

FIRST WORLD WAR

CENTENARY
(1914-2014)

Perspectives in Retrospect

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CHAPTER

Role of Women in World War I: An Inspiration for the Present Generation

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ABSTRACT

On the 28 June 1914 Archduke Ferdinand of Austria-Hungary was assassinated in Sarajevo (Serbia) and this led to the outbreak of the First World War. The event just acted as a spark for the war and it spread involving many other countries. The European nations were already aiming towards militarism and imperialist policies. Hence assassination was an opportunity for the world. Generally women are in no way part of wars directly but at the homefront their responsibilities are doubled in the absence of their fathers, brothers, husbands and sons. In this paper I have tried to trace the reasons for the participation of women in the war and contributing in their own way at the call of their nation. This will help us understand the role of women in various fields during war. War does not mean that only the soldiers are required to fight at the battle front, there are also many other areas which are important during wars such as supporting the government in medical assistance, arms and ammunition industry, etc. Very importantly their role in motivating and persuading menfolk into the armed forces is noteworthy. This paper will highlight the contribution of some women specifically and also trace their reactions not only towards war but also the struggle for women's suffrage (right to vote) which was in progress even before the World War I. Also the paper will make a humble attempt to apprise the present women generation about the contribution of women during the World War I as this can be a motivating feature in their lives.

The day the world changed was the day World War 1 began. The war began in August 1914. Not only was it a pivotal step for countries and the men that fought for their country, but also for the women who contributed behind the soldiers of the front lines.

The World War I that broke out at the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand of Austria-Hungary in July 1914 ended in 1918 giving birth to the Treaty of Versailles leaving behind huge destruction of men and material. Right up to the outbreak of World War I, feminists on both sides pledged themselves to peace, in transnational women's solidarity. In a short time many confrontational feminist groups aggressively

gave a pledge to support their respective governments. With this the campaigners for women's suffrage became avid patriots and organizers of women in support of the war effort in no time. Many of these feminists hoped that patriotic support of the war would enhance the prospects for women's suffrage after the war, and this came true in a number of countries. More than 25,000 US women served in Europe in World War I as an entrepreneurial basis, especially before 1917. They helped nurse the wounded, provide food and other supplies to the military, served as telephone operators (the "Hello Girls"), and worked as journalists. These adventurous women searched for their own work, argued, persuaded, and borrowed for supplies. They created new organizations where none had existed."

Women Reaction to the War

The women reaction to World War I, like men, was divided, as some championed the cause and others worried by it. Though majority responded positively there were many who opposed to the war such as Sylvia Pankhurst who refused to help, as did other suffrage groups; in Germany, socialist thinker and later revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg was imprisoned because of her opposition to the war. In 1915 an international meeting of anti-war women met in Holland, campaigning for a negotiated peace which was widely criticized by the press of Europe. As the war progressed women continued to be outspoken as being treated with suspicion. They were sometimes imprisoned, even in countries that guaranteed freedom of speech.

Those women who responded positively to the war gave their best action. American Elsie Janis performed for British and French troops starting in 1914 and "anticipated Bob Hope in her devotion to entertaining the soldiery." Herriot Stanton Blatch in 1918 urged American women and the government alike to "mobilize woman-power" for World War I. Women sang songs and danced along with lectures, readings and poetry in order to entertain the troops. A soldier described seeing Sarah Willmer perform, "I shall never forget as long as I live the blessed white dress she had on the night she recited to us. We had not seen a white dress in years. There we were with our gas masks at alert, all ready to go into the line, and there she was talking to us just like a girl from home. It sure was a great sight, you bet." During the war women in the military were largely confined to very routine work like cleaning, cooking, clerical work, waitressing, and some driving.

Actions that Motivated Others

Russian women took part in combat even during the Czarist period. These women, motivated by a combination of patriotism and a desire to escape a drab existence, mostly joined up dressed as men. The most famous women soldiers were the "Battalion of Death." One amongst them was Maria Botchkareva, a 25-year-old peasant girl. She began her career as an individual soldier in the Russian army and also received permission from the Czar to enlist as a regular soldier. She had faced many difficulties in life for which

she was very critical of her male comrades. But she gradually, after serving with them in the battle, she changed her opinion about them.

During World War I, in United States, 13,000 women enlisted in the US Navy, mostly doing clerical work—"the first [women in US history] to be admitted to full military rank and status." The Army hired women nurses and telephone operators to work overseas. They planned to have women's auxiliary corps in order to perform mostly clerical, supply, and communications work. So were plans for commissioning women doctors in the Medical Corps. The end of the war brought an end to proposals to enlist women in the Army.

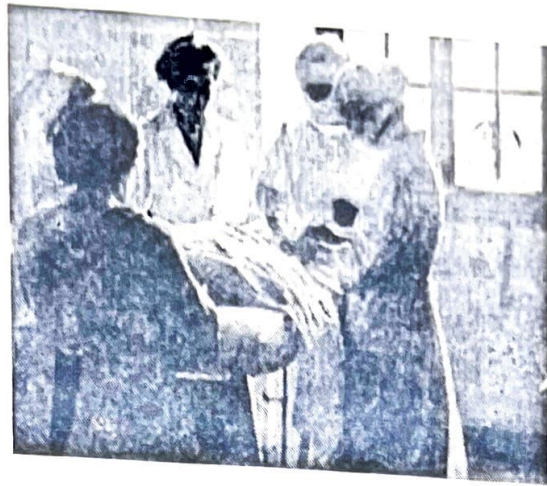
In Germany when the expected quick victory turned to protracted war, German women entered industrial jobs and served as civilian employees in military jobs in rear areas (medical, clerical, and manual labor; women trained for jobs in the signal corps late in the war but never deployed). German women won the vote after World War I, and some continued with their jobs in industry.

