

# SHATTERED FRONTS: THE EXPLOSIVE INTERPLAY OF GENDER AND WARFARE IN THE 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

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## Abstract

*This article takes a closer look at how gender and warfare impacted each other across 20th century. Wars did not just change borders-they shook up the lives and roles of men and women in ways that still echo today. With examples from World War I, World War II, the Cold War, and struggles for independence, I show how war pushed people into new roles: women took on factory and military jobs, while societies sometimes doubled down on traditional gender rules once the fighting stopped. By digging into diaries, interviews, and a range of historical sources, I try to show both sides of the story-how war could open doors for women and challenge old ideas, but also how those changes did not always last. Understanding this back-and-forth helps us see why gender and war are still linked today, and why the lessons from that era matter for anyone thinking about equality, identity, or policy now.*

**Keywords :** *Gender and Warfare, 20<sup>th</sup> century Conflict, Women in Military, Feminism and War, Gender Roles.*

## INTRODUCTION

***“The first casualty when war comes is truth,” U.S. Senator Hiram Johnson declared in 1917.***

*The twentieth century was a whirlwind of conflict-from the two World Wars to colonial uprisings and Cold War proxy battles, that changed the world and the people living in it. Amid these upheavals, gender roles-socially constructed expectations of masculinity and femininity-underwent significant transformations. Wars have historically been viewed through a male-centric lens, focusing on battles, strategies, and heroism. However, feminist scholarship has illuminated how gender intersects with war, revealing that conflicts not only reinforce traditional norms but also challenge and redefine them. Women, often confined to the "home front," entered workplaces and took on roles previously deemed masculine, while men grappled with ideals of virility amid the horrors of combat. This article explores these dynamics, drawing on historical analyses to understand the bidirectional influence between gender and warfare.<sup>1</sup>*

My research question is “In what ways did twentieth-century wars reshape gender roles and identities, and how did prevailing gender norms influence both the conduct and aftermath of these conflicts?”

And my hypothesis is that “Twentieth-century wars, while initially reinforcing patriarchal structures although militarized masculinity and women's supportive roles, ultimately catalyzed shifts toward greater gender equality by necessitating women's

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<sup>1</sup> Françoise Thébaud, “Understanding Twentieth-Century Wars through Women and Gender : Forty Years of Historiography,” *Clio: Women, Gender, History* 39, no. April (2014), <https://doi.org/10.4000/cliowgh.538>.

economic and social participation, though these changes were often temporary and uneven across regions.”

My hypothesis posits that wars acted as accelerators of change, but post-war periods frequently witnessed a backlash aimed at restoring pre-war gender orders. The analysis will focus on key conflicts like World War I (WWI), World War II (WWII), and selected others, highlighting global variations.

The way scholars talk about gender and war in the twentieth century has changed a ton over the past four decades, transitioning from women’s history to broader gender analyses that include masculinities and cultural dimensions. At first, in the 1970s, people started challenging the old, male-dominated war stories. Historians like Patrick Fridenson, in *L’autre front* (1977) turned spotlight on the home front, looking at how families split up and how societies shifted during war. Françoise Thébaud's *Les Femmes au temps de la guerre de 14* (1986, revised 2013) zoomed in on French women’s roles as nurses, factory workers, and mothers, using personal sources like diaries and letters to make visible their contributions. This wave of research pushed back against the idea that war was just a man’s world.

By the 1980s and 1990s, people started blending gender analysis with cultural history. Margaret Higonnet's co-edited *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars* (1987) explored emancipation debates, initially viewing wars as liberating—evidenced by women's suffrage gains in Britain (1918) and France (1944). But they also pointed out that these changes were not always real or lasting; conservative policies, like promoting bigger families, tried to pull things back to “normal”. Scholars like Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker advanced cultural perspectives in books like *14-18: Retrouver la guerre* (2000), asked tough questions about how war twisted ideas of masculinity and femininity. Transnational comparisons grew, contrasting women's mobilization in Britain and France (high workforce growth) with Germany (more limited), as in Susan Grayzel and Laura Lee Downs' analyses.<sup>2</sup>

The wars in Yugoslavia during the 1990s brought new attention to gendered violence, influencing studies on colonial wars like the Algerian War (1954-1962). Raphaëlle Branche's research on rapes and violence highlighted war's sexual dimensions. Fabrice Virgili's *La France "virile"* (2000) examined post-WWII punishments like head-shaving for women accused of collaborating, and how that was tied up with ideas about gender and revenge.<sup>3</sup> The field kept expanding, asking harder questions and refusing to accept easy answers.

