

## **Gendered Readings of the First World War: A European Overview**

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**Hämmerle, Christa, Oswald Überegger, and Birgitta Bader Zaar, eds.**  
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The First World War, the total war, mobilized women on a previously unprecedented scale, while mechanized and trench warfare made millions of soldiers suffer. Both phenomena challenged Europe's rigid gender ideals and hierarchies. Women took active part in the war; they became publicly visible and gained independence, while men, from being active agents of war, became dependent and were condemned to passivity. As a result, the traditional gender roles seemed to be interchanged between the two sexes. Probably one of the most visible examples of this is the unprecedented number of war hysterics, which made it unequivocal that mental illnesses do not exclusively endanger "the weaker sex." In the personal narratives of the First World War, the clash between traditional gender ideals, highly promoted by pro-war propaganda aiming at "normalization," and these new, more flexible gender roles brought about by the experience of the war often recurs and provides a fertile ground for analysis. However, in Eastern and South-Eastern Europe the war's effects on gender constructions were hardly discussed before the publication of *Gender and the First World War*, a volume based on revised and extended papers presented at the conference "The First World War in a Gender Context—Topics and Perspectives," Vienna (2011).

The organizers of the conference and the editors of this book, Christa Hämmerle, Oswald Überegger, and Birgitta Bader Zaar, are all historians who have already published numerous studies about historical, political, and socio-cultural aspects of the First World War. The mainstream history of the Great War, especially in Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, still marginalizes the gender perspective which would be essential to incorporate in order to adequately document and understand what happened at the beginning of the twentieth century. "Furthermore, it can be asked what role the concepts of masculinities and femininities, as well as related subjectivities, played for mass mobilization, perseverance, protest, and resistance" (2). *Gender and the First World War* aims at contributing to and initiating this process. What is more, the editors do not only want to catch up with and join in the extensive Anglo-Saxon WWI discourse but offer the possibility for certain general phenomena, for instance, an intensified class struggle within a nation or the

changing gendered experience of certain individuals who were affected by the war, to connect the belligerent nations, transgressing the framework of national histories.

The diversity of scholars in itself is a guarantee of the wide spectrum of theoretical approaches employed in this book: studies in history are merged with fields of art and humanities, with gender, cultural, and social studies to provide an analytical framework for the gender(ed) issues of the war. The main virtue of these fourteen insightful studies is that they focus on specific experiences of particular, previously disregarded regions and social groups. Matteo Ermacora's essay, for instance, deals with the total mobilization of the Friuli Region, providing an insight into women's work from trench excavation to railway building to food transportation, whereas Jason Crouthamel's chapter portrays how homosexual German soldiers defined their own masculinity during and after the Great War. Although they communicate an extensive amount of knowledge as the result of profound research, both essays remain informative and easily comprehensible for anyone who is interested in, yet not familiar with the history of the First World War.

Total warfare was crucial for gender history because it merged the experience of the frontline with the home front, extending violence well behind the battle zones, overwriting and transgressing not only the former rules of warfare but previously fixed gender roles and categories as well. Women's mass mobilization in the labor market, especially in the munitions industry and their militarization near to or on the front suggested crucial changes in women's social position and civil rights while becoming a threat with their potential "masculinization" (26). While the dominant hyper-masculine soldier hero ideal proved unreachable, subordinated, or marginalized masculinities became more visible, for example, the masculinity of homosexuals (52) and the experience of thousands of men "feminized" by shell-shock or war hysteria (72). Propaganda even mobilized children and addressed them in an obviously gendered way. The "re/construction of various forms of masculinity and femininity in given contexts, transgressing sexes and causing permanent 'gender trouble'" (5), disrupted the predominant heteronormative discourse of gender.

*Gender and the First World War* primarily focuses on women, their feminine roles prescribed by the conventions and pro-war propaganda, and the transgressions they made by stepping out from the private sphere, becoming visible, taking an active part in the war. It was widely accepted for women to be members of various committees and women's organizations in

wartime, thus supporting the nation and fighting men, maintaining high morale, as Ingrid Sharp highlights in “‘A Foolish Dream of Sisterhood’: Anti-Pacifist Debates in the German Women’s Movement, 1914-1919.” However, to maintain international connections through these organizations during the war—as women did, according to Sharp and Bruna Bianchi in “Towards a New Internationalism: Pacifist Journals Edited by Women, 1914-1919”—and to be openly pacifist meant a strong revolt, not only against the prevalence of unreasonable destruction, but also against the patriarchal system and its aggressive, exclusively masculine, chauvinist ideals as well. This also meant an intensifying claim for social rights and women’s suffrage at the same time, as Virginija Jurėnienė argues in “War Activities and Citizenship Rights in and outside the Occupied Zone: Lithuanian Women During the First World War.” There is a similar potential for transgression in pro-war attitude, in entering the war-zone, taking over men’s jobs and actively “making war” (27). The predominant image of the passive “waiting woman,” whose position was only defined in connection with men, as “a soldier’s mother or wife” (29) was extensively used by propaganda aimed at maintaining the illusion of the home(front)’s stability. Temporary transgressions, such as the mass employment of women (due to the shortage of male workers), were celebrated, but authorities made it clear that this visibility and independence women gained was only welcomed and tolerated under the unusual conditions of warfare. There was a sharp contrast between the celebrated war heroines who embodied and strengthened the virtues of proper femininity and the women who broke the restrictive feminine roles and were condemned because of “improper morality” and promiscuity, as Alison S. Fell argues in “Remembering French and British War Heroines.” They adopted masculine traits of behavior, discovered that they were autonomous individuals, and even dared to claim certain rights for themselves: “women had become accepted as a vital part of the war effort” (122). Various registers of this struggle are depicted by the mobilization of Friuli women, who realized their own potentials and independence by replacing men behind and on the front (21), by the reminiscences of nurses in Austro-Hungarian service, who transgressed and (re)-defined women’s sphere in wartime (91), and by French and British war heroines, who claimed acknowledgement previously provided only for fighting men (108).

