

Women's Mobilization for War

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Summary

This article explores women's economic, social, and political responses to the First World War. It addresses their mobilization including their engagement with the war effort as well as their resistance to it. Women's work during the war took a variety of forms, including essential waged labor and extensive volunteer work in and outside of their homes. The essay offers a brief comparative overview of women's war work and mobilization. It argues that the precise impact of the war on women's political and social experiences and opportunities remains complex and varied on a state and on an individual level.

Table of contents

- [1 Introduction](#)
- [2 Mobilizing Women through State Support for Families](#)
- [3 Mobilization into the Waged Labor Force](#)
- [4 Women Sustaining War-torn Europe](#)
- [5 Mobilization without Remuneration](#)
- [6 Mobilizing for Peace: Women's Wartime Dissent](#)
- [7 Conclusion](#)
- [Notes](#)
- [Selected Bibliography](#)
- [Citation](#)

Introduction

[Photographs](#) from the outbreak of war in 1914 often show crowds of men, women and [children](#) sending off the troops. Some accounts recall singing and some the tears shed by women, who still attempted to smile, but most emphasize confidence, resolution and seemingly unquestioned support for the war effort.¹ That this support had to be manufactured, in some cases, and sustained throughout the war is evident in the efforts to mobilize and re-mobilize popular support as well as man and woman power. War can obscure social differences as states and their populations rally to defend the nation, yet the messages sent to women in the early months of the conflict reflect a presumption of their special role in sustaining the war. As Britain's *Evening Standard* proclaimed on 26 August 1914: "If the men of our country offer in many cases not only themselves, but their future prospects and their careers, it is not too much to expect that the women who have bid God-speed to those they

love with a cheery word and a smile should take the fortunes of war with an equally serene and calm confidence.”² Thus, from the very start, wartime voices in a variety of countries called upon women specifically as women. They urged them to service and sacrifice, to “appropriate” action, and they emphasized women’s importance for the war’s success or failure.

Mobilizing Women through State Support for Families

The mass mobilization of fighting troops during the last months of 1914 deprived many households across Europe of their main source of income, even in working-class families where both spouses participated in waged labor. Once it became apparent that a quick and easy victory was nowhere in sight, the question of how to care for military men’s dependents arose as a central concern. How would states insure that neither military morale nor family members would suffer from domestic hardships? The solution lay in the implementation of “separation allowances,” government funds paid directly to the dependents of soldiers. Every belligerent nation created some version of such policies, although the amounts of the allowances and means of payment varied. Some countries took into account the number of children who needed to be supported, and others considered the mother’s wage as well, but recipients all gained control over the money in a way not possible prior to the war.³ In [Germany](#), financial support for so-called “warrior families” from local and state authorities started with the outbreak of war. Some estimates suggest that by the end of 1915 about 4 million families received such aid.⁴ The [German government](#) presumed, that not only would such allowances help soldiers feel better about leaving their loved ones, but that the general population would regard this kind of financial support as only fair. Those who fit the definition of dependent included not only soldiers’ wives and children but also their siblings and elderly parents. Yet some ordinary citizens came to express hostility towards “soldiers’ wives,” a category of women that they saw as benefiting from the war rather than performing a special service (or sacrifice) in support of its objectives. Such critics believed that only the soldier was truly serving the state and thus deserved support. They therefore viewed separation allowances as unjust and the recipients as spoiled and undeserving. Instead, they called for the state to support and feed all of its inhabitants equally. This feeling became more widespread after 1916 as conditions deteriorated and the need was much greater. As a result, and despite military officials’ fears that this might hurt [morale](#), the means testing of allowances occurred.

French policy on allowances paid to soldier’s dependents provoked rather less heated responses. This may have been due to the fact that French allowances were means tested from the start. [Children](#) under thirteen years old automatically qualified, but all adults had to

demonstrate both prewar dependency on the absent male's wages and current need. In [Italy](#), as early as May 1915, the [government](#) began to subsidize the families of military men who were in need. Even unmarried women were eligible as long as the fighting man's intentions to provide for them were obvious.⁵

In contrast to other European states, the existence of a volunteer, rather than a conscript, army in [Britain](#) at the start of the war had a significant impact upon the perception and kind of separation allowances granted. The [British government](#) viewed separation allowances as an aid in recruiting; with generous allowances, men could join up and feel confident that their families would not suffer any financial or material harm due to their absence. The rates of separation allowances increased periodically throughout the war, and women continued to receive them even if they found or had other sources of income. However, because this allowance was paid to soldiers' wives (and de facto wives) and granted as a right based on a soldier's labor for the nation, women could and would be disqualified if they failed to fulfill their duty as "wives." In other words, the state saw part of its role as being obliged to scrutinize women, and infidelity and misbehavior became grounds for the denial of this benefit.⁶

Separation allowances could also be used to meet other societal needs. In [Austria](#), for example, wives of conscripts who did not have young children to care for found their allowances cut off when the government wanted to encourage married women to enter the wartime waged workforce. Similar efforts in Germany failed, in part because ambivalence about women in the waged workforce meant that few financial incentives existed to shift them into factories. If family allowances offered little beyond subsistence support, women's low wages did not offer much more and provided little motivation to get women mobilized into the wartime workforce.⁷

