

Women's Mobilisation for War (Germany)

By [Matthew Stibbe](#)

This article argues that the mobilisation of women in the German empire between 1914 and 1918 was almost wholly conditioned by male priorities and interests. In particular, the increase in the number of women employed in war-related industries represented a temporary *relocation* of female labour, not a permanent re-evaluation of women's place in the workforce. There is, in addition, little evidence of a 'self-mobilisation' of working-class women. Nonetheless, the bourgeois and Social Democratic women's movements were active in the construction of 'mobilisation myths' which are relevant to our understanding of the cultural history of the war and its aftermath.

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Introduction

In the last two-and-a-half decades, especially since the publication of the pioneering work of [Ute Daniel](#), the subject of women and mobilisation for war in Imperial [Germany](#) has been extensively researched.^[1] In more recent years, interest has moved from social history topics such as wages, productivity, factory conditions, birth rates, welfare provision and public health, to a focus on "war

cultures", including the representation and self-representation of women in wartime propaganda, the participation of women's organisations in the construction of patriotic discourses such as the "spirit of 1914", and the contours of women's subjective experiences, as revealed in literature and artwork or in private letters to soldier-relatives posted away from home. Finally, gender and women's history has contributed to broader debates about why the fighting was able to continue for so long. Particularly significant here is the influence of contemporary mentalities and belief systems on ways of imagining the nation (or empire). This, in turn, played a crucial part in the mobilisation and remobilisation of popular and institutional confidence in the just nature of the war and the prospects for final victory.^[2]

Organised Women's Movements in Germany and Mobilisation for War

For women workers there began that gravest endurance test which suddenly threw all theories about female productivity in the workplace overboard. Whereas previously women had been rejected, now they were in demand. To an ever increasing extent our industrial production, agriculture, business, trade and commerce, and with time even a great part of the education system and administration, lay in the hands of women.^[3]

These lines were written by [Adele Schreiber \(1872-1957\)](#), a leading figure in the German Social Democratic women's movement, and, during the Weimar Republic, an [SPD Reichstag](#) deputy, in an essay published in 1930. Her decision to remember the outbreak of war in 1914 in this way is interesting for two reasons. Firstly, like many other Social Democrats, she had been a strong supporter of her party's decision to vote for war credits in the *Reichstag* in August 1914. In other words, she took the "patriotic" line that this was a war for the defence of the fatherland, and not, as [Rosa Luxemburg \(1871-1919\)](#) and [Clara Zetkin \(1857-1933\)](#), representatives of the left in the SPD, had it, an imperialist war of aggression. Even so, as evidenced by her work for the *Bund für Mutterschutz* (League for Protection of Mothers), a progressive sex reform organisation led by the [pacifist](#) and radical feminist campaigner [Helene Stöcker \(1869-1943\)](#), Schreiber was deeply ambivalent about war per se. As the 1914/18 conflict continued, she became increasingly concerned about its effects on Germany, on women (especially mothers and [children](#)), and on the SPD as a united party.^[4]

Secondly, Schreiber's essay represents a certain view of the supposed "modernising effects" of wartime mobilisation, especially in the sphere of gender relations and paid employment, which has been challenged by recent research. In particular, as Ute Daniel has argued, the evidence for a mass "self-mobilisation" of women is rather thin.^[5] It is true that the ranks of both the bourgeois and Social Democratic women's movements provided tens of thousands of volunteers for the new National Women's Service (*Nationaler Frauendienst* or NFD) which offered coordinated support to much-harried welfare, school and community organisations.^[6] A small number of working-class women who had previously been employed in low paid work such as domestic service or cleaning

were able to earn more by switching to war industries, although the overall value of real wages decreased by about one quarter.^[7] Some educated women secured salaried positions in the burgeoning wartime bureaucracy, including in agencies monitoring food prices, rents, healthcare, labour recruitment and so forth. However, opportunities such as these were rare and few women had the time, freedom and resources to seek them out.

A bigger problem for many working-class women was that the war initially took away their jobs. This was a particular issue for those who worked in industries such as clothing, textiles, footwear and tobacco which relied heavily on imported (and now tightly rationed) [raw materials](#). Soldiers' wives received separation allowances but these were usually not sufficient to replace their husbands' pre-war wages. Many [urban](#) women found that they could no longer afford to rent their own homes and were forced to share with others or move in with relatives.^[8] In the countryside and small towns where food was more plentiful but money was losing its value due to wartime inflation, separation allowances combined with opportunities to grow one's own produce made paid work outside the home seem unattractive.^[9] In general, women with small children found home work more appealing than factory work. All of these factors militated against a mass self-mobilisation of women for war.