Well-known roles of women in World War 1 include: nurses, munitions factory workers, sewing bandages, and selling war bonds, shipyards and spies. By 1917 it was surveyed that 68% of women had changed jobs since the war began, 16% had moved out of domestic service, 22% that were unemployed in 1914 now had work and 23% had changed factories (from one factory to another). At home, away from the war, women worked in factories, as farmers, businesswomen, and so on. On the front lines and behind the scenes in the war zone itself, women took on some much more difficult and dangerous tasks.

Medical Assistance During the War

Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD) and First Aid Nursing Yeomanry (FANY), both of these nursing organizations played a critical role in WW1. The VADs were unpaid volunteers (usually from a higher social class where money was not an issue) who were given basic medical training. These women, while they could not typically give injections, could comfort and provide basic medical treatment to wounded soldiers. The role of a FANY nurse was less glamorous. Their jobs included scrubbing and disinfecting rooms in which wounded soldiers were to be treated, disposing of bodies, organizing baths for front line soldiers, driving (sometimes makeshift) ambulances, and running soup kitchens for the soldiers. Nurses who served could be found behind the front lines of battle, in Army hospitals, on troop trains and transport ships, and anywhere else they were needed. Several nurses were awarded distinguished honors by the military for their services. Many nurses were wounded in WW1 and some died and were buried overseas.

Women as nurses and doctors.



Women Employed in Defense Services

In the United States at the beginning of the war, both the Navy and the Army wanted to bring women into their numbers. As the Army had difficulty bypassing the technicalities of the War Department regarding women, the Navy simply went ahead and enlisted as many women as would join. 13,000 American women joined the Navy and Marine Corps. The enlisted women were given the same uniform, insignia, and status as men. The women were permitted to join the Coast Guard which was part of the Navy but at the end of the War they were asked to discontinue their jobs. In WW1, women pilots were seriously overlooked and their activities were not acknowledged. Unfortunately women pilots were not officially recognized in the United States until the first one, Harriet Quimby, was licensed. European Princesses Eugenie Shakhovskaya and Sophie Alexandrovna Dolgorunaya were among the first women pilots who voluntarily joined the WW1. The Women's Royal Air Force was created, which is where women worked on planes as mechanics but whether the women were taken seriously and recognised or is a matter of concern.

Women Worked in Disguise

Many women in the time of the War felt compelled to do more than serve as nurses or aids. An uncertain number of women disguised themselves as men int. Women who fought were Serbian peasants, English, Turkish (as snipers), Ukrainian, Russian, German and French. Women were in disguise and also the deaths and hence enlistment of women in the war was difficult to track.

As World War I progressed more and more men went overseas, leading to a shortage of employees in factories. It quickly became apparent that women were needed to fill in this loss. The women mostly worked in ammunition factories dealing with explosive chemicals. This was a very dangerous and

unhealthy job, and the women worked in poor conditions. One of the chemicals that the women worked with was sulphur. Being that there was no protection against this chemical, the women's skin started showing a yellow tinge and it also damaged their lungs. In addition women worked long hours filling bomb shells with explosives and with these accidental explosions were always at risk. Through all this women's wages were half of what the men were being paid.

The women not only worked with ammunitions but also worked as power machine operators. In an effort to produce more skillful women into the working industries, schools had been set up to train women in upholstering, trimming, and other work calling for skilled operatives. One factory manager was quoted as saying, "Women were seen as quick learners and that in some departments they are more efficient than men, although those departments have been employing men exclusively for years." Women also had to take over the farm work. An organization was formed called the Women's Land Army. These women were paid 18 shillings a week and had to bring in the halves and keep the farms going.

By the end of the war women had shown what they are capable of to the matriarchal society. The involvement exhibited by the women had in the society during the war period led to the women's suffrage. This was a movement aimed at women's right to vote. In 1917 the Military's Voters Act was passed stating that women who are British subjects and have close relatives in the armed forces can vote on behalf of their male relatives, in federal elections.

Conclusion

The First World War was a pivotal time for women. This is because it gave women an opportunity to prove themselves in a male-dominated society, doing more than cleaning the house and tending to the children. With so many men going to war, there was a large gap in employment and, in response; women came in to replace the men. In Russia the quantity of women in industry went up from 26 to 43%, while in Austria a million women joined the workforce. In France, where women were already a relatively large proportion of the workforce, female employment still grew by 20%. However in the case of Germany it was contrast. Also there were variations as far states or regions were concerned. A paradigm shift was observed in 1939-1945, when women handled anti-aircraft guns, ran the communications network, mended airplanes and even flew them from base to base. Nonetheless, gender relations quickly reverted to tradition after World War II as after World War I.

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