

# Women War Reporters

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**Female war reporters from belligerent and neutral countries were present in the major war theatres in Europe and the Middle East throughout 1914 to 1918. While admission of journalists to the war zones was severely restricted by the Allies and Central Powers, a considerable number of women managed to access the frontlines or their vicinities and to publish their eyewitness accounts and photographs in well-known newspapers and magazines. Still, studies of female war reporters are rare and women are conspicuously absent from the leading surveys of war correspondents. This article outlines the diversity of female war reporting during the First World War from a comparative and transnational perspective.**

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# Introduction

In February 1998, the *Irish Times* published an obituary of the [novelist](#) and [journalist](#) [Martha Gellhorn \(1908-1998\)](#) under the headline "First Female War Reporter Dies". Gellhorn had covered all major conflicts of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, from the Spanish Civil War to the Vietnam and Arab-Israeli wars.<sup>[1]</sup> The obituary implied that female [war reporting](#) only took off in the late 1930s. However, [women](#) had reported war as early as the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century – the American journalists [Jane Cazneau \(1807-1878\)](#), reporting on the Mexican-American conflict in 1846, and [Margaret Fuller \(1810-1850\)](#), covering the First Italian War of Independence during 1848-49, are cases in point.<sup>[2]</sup> Since then, the title "first woman war correspondent" has been given by journalists, newspaper editors, scholars and biographers to dozens of women.<sup>[3]</sup>

[Tim Luckhurst](#) has argued that the First World War "was reported from an almost exclusively male perspective" and that woman war reporters "were immensely rare exceptions".<sup>[4]</sup> This article sets out to challenge this view. During 1914-1918, a considerable number of women from belligerent and [neutral](#) countries gained access to the war theatres and published their accounts and [photographs](#) in newspapers and magazines. However, academic studies are scarce. Women are conspicuously absent from [Phillip Knightley's \(1929-2016\)](#) seminal account of war correspondents and from Martin Farrar's study of war reporters on the [Western Front](#).<sup>[5]</sup> Likewise, histories of women journalists largely ignore female war reporters during 1914-1918 or mention them only in passing.<sup>[6]</sup> A recent study of Americans in wartime Europe has chapters on women and war reporters, but does not focus on *female* war reporters.<sup>[7]</sup> The few studies that do exist tend to focus on American war journalists.<sup>[8]</sup> As a result, we know much less about women from other nations. An obstacle to any comparative study is language skills – most sources on female war reporters from non-English-speaking countries are available only in their original languages.

How can we approach the study of female war reporting from a comparative and transnational perspective? In the digital age, a vast amount of biographical information is available online; many websites contain useful references to primary sources, biographies, and secondary literature. Likewise, the digitisation of historical newspapers allows us to retrieve the articles written by women with a few clicks through a full-text search. The majority of the women published their writings in newspapers and magazines under their own names, thus enabling us to trace their activities. Important digital newspaper archives offering full-text search are ANNO (Österreichische

Nationalbibliothek),<sup>[9]</sup> Gallica (Bibliothèque Nationale de France),<sup>[10]</sup> Chronicling America (Library of Congress),<sup>[11]</sup> the British Newspaper Archive (British Library),<sup>[12]</sup> Papers Past (National Library of New Zealand),<sup>[13]</sup> Trove (National Library of Australia),<sup>[14]</sup> Gale Historical Newspapers, UKPressOnline and ProQuest Historical Newspapers (British, American and international press).<sup>[15]</sup> This list is not exhaustive. Other important sources for biographical information are online publications such as local history projects, biographical dictionaries, biographies, and the secondary literature. Many women published war books based on their press articles or memoirs. Once a source difficult to access, because personal stories published during the war soon went out of print, many of these accounts are now available online (e.g. Internet Archive, HathiTrust). Some women also left private papers or collections of their photographic work, e.g. Alice Schalek (1874-1956), Noëlle Roger (1874-1953), Peggy Hull (1889-1967), Mary Boyle O'Reilly (1873-1939), Helen Johns Kirtland (1890-1979), and Alice Rohe (1876-1957).

This article outlines how women from various European countries, the British Dominions and the [United States](#) managed to access the frontlines or their vicinities and to report from different war theatres in Europe and [the Middle East](#) (so far, no female war journalists reporting from the Asian, [Pacific](#) or African [war theatres](#) could be identified). It sketches out their professional biographies and outlines the manifold roles they assumed during the war. It argues that the first [total war](#) was not exclusively told from a [male point of view](#), but that women journalists provided an alternative, multifaceted female perspective on the war. This article is not exhaustive in terms of individuals, nationalities, war theatres, or publications, but seeks to point out the diversity of female war reporting during 1914 to 1918.