Further from the main war fronts, in North America and Oceania, policies differed still further. [Canada](#) implemented "compulsory assigned pay," which proved to be inadequate to support an entire family, and was therefore supplemented by family allowances paid out by the charitable *Canadian Patriotic Fund*. The administration of allowances equated men's service to the nation with the nation's obligation then to maintain their familial dependents. In addition to separation allowances, [Australia](#) also put a War Pension scheme into action, designed to compensate female relatives. Under this plan, soldiers' dependents received funds to preserve the family, and a combination of state and charitable support helped sustain wives and children, and sometimes soldiers' mothers. Widows without children were presumed able to help themselves. Despite its short-lived involvement in the war, the [United States](#) passed some of the most progressive legislation in support of soldiers' dependents. In

October 1917, the War Risk Insurance Act instituted a system of allotments and allowances to be paid to soldiers' dependents. What made the allotment and allowance system so progressive, in addition to the size of the payments, was that these monies were need-blind, went directly to women, and were identical for black and white Americans. Married servicemen were required to make allotments for wives and children, but parents, siblings and grandchildren were also eligible for support if their financial dependence on the soldier could be proved.⁸

As the war continued, philanthropic, feminist, and sometimes government objectives seem to have coalesced around the idea of supporting women as mothers. This can be seen in things like the creation of Britain's first ever National Baby Week in 1917.⁹ Wartime [propaganda](#) deployed a variety of images of women from maternal icons to sexual temptations. It, too, made the significance of women's support and the need to preserve traditional notions of femininity an essential part of the war effort. Making motherhood compatible with other wartime activities raised certain obvious contradictions when almost all belligerent nations also began to mobilize a female labor force. It was within that workforce that some of the most vivid evidence appears of the potential for the war to bring changes in women's lives.

Mobilization into the Waged Labor Force

One of the more visible alterations in women's lives during the war came with their entrance into a wide range of occupations, some of which had been the exclusive domain of men. What quickly became clear was that given the mass mobilization required by modern, total warfare, the entirety of the nation needed to contribute. As male waged laborers entered the armed services, women filled their ranks, finding employment on a scale neither seen before the war nor sustained afterwards. Women not only entered wartime factories, but also banks and places of business and government as clerks, typists, and secretaries. They were found running trams and buses, delivering milk, and even joining newly-created armed forces' auxiliaries and becoming police officers. Although varying by region, women worked on the land and sustained agriculture.

Many women who were employed during the war were not new to the world of waged work and few indeed were new to unwaged work. If the war caused some women to shift jobs, it enabled others to join the paid workforce for the first time. Already within the first year of the war, the number of women in paid employment increased by 400,000 in Britain.¹⁰ From the outset, some women were motivated primarily by patriotism and others by necessity and a number by both. For instance, certain groups of women entered the work force directly as "replacements" for absent husbands or for dead ones. Of the nearly 14,000 women employed

as street-car workers in Germany in late 1915, 20 percent were married to workers in that occupation who had been mobilized into the army.¹¹ Across Europe, other women took over small family businesses or ran farms. Contemporary published accounts of women and the war emphasized women's atypical occupations, and they also expressed concern that such new roles or new incomes could change their "essential" nature and that women must still place family, in particular childrearing, first.

As the war continued, both Britain and Germany saw campaigns to conscript women's labor. In December 1916, Germany enacted the *Auxiliary Service for the Fatherland* law in order to shift workers from civil to military industries and to mobilize more of the population by requiring all adult males aged between seventeen and sixty to perform "war work". The leaders of the German women's movement, and some members of the [German High Command](#) urged that women should also be included even if not on the identical terms as men. However, the final legislation was a compromise between trade unions, employers, and the government and ultimately excluded women, in part over both over fears that they would displace male workers and that they had a more important task as wives and mothers. This made the decision of women to participate in the workforce voluntary, and Germany never saw the same rates of participation as other belligerent states in part because of trade union opposition. In Britain, the decision to introduce conscription in 1916 followed the creation of a National Register in August 1915, recording the age, sex, and occupation of all men and women between sixteen and sixty-five. Prominent leaders of the women's movement urged that women be placed on the Register and again hoped that with the introduction of conscription they would be included again. Instead, despite public comments advocating "compulsory service" for women, this was deliberately not enacted. Thus while overt compulsion was not a factor in any wartime state and some states made it easier for women to work outside the home than others, through various measures, many women sustained their nations at war.¹²

A vision appeared across belligerent Europe during the war of the female munitions worker: costumed in workmanlike clothes, pulling a lever or carrying an [artillery](#) shell, an integral part of the nation's arsenal. In some states, the women who went into the factories, quite literally providing the hands that armed the men of the war zones, became important figures in wartime propaganda. They also played an essential part in supporting the war effort, even if they generated controversy. Female factory workers were not anomalies in any European nation prior to 1914. Despite the importance of the stories of upper-class or middle-class wives who found solace in the production of [weapons](#) to preserve their husbands' lives or avenge their deaths, very few of those employed by wartime factories came from these sections of society. What World War One provided were opportunities for working-class

women to shift the nature of their employment, for greater employment of married women with children, and for short-lived changes in the type of industrial labor that women were permitted to perform. The strength of predominantly male unions, however, helped insure that such work by women did not threaten men's wages or, ultimately, their access to jobs.