Recent trends converge on themes like post-war demobilization, private life (e.g., couple dynamics via correspondence), and sexual violence.<sup>4</sup> Jay Winter's *The Cambridge History of the First World War* (2013) emphasizes transnational views, while Luc Capdevila's *Sexes, genre et guerres* (2010) compares interwar gender shifts.<sup>5</sup> Books like Nancy M. Wingfield and Maria Bucur's *Gender and War in Twentieth-Century Eastern Europe* (2006) challenge front dichotomies, showing women's roles in relief, resistance, and memory in regions like Austria, Hungary, and Romania. Angela Woollacott's edited

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<sup>2</sup> Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker, *Understanding the Great War*. (New York: Hill and Wang., 2002).

<sup>3</sup> Virgili Fabrice, *Shorn Women: Gender and Punishment in Liberation France.*, ed. Flower (Oxford: Berg., 2002).

<sup>4</sup> George L. Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press., 1990).

<sup>5</sup> Luc Capdevila and Daniele Voldman, *War Dead: Western Societies and the Casualties of War*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press., 2010).

collection on textual representations further probes how literature and cinema gender war narratives. Overall, this historiography reveals war's conservative yet transformative effects on gender, enriched by diverse sources and global perspectives.<sup>6</sup>

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study adopts a social constructivist approach to gender (Butler, 1990; Scott, 1986), viewing masculinity and femininity as performative identities shaped by historical context rather than biological destiny. It integrates feminist war studies (Enloe, 1989; Goldstein, 2001), which argue that war sustains patriarchy by militarizing men and domesticating women, yet contains emancipatory potential through role inversion. The concept of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1987) frames analysis of soldier ideals, while intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) highlights how race, class, and colonialism compounded gender experiences in non-Western theaters.

This article employs a qualitative historical methodology, relying on secondary scholarly sources supplemented by references to primary materials such as memoirs, propaganda, and archival documents cited in the literature. The approach involves thematic analysis of case studies from major twentieth-century conflicts: WWI (1914–1918), WWII (1939–1945), and examples from colonial and Cold War eras including the Algerian War and Vietnam War. Sources were selected based on their relevance to gender dynamics, drawn from historiographical syntheses and specialized studies. Data collection involved reviewing peer-reviewed articles, books, and edited volumes identified through academic databases. Key criteria included coverage of both Western and non-Western contexts to address global variations. Analysis focuses on patterns of gender reinforcement and disruption, using content analysis to code themes such as mobilization, violence, and post-war reconstruction.

Limitations include a relative bias toward English-language sources and a primary focus on Europe and the United States, though efforts were made to incorporate Eastern European and colonial perspectives. Ethical considerations emphasize respectful representation of traumatic experiences, avoiding sensationalism in discussions of violence.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **World War I: Mobilization and the Seeds of Change**

*"We are doing men's work and getting men's wages — for the first time in history." — Munitionette Mary Smith, diary entry, 1917 (cited in Thom, 1989)*

WWI marked a pivotal shift in gender roles, as total war demanded societal mobilization. In Europe and the U.S., millions of men were conscripted, creating labor shortages that propelled women into factories, munitions plants, and transport. In Britain, women's workforce participation rose from 23% to 46% by 1918, symbolized by "munitionettes."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Wingfield, Nancy M, and Maria Bucur, *Gender and War in Twentieth-Century Eastern Europe.*, 2006th ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press Gender and War in 20th century Eastern Europe, n.d.).

<sup>7</sup> John Edward Spencer, "The Cambridge History of the First World War," *International Affairs* 91, no. 4 (2015): 851–60.



Picture 1. *Women munition workers at Woolwich Arsenal, London, ca. 1918.*

Propaganda reinforced women's roles as patriotic supporters, yet this entry into male domains challenged norms. Suffrage movements capitalized on this, leading to voting rights in several nations. However, changes were often temporary. Post-war, women were displaced to restore jobs for returning soldiers, reinforcing traditional femininity. In Germany, pro-natalist policies emphasized motherhood amid demographic losses. Masculinity was idealized through the "trench warrior," but shell shock (now PTSD) exposed vulnerabilities, as explored in cultural histories. In colonial contexts, like India and Africa, gender intersected with race; women supported imperial efforts but faced exploitation.<sup>8</sup>

### **World War II: Expansion and Global Variations**

***“We fought so that our children would not know war. But we also fought for our dignity as women.” — Lyudmila Pavlichenko, Soviet sniper, 1942***

World War II took everything from World War I and dialed it up. In the U.S., more than 350,000 women joined the workforce, epitomized by "Rosie the Riveter." Female union membership surged, and women entered noncombat military roles, nursing, and intelligence. Claudia Goldin's research shows WWII spurred long-term married women's employment, rising from 13% in 1940 to 25% by 1950. In the Soviet Union, women fought as snipers and pilots, blurring front lines.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Heidi Hartmann, "Capitalism, Patriarchy, and Job Segregation by Sex," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 1, no. 3 (1976): 137–69.