## Typology of Female War Reporters

According to the *International Encyclopedia of Communication*, "war correspondents provide first-hand accounts of military conflict for dissemination to the public."<sup>[16]</sup> However, as Kevin Williams has pointed out, "who counts as a war correspondent is far from straightforward", as many different types of reporters were involved in the war's coverage. While some were present on the battlefields, others were not able to get near the scenes of fighting but still reported on the war actions.<sup>[17]</sup> Professional journalists accredited by major newspapers were joined by casual writers and freelance reporters with little experience of war reporting and weak links with news organisations. Moreover, a significant number of novelists went to report war and whose writing substantially shaped the way in which war was written about.<sup>[18]</sup> This holds particularly true of women war reporters of the First World War, the majority of whom had a literary background. Likewise, "war correspondent" was not yet a defined profession. Freelance journalists whose stories touched upon the war were often labelled "war correspondents" by newspapers in order to promote their articles.<sup>[19]</sup> Carolyn Edy wrote with regard to the United States:

The majority of articles billed as women's war correspondence throughout World War I

were travelogues and personal essays that rarely mentioned military operations... While many authors of these works did not fit the military's definition of a war correspondent, they each wrote articles for publications which billed them as "woman war correspondent" ...<sup>[20]</sup>

During the First World War, few women were accredited by the military. They reported war news from wherever they lived, worked and travelled. Some were allowed to visit the frontlines with an official permit. Others stayed away from the actual war scenes, but still witnessed the fighting. Nurses in field hospitals wrote about their experiences. Still others were focusing on the home front and the war's impact on civilians. War news by women was not only published in the press, but could also take the form of travelogues, (photo) essays or autobiographic books. While Dorothy and Carl Schneider distinguish between "amateur and chance observers" and "qualified women journalists",<sup>[21]</sup> thus suggesting that one type was more qualified to write about the war than the other, this article proposes six types of women war reporters. The typology focuses less on the formal qualification of the women as journalists than on the environments and conditions they were working in, and it will be illustrated by means of six biographical case studies.

### War Correspondents Accredited by the Military – Alice Schalek

Austria-Hungary was unique in offering official accreditation to female war reporters. During the war, seven women were accredited alongside 271 male journalists by the War Press Office (*Kriegspressequartier*), the central propaganda organisation of the military forces.<sup>[22]</sup> Most prominent among them was the internationally acclaimed journalist, travel writer, photographer and lecturer Alice Schalek.<sup>[23]</sup> Born into a liberal and wealthy Jewish family in Vienna, Schalek had published her first novels in the early 1900s and travelled extensively prior to the war, visiting places such as North Africa, India, Japan, Australia, Samoa, and the United States. From 1903 until 1935, she published her travelogues in the feature pages of the prestigious Viennese daily *Neue Freie Presse*. The outbreak of war threatened to interrupt her career, as international travelling had become impossible. Hoping to be able to continue her journalistic work, and with the help of personal connections, Schalek applied to the War Press Office and was accredited in July 1915. In the following two years she travelled to the Italian front, to Galicia and Serbia, where she interviewed soldiers and officers and took photographs. She published dozens of war reports in the *Neue Freie Presse* as well as photo stories in the German mass-circulation weekly *Berliner Illustrirte Zeitung*. Moreover, she wrote two books based on her war articles (*Tirol in Waffen, Am Isonzo*)<sup>[24]</sup> and drew a total audience of 40,000 to her illustrated war lectures.<sup>[25]</sup>

While in South Tyrol in 1915, Schalek visited the frontline together with a group of war correspondents and staff from the War Press Office, but it is doubtful that she witnessed any real fighting. However, while on the Isonzo River in the spring and summer of 1916, she experienced real shelling and witnessed the suffering of the soldiers. She was allowed to move around free of control and reached the forward positions of a hard-fought section of the front. Unlike many of her male

colleagues in the War Press Office, Schalek actually visited the war zones she was writing about, taking personal risks and exposing herself to shooting and shelling. While her initial war reports had depicted the war as a great and harmless adventure, her experience on the Isonzo led her to report much more critically. She portrayed the war's destructive impact on soldiers, civilians, and [landscape](#) in the battle zones and exposed the horrors of [modern warfare](#). The War Press Office disapproved of her honest and critical reporting, which had the potential to demoralise the public, and dismissed her in September 1917. Still, during the war Schalek was a popular public figure. She was praised for her writings, photographs and lectures, although she was also confronted with hostile misogynistic criticism. In February 1917 she was awarded a medal for bravery by the Viennese government.<sup>[26]</sup> In sharp contrast to her popularity in Austria during and after the First World War, she fell into oblivion after her escape from Nazi persecution to the United States in 1939.

Schalek's most ferocious critic was the influential Austrian writer, journalist and satirist [Karl Kraus](#) (1874-1936). With the creation of the character "Die Schalek" ("The Schalek Woman") he made her a negative monument in his famous war drama [Die letzten Tage der Menschheit](#) ("The Last Days of Mankind", written 1915-1922). Moreover, from May 1916 onwards he poured scorn on her in his journal [Die Fackel](#) ("The Torch"), calling her the worst example of a warmongering journalist with a naive and feminist lust for sensationalism. The central part of the play is a harsh critique of the mass media and its role in prolonging the war by agitating and manipulating public opinion. Schalek appears under her own name and in as many as eleven scenes. Kraus' scathing critique dominated Schalek's historical reputation for decades.<sup>[27]</sup>

