war had made him.<sup>56</sup>

Another story, about a young woman and her soldier boyfriend, told of a meeting the couple had on the beach while the soldier was on leave. As guns fired in the distance, the girl kept trying to say something, but her lover interrupted her every time, excited to show her that he knew what type of guns they could hear. Finally she burst out crying, and when he looked at her in surprise, she blurted out: ‘‘I wanted to ask you whether or not you missed me when you were in the Negev [Israel’s southern desert], but you, you only tell me about the war. I hate it, I hate the war. It took you away from me. I hate it.’’ The story ended with the sun going down on this tragic scene.<sup>57</sup>

Although not numerous, these dissenting sentiments appeared in the women’s columns. The first story could easily have told of a mother’s pain at seeing her son wounded, and the lovers’ meeting could have been cheerful and romantic, perhaps ending with a little sobbing when the soldier had to leave for battle. That the authors wrote the stories this way implies that some women took a different view of militarism and war. While most of the writers actively supported the nationalist ideology and military goals, a minority of women felt that the price was too high. Alternatively, the authors of these exceptional accounts, both signed ‘‘Tamar,’’ may have been the same women who, on most days, urged women to pursue their domestic wartime duties; on rare occasions, through fictional stories, they perhaps dared to object.

### *1948 in Context*

Statesmen, military representatives and some historians have depicted the 1948 war as a unique historical event. Some have seen it as a struggle for survival, and many have ascribed religious and even mythical meanings, such as the redemption of the Jewish people, to its outcome.<sup>58</sup> To quote a relatively recent example, Daniel J. Schroeter described it as ‘‘a miracle’’ in his 1998 book on Israel’s history.<sup>59</sup> While the women’s columns do not shed light on the long-debated military, political and ethical aspects of this chapter of Israeli and Palestinian history, their advice and the readers’ letters offer another perspective on this war, that of ‘‘ordinary’’ people’s experience on the home front. If their nationalist inclinations show commitment to their country’s struggle, their

methods of coping, jargon and advice reflect an experience paralleling that of women in wartime situations in other countries.

Women's associations in Japan during World War II, for instance, appealed to members to serve the nation by engaging in handicrafts and cottage industries at home. The Japanese government believed women could best help the country by staying home, keeping their families happy and producing more future citizens.<sup>60</sup> Many women in 1930s fascist Italy, too, adopted the *donna-madre* ideal, which encouraged them to become exemplary female citizens by producing as many children as possible. Some women also changed their aesthetic standards, promoting robustness rather than slimness as a more fertile kind of beauty.<sup>61</sup> American women during World War II responded to state-run propaganda through canning, meat and sugar rationing and "victory gardening."<sup>62</sup> In all these settings, women employed their traditional, domestic roles to take an active part in highly nationalist or wartime endeavors. The advice and stories in the 1948 women's columns from Israel contained few ideas or aspirations unique to the Israeli-Arab war, apart from occasional situation-specific details.

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The housewives featured in the 1948 women's columns did not breach the boundaries of gendered roles or stride daringly into men's domain, nor, barring one or two feminist writers, did they wish to. Mostly, they raised no objections to remaining part of a very patriarchal society, and they did not mind leaving "serious" matters, such as fighting the war, to the "stronger sex." They continued cooking, knitting and chatting with their neighbors. However, the writers depicted food, clothes and comfort-giving as strategies central to defending the country, perhaps of no less importance than the men's fighting on the front line. Seen through the columnists' eyes, these practices transcended the domestic, private sphere, enabling women to take part in the nationalistic, militaristic and patriotic discourse of the 1948 war.<sup>63</sup> They took the domestic setting that made them so unfit for battle and turned it into a battlefield of their own, producing their own set of heroines, saviors and victims. At the same time, while most columnists adhered to the Zionist nationalistic and militaristic ideal, a number of articles conveyed a different kind of message. Without deviating from those same "feminine" domains, a few of the writers chose an alternative, almost subversive, path. While these dissenting voices never gathered momentum during the 1948 war, the few writers who dared express such sentiments revealed another, alternative kind of bravery and pain. Finally, the columnists' tropes, patterns of coping, and overall rhetoric did not differ greatly from those of women in other highly nationalistic or wartime settings in the 1930s and 1940s. Rather, their domestic nationalism in wartime followed the pattern of housewives elsewhere in the world.