Not only women challenged traditional ideas, but men, too, who were equally suffocated by the idealized gender roles they were unable or unwilling to perform. The hyper-masculine discourse of war, still dominant when the Great War broke out, was based on the heroism of chivalry. Yet the

experience of this war could not be contextualized in this way as individual fighting skills did not guarantee survival. One of the most visible signs of the erosion of the traditional heroic, masculine ideal is the way comradeship revalued and even legitimized homoerotic love and desire to a certain extent. It was seen as a higher form of love and intimacy as men were alienated from women, whom they considered to be out of danger. It provided a chance for homosexual men to “normalize their desires” and to identify with a strong military masculinity, showing that homosexuality does not equal a feminized existence, and that they, just as most of their heterosexual comrades, were truly dedicated to the war effort. Of course, physicality remained a taboo, only a certain emotional bond, a platonic love between men was considered to be worthy of the uniform (62), as we learn from German soldiers’ recollections through Jason Crouthamel’s “Love in the Trenches: German Soldiers’ Conceptions of Sexual Deviance and Hegemonic Masculinity in the First World War.” It was not only homosexuality as a previously suppressed form of masculinity that became visible during the First World War, but a certain sensitive masculinity, too. There were attempts to reassure previous masculine ideals such as “the brave, active, physically fit and masculine soldier [by a] dramaturgy of healing” (80), as Julia Barbara Köhne’s study “Visualizing ‘War Hysterics’: Strategies of Feminization and Re-Masculinization in Scientific Cinematography, 1916-1918” contends. Official medical reports, for example, draw a parallel between shell shocked, hysteric men and feminine existence, downgrading and humiliating them in medical films instead of recognizing shell shock as a serious illness, with the clear intention to emasculate and thus to separate them from the masculine ideal.

Several studies, for example, Manon Pignot’s “French Boys and Girls in the Great War: Gender and the History of Children’s Experiences, 1914-1918,” examine how children were also used in war propaganda. They had a prescribed position in the gendered history of the war since the strong social traditions supported by the state apparatus not only intended to rewrite adult women and men into traditional gender dichotomy, but in order to strengthen these norms children were made to internalize these ideals as early as possible. As they were the next generation, it was a crucial issue how they entered the symbolic construction of gender. The ruling images after the war, the heroic, fallen soldier and the mourning mother, also served to re-establish traditional gender hierarchy and the gender roles which were dominant before the war, as Claudia Siebrecht elaborates in “The Female Mourner.”

This collection of essays partly realizes its aim by highlighting certain universal phenomena in the gendered experience of war, regardless of state

borders, such as public attempts to stabilize traditional gender roles and to correct “abnormalities”—which blurred clear-cut masculine and feminine ideals during and after the war—and ways of transgression, which, in the long run, initiated the dissolution of the rigid, heteronormative discourse. Although some of the studies build on the theoretical framework of English culture, hardly any of them adapt its theories of war or its interpretative methods. Most of the themes of these studies are in dialogue with the fascinating richness and complexity of the Great War’s representations in English culture, yet none join the wide network and theories of subjectivity and gender, which could have added a lot to the contextualization of these studies. It would greatly have helped fulfill the editors’ objectives to establish an interpretative framework for the First World War taking gender as one of its central issues if the essays had given voice to the previously un-interpreted, gendered experience of the war in Eastern and South-Eastern Europe. The volume as a whole is unique as it concentrates on issues of gender roles and their effects through and after the war in Europe, not exclusively in Britain, but also in Italy, France, Austria-Hungary, Belgium, Germany, Switzerland, and Lithuania, and brings previously marginalized geographical regions and social groups into focus. In addition, the collection draws on uncanonized sources such as diaries, letters, drawings, and (un)published autobiographies—a corpus of personal sources in order to provide a valid insight into the experience of these people.

*Gender and the First World War* is highly recommended for those interested in Central and Eastern-European testimonies of war as the previously mentioned sources can serve as a basis either for socio-cultural or literary analysis. The volume may also be useful for those engaged in gender studies as the experience of the First World War is unquestionably the cradle of our modern view and interpretation of different gender roles and norms.

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