### **War Correspondents Sent Out by Newspapers – Sofia Casanova**

Many women journalists were sent out by their newspapers to cover the conflict. They did not receive official military accreditation, but were nevertheless granted access to areas near the frontline and reported on the fighting and its impact on soldiers and civilians. A prominent case was [Sofia Casanova](#) (1861-1958), who was commissioned by the Madrid quality paper [ABC](#) to cover the [Eastern Front](#). Casanova was a highly acclaimed Galician-Spanish expatriate novelist, [poet](#), playwright, travel writer, journalist and social campaigner, who published regularly in [Spain](#) despite living in [Poland](#) after her marriage to a Polish philosopher. In 1915 she was invited by [ABC](#) to become the paper's Eastern European correspondent, a position she held until 1936. [ABC](#) was at that time the most widely read daily in neutral Spain, with a conservative and pro-German stance, and Casanova was one of a number of star columnists in [ABC](#). During the war, she posted her articles from all over Poland and, after her family's evacuation during the invasion of Warsaw in 1915, from Minsk, Moscow and Saint Petersburg. In Saint Petersburg she experienced first-hand the horrors of the [Russian Revolution](#). Casanova published more than 220 articles in [ABC](#) that chronicled the war on the Eastern Front and sought to publicise Poland's predicament and to raise awareness and sympathy for it in Spain, which, as a neutral country, had little interest in this part of Europe. As a committed [pacifist](#), she sharply criticised the destruction and injustice resulting from war.<sup>[28]</sup> Casanova gathered her wartime press articles in three books.<sup>[29]</sup>

## Nurses Reporting War – Noëlle Roger

A large body of war news was produced by nurses working in hospitals and field ambulances. To a significant number of women, nursing was the closest to a soldier's war experience they could get, as Christine Hallett wrote:

...nurses were the most immediate witnesses to the consequences of industrial warfare. Standing between the front lines and the "home front", and dealing daily with the worst injuries produced by war, they were ideally placed to witness the results of early-twentieth-century modes of combat.<sup>[30]</sup>

Many nurses published their experiences in newspapers and books. The focus of their reporting was usually on the care of their patients and the heroism and the desire of the wounded soldiers to return to the battlefield.<sup>[31]</sup> A famous example was the Swiss novelist, playwright, travel writer and journalist Noëlle Roger, who was widely known in francophone [Switzerland](#) and [France](#). Roger, trained as a nurse in London prior to her literary career, published serial novels and articles in the feature pages and on the front pages of the *Journal de Genève* from the beginning of the 1900s until the 1940s.<sup>[32]</sup> Her articles also appeared in the *Gazette de Lausanne* and in [French newspapers](#) and magazines, and she wrote numerous novels and travelogues. During the war, Roger worked as a nurse in a French hospital near Lyon. In the spring and summer of 1915 she published a series of articles in the *Journal de Genève* and the renowned periodical *Semaine littéraire* under the title *Les Carnets d'une Infirmière*. They were gathered and published as a highly acclaimed book in the same year.<sup>[33]</sup> Roger claimed to publish the memoirs of an anonymous nurse who had recently died but it is not clear whether it was the outcome of her own observations or her imagination.<sup>[34]</sup> The six reports evoke the noble suffering of the soldiers and praise the nurses' skill and empathy in easing their suffering. They recount the soldiers' battles, the moments they were wounded, the treatment they received for their injuries, but also the family lives the soldiers had left behind for the war. French newspapers reprinted excerpts from the reports, adding laudatory comments, and they became widely known in France. The *Revue des deux mondes* called *Les Carnets* Roger's "best book" which, despite describing all the pain and suffering, conveyed "a parfum of heroism".<sup>[35]</sup> Roger also received voluminous correspondence about *Les Carnets*.<sup>[36]</sup>

Roger published several other war writings that bear witness to her continued [humanitarian](#) engagement as a citizen of [neutral Switzerland](#) and her empathy towards the civilian victims of the war.<sup>[37]</sup> Most of these texts were published in the *Journal de Genève*, and *Revue des deux mondes* before appearing as books. The two-volume *Le Passage des Évacués à travers la Suisse*<sup>[38]</sup> recounts the transit through Switzerland of [Belgian war refugees](#) and civil internees evacuated from territory occupied by the Germans; *Le Train des Grands Blessés*<sup>[39]</sup> describes the exchange of [French and German wounded soldiers on neutral Swiss territory](#); *Soldats Internés en Suisse*<sup>[40]</sup> depicts the internment of German soldiers in Switzerland; and *Le Cortège des Victimes*<sup>[41]</sup> relates

the repatriation of German refugees from 1914 to 1916. After visiting the devastated combat zones of Verdun in 1917, Roger published several journal articles, which were re-published in 1919 under the title *Terres Dévastées et Cités Mortes*.<sup>[42]</sup> A review stated: "The author is a newspaper woman who seems to have had some exceptionally favorable opportunities to make early visits to the destroyed regions."<sup>[43]</sup>

### Reporting the Home Front – Matilde Serao

Apart from covering the battlefield and the war's impact on civilians near the frontlines, female war reporters were particularly interested in the role of women on the home front. Due to the absence of men, women were driven to broaden their activities at home and take over jobs in the [war economy](#). In Italy, the well-known writer and journalist Matilde Serao (1856-1927) stands out as a chronicler of the war's impact on them. Born of a [Greek](#) mother and a Neapolitan father, Serao was brought up in Naples and became a professional [journalist](#) and [writer](#). She founded and edited her own newspaper, *Il Giorno*, for which she wrote a daily column.<sup>[44]</sup> During the war, Serao took a neutral and pacifist stance; her journalism focussed on the contribution of [Italian women](#) to the war on the home front and the war's impact on women. Her articles, published between May 1915 and March 1916 in *Il Giorno*, were gathered in 1916 in *Parla una donna*. The book is dedicated to her three sons serving at the front and addressed to Italy's women ("*mie sorelle di pena*" – "my sisters in sorrow"). It offers them comfort by constantly celebrating the feminine virtues of mothers, brides and sisters who sacrificed themselves silently. It pays tribute to the heroism of the Italian women who replaced men in all fields of the economy and whose lives were fundamentally transformed by the war.<sup>[45]</sup> To give one example, the chapter "Contadine" is dedicated to the country women, recounting how they constantly added male [labour](#) to their already heavy daily burden of [childcare](#), housework and animal care, because their husbands, sons and fathers had departed for the war: "And thus the Italian country women in summer and autumn have doubled, tripled their daily work: the heaviest, the hardest, the most extenuating work of men... Who will sing your pure and humble glories, Italian country women?"<sup>[46]</sup> Serao's journalism is important not only because of its focus on the impact of the war on women, but also because she addressed it specifically to a female, middle-class audience that shared her feelings and observations.<sup>[47]</sup>