The munitions industry provided employment for more working-class women than other types of war work. Some women moved from previous employment in textile factories and most worked primarily for financial rather than patriotic reasons. Many married working-class women sought factory work because the separation allowances paid by the state to maintain their families while the male breadwinner served in the armed forces proved insufficient. Overwhelmingly, however, women gladly left domestic service for the better pay and greater personal freedom afforded by factory work. Munitions workers might put in long hours and have difficult working conditions, but servants often worked longer hours and laundresses' working conditions, for example, were often worse. Moreover the wages paid to women for munitions work, while not always the equal of male counterparts, were certainly higher than most women had previously received.¹³

What did these women do? The munitions industry in wartime Britain for example encompassed a wide range of activities controlled by the Ministry of Munitions. These included, in addition to producing weapons and ammunition, the manufacture of everything the army needed from textiles to food. Within factories, women performed a full range of tasks ranging from running machines to welding. The work was often risky, because producing ammunition put women in contact with dangerous and even deadly chemicals, and industrial accidents were not uncommon. Exposure to materials such as TNT caused jaundice, and so-called "canary girls" were easily identified by their yellow skin. Moreover, poisoning by TNT or other chemicals injured or sometimes killed female workers as did explosions in munitions factories.¹⁴

The question of pay became a heated one in Britain as elsewhere. In general, women took the place of both unskilled men [as "substitutes"] and of skilled workers [as "dilutees"]. Concern arose that if women earned less than men for the same job, they undercut male employment. On the other hand, paying men and women equally seemed far too radical, and some argued unfair since male workers were undoubtedly superior. As a compromise, women and men were paid the same for piece work, but not for time rates. Female war workers also met with hostility from male workers, and it required government intervention to allow for full use of their labor. Ultimately, female labor became accepted largely because it was cheaper and easily exploitable, especially under wartime conditions.¹⁵

[France also saw women entering new fields](#) and in greater numbers, but it did not witness the same seemingly explosive growth of women into wartime factories as did Britain. In part, this occurred because [France](#) already had one of the highest rates of female participation in its labor force. Serious recruitment of women, the workforce of last resort, into new war industries began in 1915, and yet by late 1917, the number of women working in commerce and industry combined was only 20 percent higher than before the war. By 1918, only 25 percent of munitions factories' workforce in France was female.¹⁶

As was the case in Britain, French female workers came from a wide range of backgrounds. Despite popular images of such workers as young girls, many were older and married. Few had any previous experience in fields such as metalworking but most had previously worked outside the home. Such war work carried certain risks and involved harsh conditions. First, there was the extraordinary pace of work with work periods of thirteen days before a day off, enforced overtime without an increase in wages, and strict discipline imposed by supervisors. In addition, many male workers, especially union officials, were hostile to the introduction of women in their factories. Despite the continuing wage differential between men and women, Frenchwomen still sought wartime factory jobs out of financial necessity. Money, not patriotism, was the major incentive for working. With male heads of households' wages gone and replaced by an inadequate allowance for the family, which also did little to keep up with inflation, women worked to meet their families' material needs. That the better earnings now available to them increased their social status was not insignificant either. Furthermore, as the war continued, women's earnings rose dramatically as compared to before the war.¹⁷

Of all warring states, [Germany saw the fewest women participating](#) in its wartime factory work. This reflected prewar patterns of female labor participation, and that, in part because of pressure from trade unions, women's compensation proved insufficient to recruit them in large numbers. Here, as elsewhere, those who entered the war factories were not strangers to waged work for most had shifted from other trades to wartime industries and most women factory workers were classified as "unskilled." In Germany, the system of family allowances also meant that women could choose not to enter factories, and furthermore, employers did little to encourage their participation.

Thus, there is no obvious pattern suggesting that the war brought dramatic change by bringing women into the factories, despite serious government efforts in many places during the second half of the war to mobilize them in the face of labor shortages. Yet, once participating in the wartime workforce, many women found themselves performing tasks that had previously been characterized as "male" in metalworking or chemical industries. Moreover, the public impression remained that women's work had changed radically as

women now took on such previously male-defined tasks as using pneumatic drills. All of their new opportunities were limited, and this becomes clear when considering that after the enacting of the December 1916 Auxiliary Services Law that made war work mandatory for German men, and industrialists obtained the "skilled" workers they wanted, they fired women workers.¹⁸

[Russian women](#), like their German counterparts, experienced harsh living conditions due to the scarcity and cost of basic necessities, and responded to this crisis by seeking waged work in urban areas. As was the case elsewhere, jobs vacated by men called up into the army awaited them. Some educated women were able to move into office jobs previously held exclusively by men, but more striking changes came in the factories. Between 1914 and 1917, the percentage of women in Russian industry grew to 43 percent from 26 percent, and more dramatic developments occurred in fields like metalworking and chemical production. It was also the case that women left seasonal work and more traditional female occupations in search of better wages in larger war factories.¹⁹