In fact, it was young men who were in the best position to "self-mobilise", as evidenced by the hundreds and thousands who volunteered for military service in the first months of the war. By January 1915, the number of recruits stood at 4,357,934, a more than fivefold increase in the size of the German army since August 1914; by the end of 1915 this figure had risen to 9 million.^[10] Serving alongside the soldiers were 92,000 female military [nurses](#), the "sick warrior's sisters", who made up around 40 percent of the medical personnel attached to the field and reserve armies.^[11] For the most part, however, deployment of men, not women, was the priority, particularly as the majority of German military and political leaders were still planning for a short campaign. Few could envisage mobilisation as a process in which women might actually take part. So why did members of the women's movement like Schreiber remember things differently?

One answer is the cultural importance attached to what became known as the "August experience" (*Augusterlebnis*), the supposed feeling of elation and joy with which ordinary Germans met the outbreak of war in August 1914. While historians have done much to question the extent of this war enthusiasm, there is no doubt that for some people, women as well as men, the "spirit of 1914" created a powerful sense of community and national belonging which was hard to let go, even after 1918.^[12] As Claudia Siebrecht has shown, it was above all the bourgeois wing of the German women's movement, the Federation of German Women's Associations (*Bund Deutscher Frauenvereine* or BDF), which built up a gender-specific role for women in 1914 as *Kulturträgerinnen*, guardians of German culture and spiritual values and defenders of the honour of German men accused by world opinion of [atrocities](#) in [Belgium](#) and northern [France](#).^[13]

This was an attempt to find a female "space" within the male-dominated system of war, [imperialism](#) and violence, rather than emancipation from it, but it was a discourse that nonetheless appealed to

some Social Democrat women too. [Henriette Fürth \(1861-1938\)](#), for instance, a moderate socialist active in the proletarian women's movement in Frankfurt am Main, wrote in 1917:

We abhor war now as we have done in the past...but we nevertheless give our sanction to the battle that has been forced upon us...and are prepared...to sacrifice all we possess, our body and soul, until the very last drop of blood has been spilt, so that ours will be a victory, a final victory bringing a peace in which Germany will bring to all the blessings of a civilisation and culture worthy of mankind.^[14]

Rhetoric such as this also built on earlier "mobilisation myths" which could be used to support progressive as well as conservative political agendas, for instance the legend surrounding German women's resistance to French occupation and foreign cultural domination during the anti-Napoleonic Wars of Liberation from 1813 to 1815.^[15]

Finally, there were also "less respectable" ways for women to participate in the "August experience", for instance by joining patriotic street demonstrations in the early days of the war or the crowds of excited onlookers as the first [prisoners of war](#) (POWs) were paraded through German towns in the late summer of 1914.^[16] The motives behind such spontaneous acts of "war fervour" are harder to gauge, as are the gender-specific dimensions. Suffice it to say that women, like men, were caught up in what Jeffrey Verhey has described as the "carnavalesque" atmosphere of the initial phase of the conflict and sought out an active role in the process of giving symbolic meaning to what were seen as decisive events in the history of the German nation.^[17]

Women's Wartime Waged Labour: Standing in for Men or Standing Up for Women?

From 1915 onward things changed to some extent as more women workers were recruited into skilled factory jobs in war-related industries. For instance, the number of women employed in plants which had at least ten workers grew from 1,592,138 in 1913 to 2,319,674 in 1918.^[18] Many rural women were also in effect heading farms in the absence of their soldier-husbands.^[19] However, it is important not to exaggerate the extent to which industrial or agricultural production became feminised. As well as female labour, the German war effort relied heavily on the granting of periods of leave from military service to farmers at harvest time and to urban men in reserved occupations. Women workers were desired merely as temporary replacements, and, even then, only in cases where other solutions – use of "reclaimed" men from the front or POWs and civilian labourers from occupied countries – were not available. What happened, in other words, was not a permanent shift in female employment patterns but a *relocation* of women workers who, judging by peacetime trends, would probably have entered the labour market anyway, but were now funnelled into military production.^[20] Thus, between March 1914 and March 1918 the number of women working in the traditionally male-dominated metal and electrical industries multiplied by over eight times, and in machine-building by a spectacular thirty-five times. In the same period, by contrast, the number of

women employed in textiles fell by over a third, and in clothing by almost one half.^[21]

Recruitment policies reflected masculine assumptions and structures of power. In some cases, wives literally stood in for their absent husbands, taking on their old jobs until they returned, a phenomenon most commonly seen in the transport industry.^[22] Any benefit to women themselves in terms of higher wages, economic independence or increased self-confidence, came merely in the form of what Ute Daniel has called "emancipation on loan", as demonstrated by the tendency to hire and fire women according to fluctuations in the general demand for labour on the home front. Preparations for the post-war demobilisation of the economy, which began well before the war ended, also included plans for mass layoffs of women workers to clear the decks for returning men.^[23]