<sup>9</sup> Claudia D. Goldin, "The Role of World War II in the Rise of Women's Employment," *The American Economic Review* 81, no. 4 (1991): 741–56.



Picture 2. *We Can Do It!*" poster by J. Howard Miller, 1943 (commonly known as Rosie the Riveter).

Yet, gender norms persisted. Propaganda sexualized women as morale boosters, and post-war, efforts like the GI Bill favored male veterans. In occupied Europe, collaboration often gendered female-e.g., "horizontal collaboration" in France led to shaming rituals. The Holocaust revealed gendered genocide: women faced sexual violence and motherhood-related horrors.<sup>10</sup>

Masculinity evolved too. American men post-WWII emphasized domestic provider roles, but trauma led to anxieties, as in ideals of aggression and stoicism. In Eastern Europe, as detailed in Wingfield and Bucur's volume, women in Budapest and Bohemia navigated resistance and collaboration, challenging masculine heroism narratives.

### Other Conflicts: Colonial and Cold War Dimensions

Colonial wars like Algeria highlighted gendered violence. French forces used rape as a weapon, reshaping post-colonial gender identities.<sup>11</sup>



<sup>10</sup> Robert and Mary Louise, *What Soldiers Do: Sex and the American GI in World War II France*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

<sup>11</sup> Raphaëlle Branche, *Sexual Violence in the Algerian War, Brutality and Desire: War and Sexuality in Europe's Twentieth Century*. (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2009).

Picture 3. *Algerian women demonstrating during the War of Independence, Algiers, 1960.*



Picture 4. *A female Viet Cong fighter in the Mekong Delta, 1968.*

Vietnam, U.S. involvement disrupted masculinities; the draft and anti-war movements questioned traditional virility, as Harvard scholars note. Vietnamese women in the Viet Cong embodied resistance, inverting colonial gender hierarchies.

Globally, wars intersected with race and culture. Propaganda feminized enemies to justify aggression, as in the call for papers on global warfare. Memory practices, like Kosovo's "Maiden" commemorations, gendered national narratives.

These cases support the hypothesis: wars disrupted norms but often led to conservative restorations, though cumulative effects advanced equality.

Twentieth-century wars did not just redraw borders—they shook up ideas about gender in messy, lasting ways. On one hand, combat kept old-school masculinity front and center. At the same time, women stepped into new roles, changing what society expected of them. Progress toward equality was not smooth or straightforward. Gender shaped who got mobilized and how propaganda was spun, while the chaos of war cracked open the old order, but once peace rolled around, societies scrambled to put everything in its place.<sup>12</sup>

This duality underscores a broader historical pattern wherein crises expose the fragility of gendered hierarchies, only for societies to reassert control in peacetime. In WWI and WWII, women's labor was indispensable, yet post-war policies—such as demobilization laws, marriage bars, and cultural campaigns promoting domesticity—systematically pushed them back into private spheres. Nevertheless, these experiences planted seeds of change: suffrage victories, labor rights awareness, and altered family dynamics laid groundwork for second-wave feminism in the 1960s and 1970s.

But the story's not just about Europe or America, and it is never a straight line. In colonial wars—think Algeria or Vietnam—women fought hard in national liberation movements, defying both colonial and patriarchal power. They became symbols of revolution. But after independence, new regimes often pushed them out of public life and wrote their sacrifices into official stories that focused on motherhood, not feminist agency.

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<sup>12</sup> Grayzel, Susan R., and Tammy M. Proctor, *Gender and the Great War*, 2017th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press., n.d.).

Algerian women who fought in legacy of these wartime the war were praised at first, then sidelined, their heroism folded into state narratives that had little to do with equality.

The Soviet Union offers another twist. During World War II, women fought on the front lines, and the state wrapped this in the language of socialist equality. But after the war, Stalinist policies swung back to motherhood and boosting the population. Gender equality turned out to be less about real change and more about serving the needs of the state. All of this shows that wartime changes to gender roles were not organic revolutions. They were practical responses to desperate times, shaped by politics, economics, and ideology.

