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JAARBOEK VOOR VROUWENGESCHIEDENIS 34

Under Fire: Women and World War II



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Editorial

The 34th *Yearbook of Women's History* entitled *Under Fire: Women and World War II* is, for the second time in the Yearbook's history, dedicated to the topic of war and gender. The editorial board invited Eveline Buchheim and Ralf Futselaar, researchers at NIOD: Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies in Amsterdam, to revisit this theme as guest editors. Also for the second time, the Yearbook presents its articles exclusively in English. This enables us to draw from a wider pool of authors, to extend our focus into non-Western history, and to reach a larger group of readers.

Between the Yearbook's first publication on the topic of women and war in 1995 (*Sekse en Oorlog, or: Gender and War*) and the new volume, some twenty years have passed. This volume elaborates on the issues raised in the 1995 volume, but also explores new approaches to the roles women took on in and around the Second World War, in Europe as well as the Pacific. Over the last two decades, researchers have provided novel information on and interpretations of the position and role of women in wartime, specifically with regards to the Second World War. Still, women continue to be portrayed mainly as victims, traitors and heroes, and less as agents of their own fate. This volume focuses on some of the women who did act to change their own and others' wartime lives, either by embracing or challenging stereotypical notions of womanhood.

The contributions to this volume explore the conscious and often strategic decision-making and acting of women within the constraints or opportunities brought about by the war, including the deliberate employment of stereotypical ideas on womanhood, class and race. These and other issues are discussed in articles on the incarceration of female collaborators in the Netherlands and Belgium (Grevers); German upper-class women dealing, in different ways, with gender relations and feelings of loss and guilt (Von Benda-Beckmann); the activities of the women of the Spanish Falange throughout the Civil War and into the Second World War (Morant i Ariño); the whereabouts and difficult journey of the Dutch medical doctor Martha van Esso-Polak and her husband (Van den Ende); and a double portrait of the Dutch teen sisters and resistance fighters Freddi and Truus Oversteegen (Jonker). The Pacific war is captured in articles on the resistance roles of Asian and Eurasian women during the Japanese occupation in British Asia (Yap); new opportunities created by the war for Japanese women such as journalist and writer Hayashi Fumiko (Horton); the dealings of Marie-Thérèse Brandenburg van Oltsende-Geysens and her clever use of stereotypes in order to clear her name (Buchheim); and the images of wartime women in post-war Chinese war movies (Tsu). A Photo Section offers a selection of war photographs of women

from the image database of the NIOD Institute introduced by a photo essay on war, women and gender (Groot).

While preparing this Yearbook we sadly lost one of the members of the editorial board. On 28 June, 2014, Hennie van der Zande, our cherished friend and dedicated colleague-editor, passed away. Hennie, designer and art historian specialized in design history, had been editor of the Yearbook since 2011. She will be greatly missed.

Eveline Buchheim, Ralf Futselaar, Saskia Bultman, Adriana Churampi Ramírez, Marjan Groot, Ellis Jonker, Andrea Müller-Schirmer, Claartje Rasterhoff, Ingeborg Verheul and Evelien Walhout. We would like to thank Saskia Bultman for her English editing.

Female Agency in Times of War

EVELINE BUCHHEIM & RALF FUTSELAAR

In the spring of 2014, the NIOD: Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies and Kwansai Gakuin University organised a conference titled *Fighting Women in Asia and Europe During and After World War II*, about the more violent roles played by women in and around the Second World War. As co-organizers of this conference, we noticed that far more researchers than expected, literally around the world, were researching and writing histories of women in wartime. Women, moreover, who had moved beyond the roles of mothers and nurturers or victims – the roles primarily reserved for women in narratives of war since antiquity.

There has, of course, long been at least an undercurrent, and sometimes a very strong undercurrent, of scholars trying to emphasize that women's wartime histories could not be understood by relying on these two accepted guises. Historians like Margaret Higonnet and Penny Summerfield argued decades ago that yes, women did make conscious political choices for themselves and others, and that yes, some women acted heroically, others monstrously, of their own accord and without being told to by men.¹ It seems a very recent development, however, that these views of women are beginning to take a prominent position, in gendered historiography.