Other states also witnessed an increased number of women entering into factory work. [Italian women](#) also quickly became part of the mobilized industrial supply of labor. At the war's conclusion, there were approximately 200,000 such workers, comprising about 22 percent of this workforce. Traditional family structures and work cycles also impinged on the recruitment of women workers from the countryside. For instance, most married women would not do night work without their husbands' permission (usually not forthcoming) and many insisted on returning to agricultural labor in the spring.²⁰ In [Austria](#), estimates suggest that nearly 1 million women entered the waged workforce during the war. One dramatic result was that in Vienna, after 1915 almost half of all metal workers were women. Women even performed jobs that had previously been the sole province of men, such as welding or using lathes, yet, women's earnings were often only one-third of those paid to men, and there working conditions often were bad or at least worsened during the war.²¹

Even in the [United States](#), where wartime conditions only existed for a few years (1917-1919), similar patterns of changing jobs within what had been women's waged work and of allowing women to take "nontraditional" jobs emerge. One key difference to consider in contrast with the European states just discussed, lies in the divergent work patterns and opportunities available to white and African-American women. Overall, the number of African-American women employed in such occupations as servants and cleaners decreased between 1910 and 1920 while the number employed in fields ranging from office work to semi-skilled manufacturing workers increased markedly. Despite this, the overall increase in women in

the workforce was minimal.²²

Women in a nation like [Australia](#), far removed from the combat zones and yet deeply involved in the war in Europe, also entered into new venues for waged labor. Here, about 15 percent of the male labor force left to participate militarily in the war, which created some opportunities for [women workers](#). However, the war did relatively little to alter women's wages for factory work as, for example, war bonuses, meant to counteract the effects of the rising cost of living, remained higher for men than for women.²³

Overall, women during wartime entered new types of employment within factories and some entered the factories themselves for the first time. This was certainly the case in all belligerent nations as mass mobilization and the war's duration ultimately produced labor shortages. Examining women's wartime factory work across a wide comparative perspective reveals marked similarities in terms of new opportunities for waged and skilled work that was previously restricted to men, shifts from domestic to factory, and from rural to urban work. It also yields some interesting contrasts in the number of women employed, the type of women employed, and the "success" of the entire enterprise. There are some intriguing interpretations of the varying degrees of success that governments had in mobilizing women. Is it merely a coincidence that the countries that lost the war, Germany and Austria-Hungary, had the greatest difficulty in getting women out of homes and into wartime factories? Is it unremarkable that Britain and France succeeded because they not only mobilized all available labor but also suppressed and/or avoided strikes and turmoil (unlike [Russia](#))? Obviously, this factor is not solely responsible for the war's outcome. Nonetheless, if we think of wartime conditions as a whole, the capacity of nations like Britain to mobilize a female workforce by gaining the support of trade union leadership, in contrast to Germany where such leadership opposed it, helped the war effort both in terms of supplying material support and bolstering morale.

Women Sustaining War-torn Europe

As the war continued, sustenance itself – the maintenance of an adequate food supply – also became part of their contribution. Female agricultural workers proved even more essential in places like France as men from rural areas were swallowed up by the war, and Britain, an island nation where the importation of food became difficult. Yet there was variable success in the efforts to persuade urban women to work on the land. In Germany, where the food supply was deeply affected by a [blockade](#), urban women responded to the return of a "quasi-subsistence economy" by growing vegetables in urban allotments and keeping small livestock in their homes. With almost 60 percent of male agricultural workers called up to the Army, the government tried to convince urban women to relocate to rural areas to replace

this labor. The War Office appealed directly to women, claiming that agricultural work would both benefit their health and aid the nation. This effort not only proved unsuccessful in mobilizing women to leave the cities for the land and convincing farmers to accept their aid but also led to further food shortages. It eventually collapsed altogether.²⁴

In comparison with Germany, [Britain](#) more successfully mobilized women both in rural communities and from urban areas to help maintain the food supply. Its *Women's Land Army* evolved from earlier volunteer organizations like the *Women's Legion* and the *Women's Defence Relief Corps*. From the outset, these groups sought specifically and often explicitly to attract single women of the educated, middle-classes to help solve the food problem by employing female labor. Starting with bringing women together to do seasonal land work, it soon tried to gather sufficient women to replace absent men. If the numbers of women who worked the land were never extensive, they greatly assisted with the last two harvests of the war and even came to serve as symbols of a revitalized English countryside.²⁵

French, Italian, and American women continued to work the land in much the way that they traditionally had, but the amount of work that they needed to do increased. Italian authorities bemoaned the difficulties in keeping "peasant women" in the factories when they felt the pull of agricultural labor in the spring. French women not only took on the work of their absent men but also of field animals requisitioned by the army. American women and their families were urged to supplement the food supply by growing "victory gardens." Once again, enormous variation in the use of women in agriculture existed in combatant nations; in every case, this labor was deemed essential for the war.²⁶

Mobilization without Remuneration

With the mass mobilization of 1914 came the interconnected social problems of how to alleviate the hardships experienced by family members left behind and how to best make use of the largest group of adults not called up or actively recruited for armed service. One response to both of these problems occurred largely outside the government in the form of voluntary services established to provide for those fighting and those suffering behind the lines. This included vast numbers of organizations created, headed and staffed by women; immediate relief of servicemen's families came from private charitable institutions. In Germany, as elsewhere, some of the women's groups saw themselves as fulfilling a particular feminine responsibility during wartime to care for others, different organizations (often but not exclusively those with a more feminist slant) devoted themselves to alleviating the condition of women hurt by the mobilization of male breadwinners and other disruptions to economic and familial life.