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*Notes:*

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<sup>1</sup> Tamar, "The Neighbor" (Hashekheinah), *Ma'ariv*, July 6, 1948, p. 3. Unless otherwise noted, all the articles in *Ma'ariv* appeared in the column "A Woman to Her Friend" ('Ishah lere'utah), while all those in *Ha'aretz* are cited from the column "For Woman and Home" (La'ishah velabayit). The translations are my own.

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<sup>2</sup> The Women's Corps was established in May 1948. In the course of the 1948 war, 12,645 women were drafted into the IDF, constituting over 10% of the forces. On the establishment of the Women's Corps and for statistical information regarding women's roles in the army, see Zehava Ostfeld, *An Army is Born* (Hebrew; Tel Aviv: Ministry of Defense, 1994), I, pp. 442–446. On women's roles as fighters in the 1948 war, see Lilach Rosenberg-Friedman, "Religious Women Fighters in Israel's War of Independence: A New Gender Perception, or a Passing Episode?" *Nashim*, 6 (2003), pp. 119–147.

<sup>3</sup> For a comparative essay on gender and nationalism see Ida Blom, "Gender and Nation in International Comparison," in eadem, Karen Hagemann and Catherine Hall (eds.), *Gendered Nations: Nationalisms and Gender Order in the Long Nineteenth Century* (Oxford–New York: Berg, 2000), pp. 3–26.

<sup>4</sup> In the Zionist context, see, for instance, Bat-Sheva Margalit Stern, "Between Female and Male Dominance: The Women Workers' Movement in Eretz Israel," in Margalit Shilo, Ruth Kark and Galit Hasan-Rokem (eds.), *Jewish Women in the Yishuv and Zionism: A Gender Perspective* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute, 2001), pp. 292–314; Sylvie Fogiel-Bijaoui, "On the Way to Equality? The Struggle for Women's Suffrage in the Jewish Yishuv, 1917–1926," in Deborah S. Bernstein (ed.), *Pioneers and Homemakers: Jewish Women in Pre-State Israel* (New York: SUNY Press, 1992), pp. 261–282; and Rosenberg-Friedman, "Religious Women Fighters" (above, note 2).

<sup>5</sup> The concept of separate spheres emerged in the early stages of feminist historiography and helped explain women's absence from history books. If most women lived in the private sphere of the home, while most men occupied the public sphere of politics and commerce, then traditional histories naturally excluded women. Feminist historians used this model as a corrective to shift the focus to women's past.

More recent trends in scholarship, however, have shown how this gendered separation of public and private was in fact a historically created ideology and a product of modern Western bourgeois values. With this in mind, it is possible to see how some women have lived out the notion of separate spheres while others could not or would not. See Laura Lee Down's lucid summary of the evolution of the separate spheres approach: eadem, *Writing Gender History* (London–New York: Hodder Arnold, 2004), chaps. 4–5.

<sup>6</sup> Sachlav Stoler-Liss, "'Mothers Birth the Nation': The Social Construction of Zionist Motherhood in Wartime in Israeli Parents' Manuals," *Nashim*, 6 (2003), pp. 104–118. See also Billie Melman, "From the Periphery to the Center of History: Gender and National Identity in the Yishuv (1890–1920)," *Zion*, 62 (1994), p. 255 (Hebrew); and Nitza Berkovitch, "Women of Valor: Women and Citizenship in Israel," *Sociologiyah Yisraelit*, 2/1 (1999), pp. 277–290 (Hebrew).

On conceptions of women's maternal national duty in the general European context see Seth Koven and Sonya Michel (eds.), *Mothers of a New World: Maternalist Politics and the Origins of Welfare States* (New York: Routledge, 1993). See also below, note 63.

<sup>7</sup> Yael Raviv, "Recipe for a Nation: Cuisine, Jewish Nationalism, and the Israeli State" (Ph.D. Dissertation, New York University, 2002); Orit Rozin, "Food, Identity and Nation-Building in Israel's Formative Years," *Israel Studies Forum*, 21/1 (2006), pp. 52–80; and eadem, "Israeli Housewives and the Austerity Policy," *Israel*, 1 (2002), pp. 81–118.