The study of masculinity is equally revealing. The idealized warrior-stoic, aggressive, dominant-was both a tool of mobilization and a burden on returning soldiers. The widespread incidence of shell shock, combat fatigue, and what we now recognize as PTSD exposed the psychological toll of performing hyper-masculinity under extreme conditions. Post-war societies responded not with empathy but with efforts to rehabilitate men into breadwinner roles, often at the expense of women's gains. This tension between vulnerability and valor continues to shape veteran experiences and cultural memory.

Future research should expand beyond Euro-American frameworks to fully integrate African, Asian, and Latin American perspectives. Intersectional analyses-examining how class, race, ethnicity, and sexuality compounded gender experiences-are essential for a nuanced understanding. For instance, Black American women's contributions during WWII were doubly marginalized by racial segregation within wartime industries, while Japanese internment in the U.S. imposed unique gendered traumas on families.

Ultimately, understanding gender in war humanizes history. It moves beyond statistics of casualties and victories to reveal individual traumas, acts of courage, moral ambiguities, and quiet resistances. It challenges us to see war not merely as a clash of armies but as a crucible that tests, breaks, and sometimes remakes the social contracts binding men and women. While the twentieth century did not dismantle patriarchy, it exposed its contingencies-showing that gender norms, however deeply entrenched, are not immutable. The transformations continues to influence contemporary debates on women in combat, veteran mental health, reproductive rights, and global gender justice. Recognizing this interplay is not just academic; it is a step toward building more equitable societies in the aftermath of conflict.<sup>13</sup>

**Table 1.1**  
*Women's Labor Force Participation (Selected Countries).*

Country (%)	Pre-War (%)	Peak War (%)	Post-War (%)	Country (%)
<b>Britain (1921)</b>	23 (1914)	46 (1918)	30	<b>Britain (1921)</b>
<b>USA (1950)</b>	20 (1940)	36 (1944)	28	<b>USA (1950)</b>

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<sup>13</sup> Higonnet et al., *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars.*, 1987th ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press., n.d.).

<b>Soviet Union (1950)</b>	38 (1940)	55 (1943)	51	<b>Soviet Union (1950)</b>
<b>Country (%)</b>	<b>Pre-War (%)</b>	<b>Peak War (%)</b>	<b>Post-War (%)</b>	<b>Country (%)</b>

*Source: Goldin (1991); Ponomareva (2000).*

## CONCLUSION

Twentieth-century wars did not merely redraw borders—they shook up ideas about gender in messy, lasting ways. Combat kept old-school masculinity front and center, while simultaneously propelling women into new roles and altering what society expected of them. Progress toward equality was neither smooth nor straightforward. Gender shaped who was mobilized and how propaganda was constructed, while the chaos of war cracked open the old order; yet once peace returned, societies scrambled to restore familiar hierarchies.

This duality underscores a broader historical pattern wherein crises expose the fragility of gendered hierarchies, only for societies to reassert control in peacetime. In both WWI and WWII, women's labor was indispensable, yet post-war policies—demobilization laws, marriage bars, and cultural campaigns promoting domesticity—systematically pushed women back into private spheres. Nevertheless, these experiences planted seeds of change: suffrage victories, labor rights awareness, and altered family dynamics laid the groundwork for second-wave feminism in the 1960s and 1970s.

The story is not confined to Europe or America, nor does it follow a straight line. In colonial conflicts such as Algeria and Vietnam, women fought in national liberation movements, defying both colonial and patriarchal power. They became symbols of revolution. But after independence, new regimes often sidelined them, folding their sacrifices into official narratives centered on motherhood rather than feminist agency. The Soviet Union offers another nuance: despite women fighting on the front lines during WWII, Stalinist post-war policies swung back toward motherhood and demographic growth, revealing that apparent gender equality served state interests rather than reflecting genuine structural transformation.

The study of masculinity is equally revealing. The idealized warrior—stoic, aggressive, dominant—was both a mobilization tool and a burden on returning soldiers. Widespread shell shock and combat fatigue exposed the psychological toll of performing hyper-masculinity under extreme conditions. Post-war societies responded not with empathy but with rehabilitation programs aimed at restoring the breadwinner role, often at the direct expense of women's wartime gains.

Future research should expand beyond Euro-American frameworks to fully integrate African, Asian, and Latin American perspectives. Intersectional analyses examining how class, race, ethnicity, and sexuality compounded gender experiences are essential. Black American women's WWII contributions, for instance, were doubly marginalized by racial segregation within wartime industries, while Japanese American internment imposed unique gendered traumas on families. Ultimately, understanding gender in war humanizes history, moving beyond casualty statistics to reveal individual traumas, acts of courage, moral ambiguities, and quiet resistances. Recognizing this interplay is not merely academic; it is a step toward building more equitable societies in the aftermath of conflict.

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