Along with helping other women, many women's groups across war-torn Europe also organized themselves so as best to aid soldiers. This first took the form of providing material comforts including knitted items such as socks, and sending parcels filled with cigarettes, food, writing paper, treats and "morally uplifting" literature. In [Ireland](#), for instance, 6,000 women volunteered to manufacture equipment for the Irish War Hospital Supply Depot, while in Red Cross Workrooms in Dublin 300 women knitted 20,000 pairs of socks and 10,000 mufflers for servicemen. Approximately 10,000 women's patriotic clubs, societies and sewing circles emerged in Australia, where in addition to knitting socks, they packed these along with cakes, tobacco, magazines, and an inspiring letter into "comfort" bags to be sent to soldiers in the field. In [New Zealand](#), so many patriotic groups emerged to provide comforts for soldiers, among other things, that they had to be regulated under the War Funds Act of 1915, establishing a Federation of New Zealand War Relief Societies. Meantime, in [Austria](#), Jewish women joined in the widespread practice of organizing themselves to help the war effort, and the former deliberately sought to aid Jewish soldiers by sending gift packages for Chanukah and Purim and kosher food for Passover.²⁷

Soon women's organizations established outposts at train stations, canteens for military personnel and even for female munitions workers themselves. One purpose of the "Foyers du Soldat" (Soldiers' hearths) as they were called in France was to provide an alternative to the café or public house where men might be led astray by alcohol and prostitution. The many women who flocked to the aid of soldiers envisioned themselves as entertaining the troops in an appropriate, patriotic fashion. Organizations such as the [YMCA](#) (Young Men's Christian Association) and the Salvation Army provided entertainment huts, where women served "doughnuts to doughboys." Race, however, became a complicating factor for the United States. The segregated United States army at first had not set up recreational activities or YMCA clubs, deemed so vital for morale, for any [African-American troops](#) at its training camps or abroad. Facilities for white soldiers were off limits to non-whites. Despite this, African-American women strove to support soldiers from their communities as best they could.²⁸

The time such services required meant that the bulk of those performing voluntary, charitable work came from the middle and upper classes, although women of the entire nation could contribute pennies to war loans and send comforts to soldiers. All such work appealed to women as patriots, as vital constituents of their nations at war, but much of this charitable work did not challenge any preconceived ideas about gender roles or actions. There were some notable exceptions, as some of the most difficult tasks associated with the war, such as ambulance driving done by British women, were unpaid. In these instances, women of means – some from as far away as New Zealand – paid their way to France or Britain, provided their own uniforms and received little material support of any kind The

compensation for all members of the Voluntary Aid Detachments (V.A.D.) was so minimal that almost all V.A.D.s came from the middle class, taking on grueling work both out of the desire to be of service and to test their own capacities.²⁹ The abundance of organizations created specifically by women during the war suggests that many who participated saw voluntary work as a female means of serving the nation. Women who took up the tasks of providing comforts and aid to soldiers saw this as a way, however small, of contributing to the war effort and thus to their own men and nation at risk.

It is hardly surprising that the outward changes in women's working lives provoked strong reactions. In particular, they sparked debates about the national dangers of women's work. Factory and industrial work in particular was contrasted with women's allegedly more natural and equally important task of reproduction, literally insuring a human supply of citizen soldiers for the nation. The British and French governments, for instance were concerned with regulating the behavior of the many women whom they called into war-related work, especially in factories. However, by focusing on women's health and their children's health, they reveal a deeper concern with the nation's future need for healthy citizens. One concrete result already mentioned was the creation of welfare supervisors for female factory workers, a paternalistic safeguard. Such tasks became the purview of women in Germany and Austria-Hungary as well. Better working conditions, higher wages and fewer hours might have helped all women, including mothers, but this contradicted the wartime need for increased production at reduced costs.

Women in combatant nations faced many similar challenges – anxiety about men and children, economic difficulties, and social upheavals. However, the opportunities provided for their participation in the war effort, in waged war work, varied from state to state and, within states, by class, ethnicity, or region. Urban, middle and upper-class women enjoyed a wider range of options than poorer and rural women. These latter in some countries (and the longer the war lasted) were confronted with miserable working and living conditions. Despite these divergences, the home and the care as well as production of its inhabitants continued to be construed as a vital part of the women's war effort.