### Entering the War Zone in Disguise – Mary Boyle O'Reilly

On the Western Front, the Allies sought to prevent war correspondents, and in particular female journalists, from accessing the fighting areas. Some women, however, managed to enter the war zones in disguise. Thus, the [American journalist](#), writer and social activist Mary Boyle O'Reilly passed through German lines in Belgium disguised as a peasant [refugee](#), while Dorothy Lawrence (section 2.6) accessed the frontlines in male disguise.

O'Reilly, born in Massachusetts as the daughter of the famous [Irish nationalist](#), poet and journalist

John Boyle O'Reilly (1844-1890), became a foreign correspondent of the *Newspaper Enterprise Association* in 1913 and, after assignments to Mexico and [Russia](#), was placed in charge of its London office. When war broke out, O'Reilly was sent to Belgium to write about the human side of the war. She entered occupied Louvain disguised as a peasant refugee and was the first American journalist to witness the city's burning by the Germans – two days ahead of her male colleagues. Still in disguise, she walked around Belgium, passing through German lines and writing her notes on her white blouse. Eventually, she and three male colleagues were arrested and imprisoned by the Germans for [spying](#), but soon released to [Holland](#). While the three men went back to London, O'Reilly returned to Belgium, again disguised.<sup>[48]</sup> Her report was introduced with the following statement:

Mary Boyle O'Reilly, after having been deported from Belgium by the Germans because she was a newspaper woman, managed cleverly to get back inside their lines from Holland by means of a German consul's pass. As a newspaper woman she would have been stopped in a mile, so she became a simple Belgian refugee, and she walked laboriously and footsore for days through the Prussian army. It was indeed a pilgrimage of horror!<sup>[49]</sup>

After five weeks in Belgium, O'Reilly returned to London; in the following months and years she travelled to France, and via [Norway](#) and [Sweden](#) to Russia (Saint Petersburg, Moscow), [Lithuania](#) and Poland (Warsaw), reporting the war on the Eastern Front.<sup>[50]</sup> During her travels in Europe, O'Reilly's war reports appeared in various American newspapers such as the *Boston Daily Advertiser*, *Boston Daily Globe*, *Boston Pilot*, *Boston Herald*, *Seattle Star* and *The Day Book*. In February 1917 she returned to the United States on the last ship home before the American entry into the war. Subsequently she continued to publish and lecture about the war and her experiences.<sup>[51]</sup>

### **A Failed Career – Dorothy Lawrence**

So far, this typology has presented women who succeeded in one way or another as war correspondents. However, at least one woman failed in her attempt to become a freelance war reporter. In 1915 Dorothy Lawrence (ca. 1896-1964), a nineteen-year-old English girl, secretly posed as a male soldier in order to reach the Western Front but was discovered, ordered home and forbidden to publish about her adventure.

Lawrence, who had contributed some light entertainment stories to the *Pall Mall Magazine* and the London *Times* prior to 1914 (without her own by-line, however), desperately wanted to make her name as a war correspondent, but was ridiculed and rejected by [Fleet Street](#) newspapers and the British War Office. Longing for a scoop, in the summer of 1915 she travelled to France, hoping to enter the war zone in the French sector as a freelance war correspondent, but was arrested by French police and ordered to leave. Hence, she concluded that only disguised as a man could she reach the front. With the help of British soldiers she acquired a khaki uniform and forged identity



papers and entered the British sector. In Albert on the Somme she found work with a specialist mine-laying company. However, due to poor health and for fear of being identified as a woman, Lawrence presented herself after ten days to the commanding sergeant and was arrested. After interrogations by military authorities in France, who suspected her of being a spy, Lawrence was ordered to sign an affidavit prohibiting her to sell her story to the press. Then she was sent back to London, where she faced homelessness, unemployment, and illness. Lawrence wrote a war book, but had to scrap the first draft on the instructions of the War Office. In 1919, when the war was over, she finally published her book, but it was heavily censored by the War Office, received mediocre reviews in British papers<sup>[52]</sup> and did not become a commercial success. With no income and no credibility as a journalist, and with her mental health deteriorating, Lawrence was declared insane in 1925 and admitted to a psychiatric institution where she remained until her death in 1964.<sup>[53]</sup> Although Lawrence never achieved the journalistic success she had hoped for, she demonstrated what women were capable of doing – much to the embarrassment of the War Office.<sup>[54]</sup> In her book she wrote enthusiastically:

I'll see what an ordinary English girl, without credentials or money, can accomplish. If war-correspondents cannot get out there, I'll see whether I cannot go one better than these big men with their cars, credentials, and money. I'll see what I can manage as a war correspondent!<sup>[55]</sup>

Yet, Lawrence failed in building a journalistic career despite her adventures on the Western Front. When we compare her case with that of Schalek, Casanova, Roger, Seroa and O'Reilly, it becomes apparent that in order to become a successful war reporter it was essential for women to have an established journalistic or literary career and a high social standing already prior to the war. Unlike the British press, however, American papers admired Lawrence's adventures. The *Yorkville Enquirer* called her book

one of the oddest documents to come out of the war and the story it reveals has lifted the diminutive figure of Miss Lawrence, an English newspaper woman, to the proportions of a national hero... For a British woman to enter the combatant ranks of the British army is a thing until now unheard of.<sup>[56]</sup>

## War Theatres

### The Allies on the Western Front

Access to the war theatres and reporting conditions for women differed considerably. The most restrictive regime was that set up by the Allies on the Western Front. On the outbreak of war, French and British military authorities banned all correspondents from the frontlines. After heavy complaints by journalists and the public, in the spring of 1915 the Allies introduced a system of accredited war correspondents working under close military supervision.<sup>[57]</sup> Despite the limitations imposed on journalists in the fighting zone, a number of reporters, including women, managed to access the

frontlines during the early stages of the war and publish their eyewitness accounts.<sup>[58]</sup> In August 1914, the English writer, poet, playwright and criminologist F. Tennyson Jesse (1888-1958) was sent by the *Daily Mail* to Belgium to report on the German invasion. She travelled to Ghent, Termonde, to the frontline and to Antwerp, but was forced out of the city by the [German occupation](#). She published a series of six articles for the *Daily Mail* between 7 September and 9 October 1914. Visits to France followed, from where she reported about [Red Cross](#) hospitals. Later, the British Ministry of Information asked her to write about the Women's Army, that is, organisations such as the Women's Auxiliary Army Corps (WAAC) or Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD).<sup>[59]</sup> She published her observations in the *Daily Mail* in December 1915 and in the book *The Sword of Deborah* in 1919.<sup>[60]</sup> Stories about her experiences as a woman war reporter also appeared in *Collier's Weekly*, *Pall Mall Gazette*, and *Vogue*.<sup>[61]</sup> The Australian novelist and poet Louise Mack (1870-1935) also reported for British newspapers (*The Daily Mail*, *Evening News*, *The Sphere*) on the German invasion of Belgium. She travelled through German lines and was in Brussels and Antwerp during the German occupation. According to her own account, she left Antwerp on a false passport and disguised as a peasant (section 2.5).<sup>[62]</sup> Other women served as nurses on the Western Front and published their war experiences in press articles and books (section 2.3). Olive Dent (1884-1930), a British VAD nurse in a military hospital in Rouen in France during 1915 to 1917, is a case in point. She wrote articles for the *Daily Mail*, *The Lady*, *The War Illustrated*, *Yorkshire Evening Post*, and *Evening News*, and in 1917 published a book about her experiences.<sup>[63]</sup>

When the first American troops landed in France in the summer of 1917, the American military not only imposed a system of strict control and censorship over the war correspondents,<sup>[64]</sup> but also refused to offer accreditation to woman. It was only in November 1918, when the war in Europe had ended, that Peggy Hull was officially credentialed as a war correspondent – the only American woman to achieve this status. Subsequently, she continued to report on the Russian Revolution and [American troops in Siberia](#). In 1917 she had been denied accreditation and went to France on her own expenses, publishing her accounts in the Paris army edition of the *Chicago Tribune*, in the *El Paso Morning Times*, and for the *Newspaper Enterprise Association*.<sup>[65]</sup> As Edy wrote, no journalist could travel within or near the combat zones without official permission or accreditation by the US military. Hence, the American military forces granted news-gathering facilities and accommodation to a large number of unaccredited war correspondents. They were allowed greater freedom to work and travel by avoiding censors and military officials. Military records reveal that up to seventeen women were given the status of visiting war correspondent with the American forces.<sup>[66]</sup> Other American women worked from assignments to the Red Cross or similar voluntary organisations, such as Rheta Childe Dorr (1866-1948),<sup>[67]</sup> Sophie Treadwell (1885-1970)<sup>[68]</sup> and Mary Boyle O'Reilly (section 2.5).<sup>[69]</sup> The American novelist and trained nurse Mary Roberts Rinehart (1876-1958) was attached to the Belgian Red Cross and visited the Belgian and French sectors as well as British lines on the Western Front in 1915. She was able to see trenches, shelled towns and [no man's land](#). Her reports appeared in the *Saturday Evening Post*, *Boston Globe* and *The Sphere* and