In this Yearbook, however, we have decided not to focus primarily on violent behaviour of women during the Second World War. Undeniably, a great deal of research has been done into women's roles in, for example, the Red Army, colonial liberation armies and various other resistance groups, but in this Yearbook we have chosen to focus not on female contributions to the violence per se, but on the leeway women had in shaping their own wartime lives. We focus on women making conscious and often strategic decisions and purposefully acting upon those decisions: claiming *agency* was not only more common in wartime than has previously been acknowledged, but also, many scholars were busy investigating exactly this kind of agency.²

We are happy and honoured that the *Yearbook for Women's History* has given us the opportunity to further elaborate on some of the themes that surfaced in our conference. This Yearbook aims to further investigate the interplay of female agency with social expectations of women, both during and after the war. Because their behaviour

was in most cases transgressive of pre-war social norms, it is tempting to view female agency in wartime as an act of rebellion, as a manifestation of a feminist attitude. However, as the articles in this Yearbook make clear, this was not necessarily the case. The interplay between existing gender roles and expectations on the one hand, and female actions on the other, was far more layered, far more complex. Individual women deployed different strategies, sometimes taking advantage of common prejudices to attain their goals. They were not always politically motivated nor did they necessarily have the intention, or the desire, to change the social position of women in their societies. Instead, often they used expectations of women to further their own, often very personal, sometimes deeply ideological, ends.

All the women who feature in this volume endured hardships as a result of the Second World War. Our primary interest here, however, is not in their discomfort, their victimhood or in their victimization, but in their actions and motives. In a period of insecurity and danger, they did not fail to see the advantages and opportunities that the war also offered, and they attempted to grasp them. Under pressure, sometimes gender stereotypes could be exploited, while at the same time women could escape some of the constraints their gender would have posed in peacetime. Some of them managed to achieve a rewarding career for themselves, others to further their military or political causes. As opportunities presented themselves, they chose either to live up to a traditionally feminine role, or to break through stereotypes to achieve their aims.

The strategic, opportunistic use of female stereotypes was not limited to a specific age group. In the articles included in this Yearbook we find young women posing as naive girls, and older women as harmless and vulnerable old ladies, when they certainly were neither. This acting out expected behaviours was generally a strategy to either achieve a goal or to escape retribution. Just as these strategies were not limited by age, neither were they by social position, in terms of income, class or race. All the women figuring in this volume had first-hand experience of lethal violence, to which they had to relate, and even though their backgrounds were radically different, the operational use of gender stereotypes was remarkably similar.

In her keynote at the conference *Fighting Women in Asia and Europe During and After World War II*, Sonya Michel noticed how women in different parts of the world and in radically different positions behaved in remarkably similar ways. She stated that "... to find a way to participate fully on significant terms, women consistently made choices and acted according to their own will. They were actors, not passive recipients of ideologies, assigned roles, or representational shapings, and they made the most of, and often exceeded, limited assignments, often at great risk to themselves."

In this Yearbook, we aim to provide an insight into the scope for individual action that *some* women had in times of war. We make no claim to the representativeness of their experiences. They delineate the realm of the possible, rather than the practice of the normal. Neither have we attempted to cover all the regions and countries affected by the conflict. Not only would this have been impossible within the limited scope of the Yearbook, it would also be at odds with our primary aim to show that female

agency in war existed and that it offers a useful a useful entry point for researchers interested in either gender, or war studies.³

Gender Studies and War

This is not the first *Yearbook for Women's History* devoted to the theme of war and gender. In 1995, the fifteenth Yearbook was published under the title *Gender and War* (Dutch: *Sekse en Oorlog*),⁴ albeit with a clearly different approach: it dealt with the representation of women with a 'fighting spirit', and the articles showed that their reception had ranged from abhorrence to admiration. They also made clear how preconceived ideas about 'proper' masculine and feminine behaviour played an important role in their assessment. Almost twenty years later, we believe that the new research done since then, and the insights this has brought, justify a new Yearbook devoted to war, specifically to the Second World War. This Yearbook builds on the work done since 1995, but attempts to further elaborate the consequences of these expected masculine and feminine roles in the lives of wartime women.

Just like *Under Fire* was inspired by new research and publications, *Gender and War* clearly took a cue from debates raging in 1995. The debate between the German historian Gisela Bock and the American historian Claudia Koonz, that has come to be known as the *Historikerinnenstreit*, called into question the role that women *could* have played in wartime Europe. Their dispute was basically about women's agency and, put simply, it addressed the question whether women could be considered perpetrators or, given their subordinate position, could only have been victims.⁵

In these articles, the morally loaded distinction between victim and perpetrator is a less relevant theme than the underlying, bigger question into female action, initiative and autonomy. Our interest here is not limited by the question whether women could, of their own accord, commit gruesome deeds, but to what extent women could shape their own fate in wartime, and by which means.