Did the temporary shift in female employment patterns during the war advance the cause of women's rights in the workplace? Improvements in maternity provisions, rooms for nursing mothers, minimum wages and factory welfare assistants were all urged upon employers by military and civilian officials amid rising unease about women's health.^[24] Nonetheless, working hours were long and requests for time off to do shopping, housework and other routine, but, under wartime conditions, increasingly difficult, chores, were often refused. In 1917, one company in Göttingen even introduced shorter breaks during nightshifts on the grounds that "otherwise there is a danger that the workers will fall asleep".^[25] Many women preferred to do home-based work, especially on commission or sub-commission from the army, sewing military uniforms and making up other items like sandbags, belts and even gunlock covers. However, to some extent this was an "unwanted mobilisation" as it interfered with the army's main priority of recruiting skilled labour into more modern and efficient factory-based production.^[26] Indeed, by 1918 there was a scarcity not of workers generally, but of highly-trained workers capable of increasing output to meet the military's never-ending demand for munitions.

One area where women could not simply be seen as temporarily standing in for men was in the non-waged sphere of reproduction. Cornelia Osborne has shown how the war led to an upsurge of pro-natalism in Germany, with medical experts like the Social Democrat [Alfred Grotjahn \(1869-1931\)](#) declaring pregnancy to be women's patriotic duty and the female equivalent of military service.^[27] Whether this empowered "motherhood" in any way seems doubtful, however; more revealing is the tendency of women of all social classes across Western Europe, including in Germany, to eschew calls for higher birth rates, marking a trend towards declining fertility which was already visible before the war (and persisted long after it).^[28] Elisabeth Domansky is probably right to interpret the pro-natalist policies of the war years as an attempted "militarisation of reproduction" which went alongside the army's "militarisation" of production (and associated social relations).^[29] It is also telling that the pensions offered to the [wives of fallen soldiers](#) were much lower than the separation allowances granted to women whose husbands were still serving in the field, ensuring that many war widows and their children fell into extreme poverty, aggravated by feelings of loss and

disempowerment.^[30]

A final example of the way in which wartime mobilisation did not challenge the established gender order was the treatment of German women married to foreigners. Under the Reich citizenship laws of 1870 and 1913 such women were obliged to take on their husbands' nationality, meaning that they became aliens in their own country and, in wartime, were unable to engage in patriotic work of any kind. Several hundred German-born women, whose husbands were [interned as enemy aliens](#), would quite literally have faced destitution were it not for the activities of two charities set up to help them. A petition sent on their behalf by the National Women's Service (NFD) to the Reich Office of Interior in November 1914 elicited a sympathetic response, indicating a paternalistic desire on the part of the masculine state to uphold women's protected status. However, there was no change to the law which would have allowed the wives of internees to seek employment in war-related industries or claim separation allowances as the mothers of German-born and German-educated children.^[31]

1916-1918: Remobilisation for War?

In late 1916 a renewed effort was made to mobilise all remaining civilian resources for war. This coincided with the appointment of [Paul von Hindenburg \(1847-1934\)](#) and [Erich Ludendorff \(1865-1937\)](#) to head the third supreme command (*Oberste Heeresleitung* or OHL) and the passage of a new Auxiliary Service Law (*Vaterländischer Hilfsdienstgesetz*) in December 1916.^[32] All men aged seventeen to sixty who were not required for military duty could now be called up for labour on the home front. Women were spared the threat of compulsion, but [Wilhelm Groener \(1867-1939\)](#), the head of the new centralised War Office, went to great lengths to ensure better coordination of female labour recruitment. This included the appointment of [Marie-Elisabeth Lüders \(1878-1966\)](#), a prominent figure in the BDF, to head a new Women's Central Work Office (*Frauenarbeitszentrale*) in the Prussian Ministry of War. This agency was charged, among other things, with the development of systems for inspecting factories where women worked or might potentially work.^[33] Sensing opposition within other departments of the War Ministry to Lüders' activities, Groener ordered on 29 January 1917 that all "prejudice...against the mobilisation of women must fall."^[34]

The acting commanders of the individual military districts inside Germany were also increasingly prone to make women the target audience for "patriotic instruction", partly in response to signs of war weariness and the growing number of incidents in which women were involved in protests and rioting over food prices.^[35] The NFD and other voluntary organisations, it was now believed, could be mobilised in the battle against "defeatism" on the home front. Or, as the propaganda department of the 10th reserve army corps in Hanover put it in May 1917:

The *women of all classes*, who have borne a quite considerable measure of worries and burdens, privations and sacrifices during the war, deserve special consideration in relation to our campaigns. The general command would especially welcome the participation of women's organisations in the delivery of its educational-propaganda work

One of the key aims of "patriotic instruction" was to counter the influence of the USPD, the independent and anti-war workers' party founded in April 1917 as a breakaway from the Majority Social Democrats (MSPD). However, this was easier said than done. The USPD developed a strong foothold in certain industrial regions, above all Leipzig, Stuttgart and Berlin, and also attracted significant figures from the Social Democratic women's movement, including [Luise Zietz \(1865-1922\)](#), the only female member of the SPD party executive (*Parteivorstand*) until she was expelled for oppositional activities.^[37] In order not to lose more of its supporters, the MSPD itself was forced to shift to the left so that it too became increasingly critical of the government's management of labour and food scarcity although it still broadly supported the war effort.