were gathered in her book *Kings, Queens and Pawns*.<sup>[70]</sup>

## The Allies on the Eastern Front

In contrast to the Western Front, the Allies on the Eastern Front in Russia and Serbia tolerated women journalists from neutral and allied nations, yet little is known about their working conditions, or the attitude of the military towards them. Apart from Sofía Casanova from neutral Spain, who reported from Poland and Russia throughout the war (section 2.2), several [Canadian](#) and American women covered the Eastern Front, and in particular the Russian Revolution of February 1917 and the Bolshevik Revolution of November 1917. Among them were the Canadian journalist [Florence Macleod Harper \(1886-1946\)](#) of *Leslie's Weekly*, who worked as a volunteer nurse in an American field hospital in Russia and published three books;<sup>[71]</sup> the Americans Rheta Childe Dorr of the *New York Evening Mail* (section 3.1), [Bessie Beatty \(1886-1947\)](#)<sup>[72]</sup> of the *San Francisco Bulletin*, [Louise Bryant \(1885-1936\)](#)<sup>[73]</sup> of the *Bell Syndicate*, and [Madeleine Zabriskie Doty \(1877-1963\)](#),<sup>[74]</sup> writing for the *New York Tribune*, among others. They witnessed the horrors of the revolutions and their impact on civilians, but also chronicled the daily wartime life of the Russian people. Moreover, they were particularly interested in the work of the [Russian women soldiers](#) in the Women's Battalion of Death and their leader, [Maria Bochkareva \(1889-1920\)](#), the first Russian woman to command a military unit. In July 1917 the journalists accompanied the battalion to the front, living for one week with the women and witnessing them going into battle.<sup>[75]</sup>

On the Eastern Front in Serbia, the lecturer, religious writer and Catholic suffragist [Annie Christitch \(1885-1977\)](#) reported for British papers during 1915 to 1918. Christitch, a Serbian national with an Irish mother, who had been educated and was mainly living in the United Kingdom, was sent to Serbia as a staff correspondent of the *Daily Express*. In Valjevo she established a relief centre and was in charge of eight hospitals during the [occupation of Serbia](#) by German and Austrian forces. Due to her Serbian nationality, she was allowed to stay in Serbia when all foreigners were expelled. Her articles on the plight of the Serbian war victims appeared in the *Daily Express* and other British publications and were reprinted in newspapers in [Australia](#), [New Zealand](#) and [China](#). Moreover, the British and foreign press reported extensively about her relief work in Serbia.<sup>[76]</sup>

## The Allies on the Italian Front

On the Italian front, the Italian High Command accredited several Italian women, among them the journalist and novelist [Flavia Steno \(1877-1946\)](#); the writer, founder and editor of the monthly *La Madre Italiana*, [Stefania Türr \(1885-1940\)](#); the women's activist and editor of the magazine *La Donna*, [Ester Danesi Traversari \(1878-1965\)](#); the novelist, poet, playwright and theatre artist [Annie Vivanti \(1868-1942\)](#); and the writer, translator, school teacher and university professor of German language and literature, [Barbara Allason \(1877-1968\)](#). Steno was permitted to visit military hospitals on the Mount Krn as close as four kilometres to the frontline and published her accounts in *Il Secolo*

XIX.<sup>[77]</sup> Barbara Allason, publishing in *La Donna*, *La Lettura*, and *Gazzetta del Popolo*, visited the Italian defence lines, where she met and befriended the Anglo-Italian journalist Annie Vivanti, a war correspondent for several British publications (e.g. *The Times*, *Westminster Gazette*, *The Nineteenth Century and After*). Both women were granted access to advanced Italian border posts, the headquarters of the Italian High Command in Udine, and to field hospitals.<sup>[78]</sup> Stefania Türr visited large sections of the Italian front including the trenches. She published her observations of the frontlines, the surrounding areas devastated by the conflict, and the vast organisation of military supplies in *La Madre Italiana* and in her book *Alle trincee d'Italia*. It contained numerous photographs of soldiers and the war landscape, similar to the books of Alice Schalek (section 2.1).<sup>[79]</sup>

The Italian High Command also granted frontline access to women from neutral and Allied countries. In the summer of 1915, the suffragist, lawyer and socialist reformer Inez Milholland (1886-1916), writing for the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, *Washington Post*, *New York Tribune*, *McClure's* and *Harper's*, took part in a guided tour of correspondents to the Italian front. However, the Italian authorities disliked her anti-war articles and at the end of September 1915 she was ordered to leave the country. *The New York Times* reported that the Italian government thought it "not politic to have war presented from a pacifist point of view".<sup>[80]</sup> In 1914, Alice Rohe, a journalist, photographer and feminist, became the first female overseas bureau chief for United Press in Rome, a post she held until 1919. Unlike many of her foreign colleagues who waited for Italians to tell them what was happening, Rohe went into the countryside to gather news directly. She wrote stories, illustrated with her own photographs, about the war's impact on civilians for the *New York World*, *Denver Times*, *Washington Post*, *Leslie's Weekly* and *National Geographic Magazine*.<sup>[81]</sup> Finally, Helen Johns Kirtland, a photojournalist for *Leslie's Weekly*, was allowed by the Italian High Command to the frontline after the retreat at Caporetto in 1917, where 275,000 Italian troops had been captured. In the autumn of 1918, when the Austro-Hungarian and the Italian armies again confronted each other, Kirtland was granted special access to the front and allowed to photograph Italian soldiers in the trenches.<sup>[82]</sup>