Mobilizing for Peace: Women's Wartime Dissent

Not all women adopted a patriotic outlook or abandoned prewar feminist internationalism. Even in the confusion of August 1914, the horrors of what a sustained war might bring seemed abundantly clear to several groups of women: those on the left; those feminists for whom [pacifism](#) or antimilitarism were central to their beliefs; and those who simply could not sanction sending their beloved sons, husbands, lovers, brothers, and friends to fight. The very existence of a women's antiwar movement is significant, because it required a good

deal of courage to counter the prevailing waves of patriotism that emanated from almost every institution, above all the governments of belligerent nations, during the early, optimistic phases of the war. Moreover, a few women saw the outbreak of war as giving them a great, if tragic, opportunity to show the world what made the political empowerment of women so vital. They insisted that a world that listened to their voices would not be a world at war. Women organizing themselves to advocate an end to the war posed a potential threat to the war efforts of belligerent states. They were joined by other women protesting war-induced economic and social conditions such as insufficient food and fuel supplies, rising prices, inadequate wages or some combination of all three. As the war dragged on, the line between economic and political protests blurred, and women marched to demand both bread and peace. In several places, most notably Russia, strikes and street demonstrations ultimately contributed to revolution.

[Feminist pacifist](#) arguments against war appeared even before its outbreak, and most centered on three aspects of feminism: the international solidarity that existed among women and feminism's commitment to internationalism; its appeal to women as mothers and caregivers therefore inherently opposed to war; and the existence of women's oppression, their lack of basic political and social rights. In various nations, as well as in international women's organizations and their works, and in the voices of individual women, one can find echoes of all three perspectives, separately and intertwined.³⁰

Galvanized into action by the crisis at hand, socialist women leaders like [Clara Zetkin \(1857-1933\)](#) of Germany and [Louise Saumoneau \(1875-1950\)](#) of France determined that they must protest the war. In March 1915, socialist women called together by Zetkin met in neutral Berne, [Switzerland](#). The majority of delegates came from [neutral nations](#), but representatives from Germany, England, France, and Russia also attended. Among the resolutions passed at this congress was one stating that the real enemy was the capitalist who gained from oppressing the masses, not the citizens of "enemy" nations. Furthermore, since men in the war zone no longer had a political voice, it was up to women to speak for them and try to end the war. A "manifesto" issued by this gathering was soon published and distributed in Germany by Zetkin and in France by Saumoneau, bringing them to the attention of authorities who alternated between a desire to arrest and thus silence them and to avoid turning them into martyrs.³¹

From 28 April to 1 May 1915, a larger group of women gathered in The Hague, a gathering that eventually gave rise to a new organization, the *Women's International League for Peace and Freedom*. The gathering at The Hague was crucial for renewing feminist internationalism and bolstering a women's antiwar movement, but it did not meet with approval from all

women or from national feminist organizations. The initial call for women to come to The Hague further highlighted an increasingly bitter division within the largest British women's suffrage organization, the National Union of Woman Suffrage Societies. France's mainstream feminist organizations unilaterally denounced the meeting at The Hague, claiming that Frenchwomen could not attend such a gathering while France itself was under enemy occupation, although some individual feminists such as [Gabrielle Duchêne \(1870-1954\)](#) dissented from this position. In Germany, as in Britain and France, the feminist movement was divided over how to respond to the war and to peace initiatives. [Gertrud Bäumer \(1873-1954\)](#), head of the *Bund Deutscher Frauenvereine*, led the majority of feminists in supporting the war effort while other feminists including [Anita Augspurg \(1857-1943\)](#), [Lida Gustava Heymann \(1868-1943\)](#), and [Helene Stöcker \(1869-1943\)](#) publicly opposed the war and attended The Hague Congress. Despite these obstacles and the absence of Russian and French – although not Belgian – participation, the 1915 Women's Peace Congress at The Hague allowed women of both belligerent and neutral nations to speak together in the midst of war. This in itself was remarkable. Along with discussing the prospects for peace, delegates also articulated a solidarity of women against war, as mothers and the nurturers of children and as the war's victims. At the end of the meeting, delegates sent a message to the world urging continuous mediation until a peace settlement could be reached and arguing that women must have a voice in any such settlement.³²

In more local efforts, female organizers and activists drew attention to the powerful connections between the costs of prosecuting the war and the expenses that then shifted to working-class families. [Sylvia Pankhurst \(1882-1960\)](#) tried to organize a "no rent" strike among her constituency in East London to protest rapidly rising costs as a result of war. One of the most vivid examples of this type of political protest can be found in the Glasgow rent strike of 1915. This became an action both by and for poor women, set in motion by landlords raising rents in response to the arrival of laborers seeking work in war-related factories. With housing already scarce and many of those threatened with eviction the wives of servicemen, tensions grew extremely high. With the backing of the local Independent Labour Party and their menfolk, these women forced the government's hand by forming pickets, blocking evictions, and using the courts to seek redress. The movement spread beyond Glasgow, and eventually the government intervened. By late December 1915, Parliament had passed the Rent Restriction Act covering the entire nation and alleviating the crisis.³³