The success of "patriotic instruction" was also hindered by its association with the extreme nationalist [propaganda](#) of the German Fatherland Party (*Deutsche Vaterlandspartei*) which was founded in September 1917 to mobilise support for what it called a "Hindenburg peace" in opposition to the *Reichstag's* call for a negotiated end to the war. While the Fatherland Party enjoyed some support among women of the middle classes, who provided up to one third of the organisation's membership by May 1918,^[38] it was viewed with suspicion by the vast majority of ordinary people.^[39] Its meetings were rowdy affairs and were often interrupted by left-wing hecklers, especially from the USPD.

By the summer of 1918, as the [German offensive](#) on the [western front](#) ran out of steam and the Allies began their counter-attack, there was little faith left in "patriotic instruction." Even before this, working-class women had played an active role in the strikes of April 1917 and January 1918, although the latter were largely led by men. As it became increasingly clear that the 1918 offensive had failed, women began writing to their husbands and sons begging them to abandon their posts in France and Belgium and "simply come home."^[40] The war was now effectively lost and if women needed any more encouragement in believing this, it came when soldiers on furlough began "warning people at home...against signing up for the ninth (and last) war loan because the military situation looked so bad."^[41]

Conclusion: Was Women's Mobilisation a Success?

The question of whether women's mobilisation was a success must be answered on two different levels: in terms of its benefit to the organised women's movements in Germany and in broader military and societal terms. In early November 1918 the BDF called on German women to "put all their energies into defending [the fatherland] to the last", an appeal which fell on deaf ears.^[42] A few days later the [revolution](#) led to the acceptance of the Allied armistice terms. In the meantime, the BDF had also failed to convince the Imperial government to grant women's suffrage; the Kaiser's "Easter message" of 1917 had merely promised a reform of the three-class franchise in Prussia to

give men a more equal voice in elections in the largest of the German states, while both the *Reichstag* and the Prussian *Landtag* rejected petitions in favour of votes for women.^[43]

The Social Democratic women's movement had done slightly better out of the war, at least in the sense that the November 1918 revolution brought the SPD to power and also led to the granting of female suffrage by the new Council of People's Commissars (*Rat der Volksbeauftragten*). Nonetheless, the SPD itself had been deeply divided by the party executive's support for wartime mobilisation measures, with many socialist women as well as men switching allegiance to the USPD (and eventually to the Communists after 1918), and others leaving the party altogether. At the 1919 women's party conference, National Assembly member [Marie Juchacz \(1879-1956\)](#) noted with regret that "the party split has deprived us of many of our forces."^[44] Worse still, in the winter of 1918/19 the Council of People's Commissars implemented the demobilisation decrees which threw large numbers of women out of work to create positions for returning war veterans, a process in which both social democratic parties, the SPD and the USPD, were implicated.^[45] While members of the organised women's movement regarded this as an outrage, for many ordinary working-class women it was seen "not...as a defeat but as a victory" because it meant "the restoration of workers' families and thus the basis of their and their children's survival".^[46] In this sense it is hard not to agree with Benjamin Ziemann that, when it came to attitudes towards family, waged employment and male-female relations more generally, the war had "utterly conservative consequences."^[47]

Finally, in terms of contributing to a German military victory, women's mobilisation was also, quite obviously, unsuccessful. Could things have been any different? Leaving aside the pitfalls of hindsight, it may be instructive here to compare the First World War experience with that of the Second World War. Recent research on the latter conflict has highlighted the existence of a much greater degree of female self-mobilisation on the home front, particularly in the sphere of voluntary work.^[48] This was combined with the availability of more numerous and attractive opportunities for women to serve the war effort beyond Germany's own borders, for instance as Wehrmacht auxiliaries, SS guards and wives, and social workers involved in resettling ethnic German families in occupied territories in the east.^[49] Some scholars have even talked of a "militarised comradeship between the genders" a phenomenon which was simply unimaginable during the First World War.^[50] Of course, all of this took place in a context in which the Nazis were pursuing not just a military war, but a "race war" involving the killing, on a genocidal and at times industrial scale, of millions of innocent civilians and POWs. This "race war", in turn, required a form of national mobilisation which was less obviously encumbered by a desire to defend the existing gender order.

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