## The Central Powers

Among the Central Powers, working conditions for female war reporters also varied. On the outbreak of war, the Austro-Hungarian military sought to keep all war correspondents away from the frontlines. A short time afterwards, however, the War Press Office announced that correspondents from Austria-Hungary, Germany and neutral countries would be accredited, and it began to organise guided tours to the frontlines, though not to the actual combat zones.<sup>[83]</sup> Austria-Hungary was also rather generous in granting accreditation to female journalists, among them Alice Schalek (section 2.1), Hede von Trapp (1877-1947)<sup>[84]</sup> and Maria Magda Rumbold (1868-?)<sup>[85]</sup> from Austria, and Margit Vészi (1885-1961)<sup>[86]</sup> and Olga Fehér (1881-1947)<sup>[87]</sup> from Hungary. They were allowed, often as part of a larger group of accredited war correspondents and under the guidance of officers of

the War Press Office, to visit sections of the front in the Alps, Galicia, and Serbia (section 2.1).<sup>[88]</sup>

In contrast, little is known about German women reporters. At the beginning of the war, the German Empire imposed a severe and effective system of military censorship; no war reporter was allowed to visit the front.<sup>[89]</sup> However, the novelist and journalist Thea von Puttkamer (1882-1952), based in Constantinople and a member of the German ambulance corps in Turkey, was attached to the Turkish forces and published her articles in German, Hungarian and Turkish newspapers (*Frankfurter Zeitung*, *Norddeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Die Woche*, *Pester Lloyd*, *Vakit*).<sup>[90]</sup> Several articles also appeared in the German-American paper *Tägliche Cincinnatier Volksblatt*, among them a report on the Gallipoli campaign. Von Puttkamer recounted her visit to the foremost frontline positions of the Central Powers and to the enemy lines evacuated by the defeated British and Australian forces and praised the heroism of the Ottoman soldiers.<sup>[91]</sup> In August 1917, the South Carolina *Union Times* reported that von Puttkamer, "attached to the Turkish forces operating in Mesopotamia, is the only woman war correspondent officially recognized by the German government".<sup>[92]</sup> Yet there is no mention of her in the official (if incomplete) German list of war correspondents.<sup>[93]</sup> A curious case was the novelist and journalist Friedel Merzenich (1879-1956) who, from the spring of 1915 until October 1918, worked in the editorial office of the *Liller Kriegszeitung*, a German soldiers' journal published in northern France.<sup>[94]</sup> Apart from her editorial work, Merzenich also published articles in the *Liller Kriegszeitung* and other German war journals, in the *Berliner Tageblatt*, *Magdeburger Zeitung*, *Illustrierte Zeitung* and *Die Woche*. In 1918, a large number of her articles for the *Liller Kriegszeitung* were published as a book.<sup>[95]</sup>

The Central Powers also granted women from neutral countries permission to visit Germany and Austria-Hungary. After attending the Women's Peace Congress in The Hague in 1915, the American lawyer, women's activist and pacifist Madeleine Zabriskie Doty travelled through Germany, reporting for the *New York Tribune*, the *Chicago Tribune* and *Good Housekeeping*.<sup>[96]</sup> She observed how life on the German home front was affected by the war, especially in Berlin and Hamburg. In her book *Short Rations* she wrote: "There are but two topics of conversation – war and food shortage... Life has become mere existence – a prison existence. Mind and bodies are shrinking from a shortage of intellectual and physical nourishment."<sup>[97]</sup> In 1916, the Swedish author and journalist Annie Åkerhielm (1869-1956), a campaigner against women's suffrage and democracy and later an admirer of Adolf Hitler (1889-1945) and Nazism, was invited to Berlin together with her husband Baron Dan Åkerhielm (1863-1931), a newspaper man. Åkerhielm, whose war journalism appeared in *Nya Dagligt Allehanda* and *Stockholm Dagblatt*, published a book about her war journey entitled *Från Berlin till Brüssel*.<sup>[98]</sup> Moreover, she published a long article about conditions in wartime Germany in the Leipzig *Illustrierte Zeitung*. It depicted Berlin as calm and focussed on the war, while the social and cultural life was continuing as in peacetime. A special praise was given to Germany's allegedly modest and socially committed upper-class women.<sup>[99]</sup>

The renowned Spanish journalist, novelist and women's rights activist Carmen de Burgos y Segui (1867-1932) also travelled through Germany in August 1914, publishing her war essays under the pseudonym "Colombine" in *El Heraldo de Madrid*; later they were gathered in her book *Mis viajes por Europa*.<sup>[100]</sup> In Austria-Hungary, the famous American author and world traveller Nellie Bly (1864-1922) was accredited by the War Press Office together with other foreign (male) war correspondents. In the autumn of 1914 she spent several weeks on the Eastern Front in Poland, Galicia and Serbia, publishing her accounts in various American papers. Between December 1914 and February 1915 twenty-one articles appeared in the *New York Evening Journal* under the headline "Nellie Bly on the Firing Line". Bly also published a report in *Die Zeit*. This, however, was severely cut by the censor, and thereafter Bly refused to write further articles for the German paper.<sup>[101]</sup> Her articles painted a grim picture of the cruelty of modern warfare; one article described scenes witnessed in a Red Cross hospital and concluded:

Travel the roads from the scene of battle; search the trains; wounded, frozen, starved, thousands are dying in agonizing torture – not hundreds, but thousands. And as they die thousands are being rushed into their pest-filled trenches to be slaughtered in the same way.<sup>[102]</sup>