Political actions to protest wartime conditions such as the rising cost of living were not restricted to nations in the thick of war, such as those mentioned above, or the German Empire and Austria-Hungary. The city of Melbourne, Australia witnessed its own women-led demonstrations over the war-induced rise in the cost of living in 1917. Elsewhere in Australia,

women had actively protested the war and here, as in Europe, the initiative had come from socialist women. As was true in Britain, the war proved divisive for the Canadian women's suffrage movement with the Canadian Suffrage Association urging arbitration to end the war and sponsoring pacifist speakers while the National Equal Franchise Association advocated no discussion of peace until the Allies won as the encyclopedia article "[Controversy: War-related Changes in Gender Relations: The Issue of Women's Citizenship](#)" by [Birgitta Bader-Zaar](#) further explains. More extensive campaigning against the war was carried out by socialist women. In nations neutral at the start of the war, support for the peace movement similarly divided feminists. In the United States, some 1,500 women had paraded down Manhattan's Fifth Avenue in a Women's Peace March on 29 August 1914, and a Women's Peace Party emerged in 1915. By the time of America's entrance into the war in April 1917, the main suffrage group, the National American Women's Suffrage Association under the leadership of [Carrie Chapman Catt \(1859-1947\)](#), had avowed its full support for the war while the National Woman's Party under [Alice Paul \(1885-1977\)](#) decided upon neutrality, neither actively supporting nor opposing it. Moreover, membership in the Women's Peace Party quickly declined.³⁴

Those who remained committed to an antiwar stance soon found themselves both busier than ever and under more direct threat from the government. No belligerent state was willing to let those who opposed the war, whatever their motivation, continue to speak out. As was the case with their male counterparts, women protesting the war found themselves viewed as dangerous to their wartime nations. Both Zetkin and Saumoneau were imprisoned for spreading the message of the 1915 socialist women's Berne Congress. In the United States, the enacting of the Espionage Act of 1917 and the Sedition Act of 1918, free speech, particularly speech critical of the United States and its war aims, became an endangered species. Women, although a minority of defendants in cases brought under these acts, found themselves suspect as much for their violating appropriate gender roles as for acting against the war. In one of the most famous cases, socialist [Kate Richards O'Hare \(1877-1948\)](#) was indicted in June 1917 for suggesting that "war corrupted motherhood."³⁵ One way to evaluate the importance of the activities of such small numbers of women internationally is to consider the disproportionate response that they invoked. It is a sign that the voices of women mattered that without wishing to create martyrs, various governments felt obliged to prosecute vigorously the women who spoke out against the war.

By the winter of 1917, the war had reached a crisis point. Mutinies occurred across the [Western Front](#), [revolution struck Russia](#), protests about scarcities grew, and strikes threatened vital war production. All but the mutinies directly involved women, and all show how interconnected the lives of civilians and soldiers truly were. France, for instance,

experienced a huge upsurge in both military and civilian unrest during the spring of 1917. While men mutinied in the war zone, strikes proliferated in the munitions factories in and around Paris, places where women workers were, by this time, in the majority. Striking women workers decisively linked complaints about wages and working conditions with criticisms of the war itself. Most ominously for the government, when they took to the streets at the end of May 1917, they demanded that the government bring their soldiers home and send the presumed cowards (men avoiding combat through factory work) to battle in their stead. That some 30,000 women had stopped producing armaments to demand money, their men, and ultimately an end to the war gravely alarmed the government. It intervened by a combination of granting some concessions in wages and work and by punishing the movement's leaders.³⁶ Even in nonbelligerent European countries like Spain, the war affected the availability of food and fuel, and this in turn prompted working-class protests involving women. Shortages of items necessary for families' survival prompted women to take collective action in various venues including Córdoba, Madrid, Alicante and most notably Málaga and Barcelona. In January 1918, reacting to the rising cost of bread and coal, groups of Barcelona's women took to the streets and those working in factories struck. In the end, this wartime agitation was quelled only by the use of military force.³⁷

Economic hardship also deeply affected women in Austria-Hungary and Germany. Given the severity of the blockade's effects, German women, many now heading households, faced enormous difficulties in obtaining basic supplies for themselves and their families. Protesting against the shortage of vital food stuffs such as potatoes, women, especially "war wives", took to the streets. These kinds of protests themselves were not new. Vocal reactions occurred as soon as the shortages of food had become evident earlier in the war, but 1917 represented the final eroding of faith in the government as food scandals shocked civilians. The year began with women war factory workers demanding equal rations to male munitions workers. In addition, consumers became enraged by stories of hoarding and profiteering recounted in the press, and the government became newly concerned with the possibility of hungry and newly-radicalized women taking to the streets. As food and fuel became scarcer and concern about survival during yet another winter of war emerged, street protests continued through the summer with increasing violence and the theft of food. Conditions did not improve throughout the year leading to further disillusionment and arrival of mass strikes in Berlin as 1918 opened.³⁸