Although this Yearbook discusses women and their gendered experiences in times of war, gender is of course not the only analytical category that is important to the articles here. Obviously, gender relations do not exist in a vacuum, and neither are they unchanging. It is more productive to analyse gender in relation to, and in interaction with, race, class and other categories of identity. As Kathy Davis stated, 'Intersectionality initiates a process of discovery, alerting us to the fact that the world around us is always more complicated and contradictory than we ever could have anticipated. It compels us to grapple with this complexity.'⁶

As a consequence of the *Historikerinnenstreit* and its aftermath, scholars working on German social history took the lead in the study of war and gender. This research tradition also flourished as a consequence of a more general debate in Germany about the role of ordinary Germans during the Nazi Era. In a flurry of debates, notably the *Historikerstreit*, German historians reassessed the social history of the Hitler years, which culminated in the publication of several classic books in the 1990s, as well as a

controversial, but epoch-making exhibition on the role of the Wehrmacht in occupied Europe.⁷

There appears to be a straightforward relationship between a greater attention to ordinary people in war situations on the one hand, and the rise of interest in the roles of ordinary women. By now, it has almost become a cliché that women, like men, could be victims, perpetrators, accomplices and bystanders, or a combination of those, and that war indeed could serve as a vehicle for new opportunities. An important new strand of research focuses on specific occupations that became open, or more open than before, to women, exactly demonstrating these new opportunities.⁸ This strand of research, however, seems to be developed especially in countries with a strong home front like Britain and the United States – where not only the bulk of academic publications is from, but where there also seems to be a popular, and very visual, narrative of female wartime labour, expressed for example in the now iconic ‘Rosy the Riveter’.

In Eastern Europe, a different but certainly no less interesting direction seems to have come to dominate. A number of scholars have published extensively, but usually in their national language, on the role of women in various wartime organizations. The publication of *Women and Men at War* (2012) allows an insight into this field of research in Central and Eastern Europe, in English. It shows how gender relations shift in societies while going through dramatic and violent transformations. However, the editors of *Women and Men at War* also point to the necessity of identifying similarities and differences with Western Europe.⁹ In Western Europe, however, with the aforementioned exceptions of Britain and Germany, research into women in wartime is considerably less developed.

Finding the Wartime Woman

Although major heroes and villains have inspired legions of biographers, the historiography of the Second World War is generally an impersonal one. Historians discuss the manoeuvres of the Imperial Japanese Navy, the suffering in besieged Leningrad, or the murders in Sobibor primarily on a higher aggregate level, in which named individuals play a minor role. The upsurge of biographical research of the past two decades sets individual stories to the background of these larger narratives, and treats individual cases as illustrations of the general pattern, or as representatives of a larger group. These representatives are not inevitably male; Anne Frank is perhaps the best example of a personal history used to illustrate a much larger historical occurrence.

In many recent publications on wartime women, personal documents and testimonies play a remarkably large role. Because of a lack of general histories of women in wartime, biography here is not an illustration of a larger, well-known story. Biography seems to have become the basis and there is relatively little beyond it. To be clear, we do not wish to belittle biographical research, indeed the contrary. This Yearbook is itself filled mostly with articles concerning at most a handful of named women. This has the enormous advantage that they allow for a much more detailed investigation into the

behaviour, strategies and setbacks of women in highly dynamic and volatile, but also lethally dangerous wartime societies. By recalling the individual process of adjusting to ever-shifting demands, dangers and opportunities, we can learn more about the ways in which women generally dealt with changes brought about by war.

These individual stories, sequences of choices under permanently shifting circumstances, are not usually easy to reconstruct. Yet these stories do help us to see how individual women could shape their own fate (although not necessarily successfully) in the chaos of wartime Europe and Asia. Women like Martha ben Assa, whose life is the subject of an article by Hannah van den Ende, or Luise von Benda, described by Bas von Benda Beckmann, are cases in point. Their life stories would never have featured in traditional historiography. Not only because they are minor characters, but also because the sources were not available for a long time, many documents still in family possession. Yet their biographies offer glimpses of how women found themselves in exceptional circumstances to which they had to relate. One as the wife of a Nazi general, one as a Jewish refugee from occupied Europe, they both had no choice but to deal with the fallout of the conflict, both before and after 1945.