## A Female Perspective on the War?

As Milly Buonanno has pointed out, the issue of whether female war reporting differs from its male counterpart and whether women war reporters "are willing and able to create their own gender-based agenda and express their own point of view" is controversial and has barely been studied.<sup>[103]</sup> Women's war reporting provided a wide variety of perspectives on the war, ranging from military combat, [weaponry](#), troops and military strategy to the side effects of warfare, e.g. women's work in the munitions factories; women taking over the work of conscripted men in factories, agriculture, and in the home; the impact of the war on civilians; the work of the Red Cross; the care and feeding of soldiers; or the personal experiences of women in an environment dominated by men.<sup>[104]</sup> Many newspapers and magazines explicitly sent out their female journalists to write about the war from a female perspective, called the "woman's angle". Rheta Childe Dorr and Gertrude Atherton (1857-1948)<sup>[105]</sup> are cases in point. Atherton, a writer and feminist who spent three months in France in 1916, published a series of reports in *The New York Times* and *The Delineator* on the war work of French and American [women in France](#), e.g. caring for refugees and nursing of soldiers and civilians. The purpose of reports from the woman's perspective for the newspaper publishers as well as for the women journalists was often commercial; it attracted more female readers and offered new possibilities for advertising.<sup>[106]</sup> George Lorimer (1867-1937), the editor of the *Saturday Evening Post* who sent out four women to cover the war in Europe, stated in 1915:

The big story of the war is never at the front... It is in the hospitals and in the homes... War is largely a woman's affair and women, I think, best understand the little things that go to make up the big story.<sup>[107]</sup>

However, many female journalists resented their war writing being reduced to the "woman's angle" as they felt degraded to reporting the war's periphery.<sup>[108]</sup> When women "dared" to report about men's warfare, they were often criticised and ridiculed. Peggy Hull, who in 1917 successfully published a series of articles in the Paris edition of the *Chicago Tribune*, met with fierce hostility by her male colleagues, who resented her presence near the front and her popularity with the troops.<sup>[109]</sup> Alice Schalek, who initially published glorifying and highly controversial accounts of the war, was challenged by male journalists and military figures about her qualifications for writing about war.<sup>[110]</sup> In the *Arbeiter-Zeitung* of 26 November 1915 she rebutted the criticism that women could not be war correspondents because they knew too little about the business of warfare and the psyche of the male warrior, arguing that being a woman, and writing from a female perspective, provided the best qualifications for a war reporter:

I think it is not un-womanly, indeed it is the right of women, to trace the inner metamorphoses in the psyche of their brothers, fathers, husbands, and sons. For many months during their fighting actions they have excluded every thought of their beloved ones, thus totally transforming their inner life. The reporting of male war reporters usually excludes this aspect of the war. I myself, however, wish to bring to the attention of newspaper readers the fact that our own army as well as that of the enemy, consists of human beings... I am trying to write about the souls of the soldiers.<sup>[111]</sup>

## Conclusion

During 1914 to 1918, women journalists reported from all major war theatres in Europe and the Middle East. However, whether they were admitted to the war zones as accredited war correspondents, on more informal assignments by their newspapers, or were working as nurses, depended on the policies of the Allies and the Central Powers. As diverse as the opportunities for women to access the war zones was also their reporting. Depending on their location, access to the frontlines, assignments by their newspapers, and professional and personal interests, women were focusing on military combat, the war's impact on soldiers and civilians, relief work, or the home front. Taking personal risks, they visited the war zones under shelling and shooting. They published their eyewitness accounts in well-known newspapers and magazines, generally under their own names.

Female war reporters not only published their accounts in newspapers of their country of origin, but also in the press of foreign countries, thus adding a transnational dimension to their work: Alice Schalek published in Austrian and German papers, Margit Vészi wrote for Hungarian, Austrian and German publications; Florence MacLeod Harper from Canada worked for the American magazine *Leslie's Weekly*, and Thea von Puttkamer published in the German, Hungarian, Turkish and German-American press. Moreover, women reporters communicated through a wide range of media such as quality and mass circulation papers, illustrated magazines, photographs, and books. Frequently they also lectured about the war after returning home (Alice Schalek, Louise Mack, Mary Boyle O'Reilly). In this way, they reached a vast and heterogeneous audience beyond social and

national borders.

Who were those women war reporters? With the exception of nineteen-year-old Dorothy Lawrence, they generally belonged to the higher social classes, were educated above the norm, were financially independent, and had established professional careers in journalism, literature, travel writing and photography. Often they were politically active as [suffragists](#), [pacifists](#) and social reformers. They belonged to all age groups ranging from early twenties to fifties and sixties. They often broke with the social conventions of their times, when women were expected to become housewives and raise children, and opened up hitherto male-dominated professions to women, such as travelling, lecturing, journalism, photography, and war reporting. Hence, the success or failure of female war reporters depended largely on their social background and pre-war professional standing; they were recruited because of their journalistic reputation and personal connections. After the war they continued to publish for their newspapers, often for several decades. In contrast, the case of Dorothy Lawrence shows that a newcomer to the field of journalism with no connections was likely to fail despite her war adventures.

Notably, women did not limit their war reporting to the "woman's angle". Even though entry for women to the fighting zones was often severely restricted, women were determined to cover all aspects of the war, from the fighting on the fronts, the suffering of the (wounded) soldiers, the destruction of cities, villages and landscapes to the war's impact on civilians, especially women and [children](#). Female war reporters covered the First World War from many different perspectives, thus complementing and widening the war images provided by their male counterparts.

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### **Citation**

Seul, Stephanie: Women War Reporters , 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/ie1418.11385](https://doi.org/10.15463/ie1418.11385).

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