The war's economic and political effects were far-reaching, and even affecting women's lives and actions in the European colonies of participant nations. One notable example is India, where the war saw an intensification of efforts to gain self-government, as the British sought both its troops and material support. In efforts to recruit troops in India, the state turned to

financial incentives, for instance by offering a life pension to war widows. This support for women left widowed by war was especially important in the context of a culture where widows did not remarry; an issue that was itself cautiously raised in Hindi women's magazines during the war. The contradiction between recruiting Indian troops for combat in Europe while the Arms Act legally denied them the right to bear arms in most of India itself also aroused protest. In 1916, [Sarojini Naidu \(1879-1949\)](#), one of the activists in the Ladies' War Relief Association, which believed that support for the war would further strengthen India's case for independence, spoke out against this Act. Naidu argued that women were uniquely qualified to address this issue, since they were the "mothers of men whom we wish to make men and not emasculated machines" thus demanding that "the birthright of their sons should be given back to them." She would reiterate these themes throughout the war, stressing in December 1917 that Indians' "self-respect" was at stake, since "the primary right of man to defend his honour, to defend his women and to protect his country have been taken away from him."³⁹

Regardless of where they took place, protests and strikes had the serious potential to disrupt what was an international war effort. They further demonstrated how intertwined the actions of civilians and combatants were and in some instances, suggest the importance of women's wartime labor to the war's success.

Conclusion

We can begin to understand what happened to women in the war by looking at them from a comparative perspective that acknowledges the diversity of their experiences. In general, World War One accelerated the pace at which women across class lines entered the public sphere, both to support and to condemn the waging of the war, and gained new economic and social opportunities. In some cases this was "for the duration," but in other cases, women acquired new skills and participated in new activities that enabled them to achieve more than had been possible prior to 1914. Concern over the spread of [venereal disease](#), among other factors, led to more open public discussions of sexuality including women's. Examining women's wartime lives across many national boundaries, one finds some similarities in how states viewed women but also much variety. Thus part of what makes this war such a compelling moment in women's history is that it provided an opportunity for many women to forge a new relationship with their nation-state. This does not mean that they succeeded, for we are left with contradictory evidence of women's progress: for instance, a nation like Britain that passed legislation giving women the vote during the war did not enfranchise the vast majority of women war workers let alone acknowledge the contributions of its male and female colonial subjects by bestowing political rights.

Women's war experiences varied enormously, but, with few exceptions, they remained distinguished from those of the majority of men conscripted into military service. No state was willing to break this barrier and draft women to serve in its army. For all the debate at relatively high levels of government over compulsory war service for women in Germany and Britain, nothing really materialized. Thus, to an extent, everything that women contributed to the war was done on a "voluntary" basis. Many perceived that wartime women, particularly the young, had choices that their male counterparts, by and large, did not. Perhaps this explains why, for all the praise of women's undeniably important work for their wartime societies, the postwar world was unwilling to accord it equal recognition.

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Notes

1. This entry is a slightly revised version of chapters that appeared in Grayzel Susan R.: *Women and the First World War*, Harlow 2002, where more information on other aspects of women and the war can be found. It does not therefore fully incorporate scholarly work that has appeared since that date and particularly in non-English language sources. Sweeney, Regina: *Singing our Way to Victory: French Cultural Politics and Music during the Great War*, Middletown 2001; Horne, John (ed.): *State, Society and Mobilization in Europe during the First World War*, Cambridge 1997. ↑
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Citation

Susan R. Grayzel: Women's Mobilization for War, in: 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. by Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson, issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin 2014-10-08. DOI: [10.15463/ie1418.10348](https://doi.org/10.15463/ie1418.10348)

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[North America](#) > [USA](#)

[South and South East Asia](#)

[Western Europe](#) > [France](#)

[Western Europe](#) > [Great Britain and Ireland](#) > [Great Britain](#)

[Western Europe](#) > [Great Britain and Ireland](#) > [Ireland](#)

[Western Europe](#) > [Italy](#)

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[Home Front](#)

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[Economy](#) > [Labour](#) > [Women's labour](#)

[Politics, law](#) > [Domestic policy](#) > [Suffrage](#)

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[Society](#) > [Social conflict](#) > [Strikes, society](#)

[Society](#) > [Social groups](#) > [Population, rural](#)

[Society](#) > [Social groups](#) > [Population, urban](#)

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Author Keywords

Women; Feminism; Home; Work; Politics

GND Subject Headings

[Weltkrieg \[1914-1918\] ; Frau](#)

LC Subject Headings

[World War, 1914-1918 ; Women and war](#)

Rameau Subject Headings

[Guerre mondiale \(1914-1918\) ; Participation des femmes](#)

Key Person(s)

[Stöcker, Helene](#); [Catt, Carrie Chapman](#); [Naidu, Sarojini](#); [Duchêne, Gabrielle](#); [Augsburg, Anita](#); [Heymann, Lida Gustava](#); [Pankhurst, Sylvia](#); [O'Hare, Kate Richards](#); [Saumoneau, Louise](#); [Zetkin, Clara](#); [Paul, Alice](#); [Bäumer, Gertrud](#)

Key Location(s)

[Alicante](#); [Barcelona](#); [Berlin](#); [Berne](#); [Córdoba, Spain](#); [Glasgow](#); [London](#); [Málaga](#); [Paris](#); [The Hague \(Den Haag\)](#); [Vienna](#)

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