In some cases, women could improve their social position because men allowed them to. Fascist Spain, however conservative in its outlook, needed women in rebuilding society after the end of the civil war. That this placed women in paid, and sometimes powerful, positions, was considered less problematic, as Morant shows.

Irrespective of their social position and the vicissitudes of wartime, in the context of mid-twentieth-century Europe and Asia, women were in a permanently and inevitably subordinate position vis-à-vis men. Men do not take centre stage in the articles in this volume, but that does not mean that they are absent. Pre-war societies had of course been male-dominated and the subordinate position of women did not as such change in wartime; women remained hierarchically below men. Yet the destabilization resulting from war, did temporarily provide at least some women more leeway to choose their own role in their respective societies. Margaret R. Higonnet and Patrice L.R. Higonnet have used the model of the Double Helix to explain that although the Second World War accounted for a lot of changes, the relative lower position of women remained the same.¹⁰ But here we are dealing with those women who did reap the opportunities that arose.¹¹

This raises the inevitable question whether these women are in any way representative of other women. Clearly, there is no real way of knowing to what extent *these* women behaved similarly to *most* women in the same circumstances and whether the difference was a gradual one, or a fundamental one. While the protagonists of these stories mostly behaved in exceptional ways, their adversaries, however, did not. These women used their strategies on, say, soldiers of occupying armies, and on post-war magistrates, who were bound by both formal rules and social conventions. The stories of exceptional women perhaps convey less about women generally, than about how women were perceived by their (male) adversaries.

The Filipina Josefina V. Guerrero undoubtedly acted in an uncommon manner when she decided to map Japanese fortifications around Manila, tape the map be-

tween her shoulder blades and smuggle it through Japanese-held territory to deliver it safely to American troops based sixty kilometres away. As such, Felicia Yap's article 'Asian and Eurasian Women's Resistance Against the Japanese, 1942-1945', teaches us relatively little about other female Manilans in 1945, but quite a lot about the Japanese troops who apparently did not deem her likely enough to be dangerous to search her thoroughly. Likewise, Marie-Thérèse Brandenburg van Oltsende, in 1947, successfully presented herself as a weak, but respectable elderly lady, thereby escaping being designated an enemy of the state. Eveline Buchheim shows how in spite of strong circumstantial evidence against her, Dutch magistrates were profoundly reluctant to even press charges against her.

Although the biographical approach in these and other articles is thus more elucidating than it may initially seem, a more systematic study of women, all women, in wartime societies remains conspicuously missing in general historiography. This biographical research, then, also outlines possible scenarios for women in wartime societies that can, and should be, used to inspire more systematic research at a higher aggregate level. This can help understand the ways in which gender and war interact and have interacted in different societies. Biography helps us to disclose what was possible for some women, but this should be seen, and used, as a stepping stone towards a better understanding of the lives of all women. (Or at least most of them.)

This interaction is of course more intricate than is suggested by the two examples given above, where prejudice is used as a means of escaping. As has been pointed out by others, war could also offer exceptional new opportunities to women willing to reap them. For example in education, employment and sexual autonomy, women have been shown to have profited, at times, from war. In Bas von Benda Beckmann's article 'Aunts at War', we find two sisters from a stuffily conservative background gain access to responsible and interesting careers in the Wehrmacht, and in the case of one of them to a degree in medicine. Again, neither sister can be classified as typical of German women of their generation, but their careers clearly reveal the possibilities that war brought them.

William Bradley Horton shows in his contribution that these opportunities were not limited to women who had been lacking employment or educational opportunities before the war. He shows how the successful journalist and writer Hayashi Fumiko managed to add an interesting new dimension to an already impressive career. Unusual for a Japanese woman of her time, she was able to travel extensively throughout Asia, to the occupied territories as a guest of the imperial army. For her, the war opened opportunities to further an already flourishing career. A career, moreover, that continued after the Japanese surrender in 1945.

Biographical history, especially in the modern era, has the peculiarity that the object of research tends to exert considerable influence on the representation of him or herself. Self-representation and accurate biography are of course two very different things and there are several articles in this Yearbook where whitewashing, or at least a conveniently selective memory, seem to have been at work. That we take a critical approach to personal testimony, however, does not mean that we do not recognize the