<sup>8</sup> Bat-Sheva Margalit Stern, "Who's the Fairest of Them All? Women, Womanhood, and Ethnicity in Zionist Eretz Israel," *Nashim*, 11 (2006), pp. 142–163.

<sup>9</sup> Some of the authors, at least, had children or even grandchildren in the army; see, for instance, the columns mentioned in note 15 below.

<sup>10</sup> Mordecai Naor, *Ladies and Gentlemen, The Press* (Hebrew; Tel Aviv: Ministry of Defense, 2004), pp. 231–232.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 233.

<sup>12</sup> *Ma'ariv*'s first issue came out on February 15, 1948, in the wake of a conflict between the editorial board and staffers of *Yedioth Ahronoth*. Almost all of *Yedioth*'s editors, journalists, and print and administrative workers, headed by Dr. Azriel Carlebach, its Editor-in-Chief for the previous eight years, seceded and thereupon established their own daily. For a detailed treatment of the events leading to and following the

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establishment of *Ma'ariv*, see Naor, *The Press* (above, note 10), pp. 79–102.

<sup>13</sup> *Ha'aretz* had its origin in a weekly newspaper entitled *Hadashot Meha'aretz* (“News from the Land,” or, in English, *The Palestine News*), established by the British military in 1917 and later transferred to civilian ownership. In 1935 it was acquired by the Schocken family, in whose hands it remains to this day. For a summary of the history of *Ha'aretz* and its predecessors see Naor, *The Press*, pp. 33–52.

<sup>14</sup> Bat Shmuel, “My Daughter Joins the Army” (Biti yotzet legiyus), *Ma'ariv*, May 2, 1948, p. 3; Daniela, “My Acquaintances Argue” (Makarai mitvakhim), *Ma'ariv*, May 9, 1948, p. 3; Daniela, “My Granddaughter Looks at My Picture” (Nekhdati mitbonenet bitmunati), *Ma'ariv*, May 16, 1948, p. 3.

<sup>15</sup> Elsa Lindenstraus, “The Problems of Citizenship: Women in the Constitution of the State of Israel” (Ba'ayot hanetinut: Ha'ishah behukat medinat Yisrael), *Ha'aretz*, May 25, 1948, p. 3; eadem, “Are Regulations to Protect the Working Woman Necessary?” (Hayesh tzorekh betakanot haganah la'ishah ha'ovedet?), *Ha'aretz*, May 11, 1948, p. 3; and eadem, “We, Too Need a [Women's] Consumers' Association” (Irgun tzarkhanot darush gam lanu), *Ha'aretz*, June 29, 1948, p. 3.

<sup>16</sup> See the chapter “Hebrew Names and Diaspora Names,” in Oz Almog, *The Sabra: The Creation of the New Jew* (Berkeley–Los Angeles–London: University of California Press, 2000), pp. 91–95.

<sup>17</sup> On Lillian Cornfeld see Raviv, “Recipe for a Nation” (above, note 7), pp. 132–137. An advertisement for Cornfeld's cookbook, *I'm Cooking* ('Ani mevashet), appeared in *Davar* on January 13, 1948, p. 4.

<sup>18</sup> By “Palestine” I refer to the pre-war country, in which Jews and Arabs lived under British rule.

<sup>19</sup> For an official translation of the Proclamation of Independence into English, see the website of the Knesset at [http://www.knesset.gov.il/docs/eng/megilat\\_eng.htm](http://www.knesset.gov.il/docs/eng/megilat_eng.htm).

<sup>20</sup> Until May 1948, the *Haganah* served as the unofficial army of the *Yishuv* (the Jewish community in Mandatory Palestine). The IDF was established on May 26, 1948, as the permanent army of the Jewish state.

<sup>21</sup> The front-page headlines of *Ha'aretz* in the immediate post-independence period convey the pervasive sense of urgency and emergency: “All Who Can Bear Arms – To the Flag!” (Kol mahazik beneshek el hadege!) May 13, 1948; “Tonight Egypt Invades” (Halaylah pelishah miMitzrayim), May 14, 1948; “The Enemy Has Rejected a Ceasefire. Your Response: Sign On to the National Loan!” (Ha'oyev dahah shevitat neshek. Teshuvatka: Hatimah 'al hamilveh hale'umi!), May 28, 1948.

<sup>22</sup> *Ha'aretz*, August 10, 1948, p. 6; August 16, 1948, p. 4. See also note 2.

<sup>23</sup> On the feminist essays see note 16; for a reference to women in the army, see, for instance, Bat Shmuel, “My Daughter Joins” (above, note 14).

<sup>24</sup> Rozin, “Food, Identity,” p. 58; eadem, “Israel Housewives,” p. 81 (both above, note 7); cf. “The Authorities Are Not in Control!” (Hashiltonot 'einam sholtim bamatzav!), *Ma'ariv*, July 7, 1948, p. 3.

<sup>25</sup> The *Ma'ariv* women's columns had regular features entitled “The State of the Market” (Hamatzav bashuk) and “The Supply Situation” (Matzav ha'aspakah). The women's columns in *Ha'aretz* often devoted half their space to discussing the high prices and food shortages.

<sup>26</sup> “The Supply Situation” (above, note 25; emphasis mine here and below – SK).

<sup>27</sup> “No-Egg Omelets” (Havitot belo beitzim), *Ha'aretz*, January 27, 1948, p. 3.

<sup>28</sup> “How to Cook Fast” (Bishul mahir keitsad?), *Ma'ariv*, May 26, 1948, p. 3.

<sup>29</sup> Lillian Cornfeld. “Entertaining Guests during Blackouts” (Kabalat 'orchim baha'afala), *Ha'aretz*, July 13, 1948, p. 3.

<sup>30</sup> “The Market on Friday” (Hashuk be'erev Shabbat), *Ma'ariv*, May 27, 1948, p. 3.

<sup>31</sup> Shulamit, “From One Week to the Next” (Mishavua' leshavua'), *Ha'aretz*, May 4, 1948, p. 3.

<sup>32</sup> “Sandwiches for Mobilized Soldiers” (Sendvichim lameguyasim), *Ma'ariv*, June 6, 1948, p. 3.

<sup>33</sup> Lillian Cornfeld. “Sandwiches for Soldiers Going on Duty” (Kerikhim bish'at yetsi'ah letafkid), *Ha'aretz*, May 5, 1948, p. 3.

<sup>34</sup> Tamar, “Wedding March” (Masa' hatunah), *Ma'ariv*, June 29, 1948, p. 3.

<sup>35</sup> See note 6.

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- <sup>36</sup> Tamar, "The Neighbor" (above, note 1; quotation marks in the original).
- <sup>37</sup> Lillian Cornfeld. "How They Eat In the Army" ('Eikh okhlim batzava), *Ma'ariv*, June 27, 1948, p. 3.
- <sup>38</sup> Eadem, "Avoiding Waste in Kitchens and in Army Kitchens" (Meni'at bizbuz bamitbahim umitbahei tzava), *Ha'aretz*, July 20, 1948, p. 3. See also eadem, "Improve the Food in the Hospitals!" (Leshaper et hamazon bebatei ha'holim!), *Ma'ariv*, August 5, 1948, p. 3.
- <sup>39</sup> "Sten and Saucepan" (Sten belivui sir bishul), *Ha'aretz*, August 3, 1948, p. 3.
- <sup>40</sup> Lillian Cornfeld. "There Are No Old Women in Tel Aviv" ('Ein nashim zekeinot beTel Aviv), *Ha'aretz*, June 8, 1948, p. 3.
- <sup>41</sup> "Letters to Shulamit: National Knitting" (Mikhtavim el Shulamit: Serigah le'umit), *Ha'aretz*, January 27, 1948, p. 3.
- <sup>42</sup> Aliza Holdheim. "Three Typical Cases" (Sheloshah mikrim 'ofyaniyim), *Ha'aretz*, June 8, 1948, p. 3.
- <sup>43</sup> Tamar, "The Washerwoman" (Hakoveset), *Ma'ariv*, June 14, 1948, p. 3.
- <sup>44</sup> See Orit Rozin, "Women Absorbing Women: The Role of Veteran Women in Absorbing the Mass Aliyah in the 1950s: History and Theory" in Avi Bareli, Daniel Gutwein and Tuvia Friling (eds.), *Society and Economy in Israel: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute, 2005), pp. 653–658.
- <sup>45</sup> Shulamit, "From One Week to the Next" (above, note 31).
- <sup>46</sup> "Watch Your Appearance" (Hakpidi al mar'ekh), *Ma'ariv*, June 9, 1948, p. 3. See also M.P., "Cosmetic Tips for Women's Corps Girls" ('Eztot kosmetiyot livnot HEN), *Ha'aretz*, August 24, 1948, p. 3.
- <sup>47</sup> On these ideals in Zionist ideology, see Stern, "Who's the Fairest" (above, note 8), pp. 142–145; and Stoler-Liss, "'Mothers Birth the Nation" (above, note 6), p. 111.
- <sup>48</sup> From May 15 through December 31, 1948, about 100,000 immigrants arrived in Israel. This number, compared to the mere 17,000 who came the preceding year (June 1947 through May 1948), marked the beginning of a mass immigration that was to continue for two decades. See Zvi (Yaron) Zinger, "Israel, State of: Aliyah, Absorption, and Settlement," *Encyclopedia Judaica*, second online edition.
- <sup>49</sup> Aliza Holdheim, "Once It Was a Bar" (Lifanim hayah zeh bar), *Ha'aretz*, July 20, 1948, p. 3.
- <sup>50</sup> Eadem, "Each Woman and Her Role" ('Ishah 'ishah vetafkidah, *Ha'aretz*, June 1, 1948, p. 3.
- <sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>52</sup> *Ibid.* See also eadem, "Impressions of a Volunteer Nurse" (Reshameiha shel 'ahot mitnadevet), *Ha'aretz*, August 10, 1948, p. 3.
- <sup>53</sup> Tamar, "The Neighbor" (above, note 1; my emphasis in the next line).
- <sup>54</sup> Tamar, "To the Bereaved Mother" (El ha'em hashekulah), *Ma'ariv*, 18 May 1948, p. 3.
- <sup>55</sup> On men's idealization of dying for the homeland, on the one hand, and the demonization of the Arabs, on the other, see Almog, *The Sabra* (above, note 16), pp. 69–72 and 205–207.
- <sup>56</sup> Tamar, "Now He Is Mine ..." ('Akhshav hu sheli....), *Ma'ariv*, July 28, 1948, p. 3.
- <sup>57</sup> Tamar, "Love and war" ('Ahavah umilhamah), *Ma'ariv*, June 1, 1948, p. 3.
- <sup>58</sup> See also Yitzhak Navon, Preface to Alon Kadish (ed.), *Israel's War of Independence, 1948–1949* (Hebrew; Tel Aviv: Ministry of Defense, 2004), p. 9; Amnon Rubinstein, *The Zionist Dream Revisited: From Herzl to Gush Emunim and Back* (New York: Schocken Books, 1984), p. 73; Herbert Feis, *The Birth of Israel: The Tossed Diplomatic Bed* (New York: Norton, 1969), and Yigael Yadin, Epilogue to Netanel Lorch (ed.), *The Edge of the Sword: Israel's War of Independence, 1947–1949* (New York–London: Putnam, 1968).
- <sup>59</sup> Daniel J. Schroeter, *Israel: An Illustrated History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 97.
- <sup>60</sup> See Thomas R.H. Havens, "Women and War in Japan, 1937–45," *The American Historical Review*, 80/4 (1975), pp. 920–921.
- <sup>61</sup> See Victoria De Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women: Italy, 1922–1945* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992), Chap. 3.

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<sup>62</sup> When wartime shortages in the United States worsened, the government encouraged citizens to contribute to the national effort by planting their own fruits and vegetables in what came to be known as “victory gardens.” See Amy Bentley, *Eating for Victory: Food Rationing and the Politics of Domesticity* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998).

<sup>63</sup> On the notion of separate spheres see above, note 5.