



## Home Fronts, Gender War and Conflict

Maggie Andrews & Janis Lomas

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## INTRODUCTION

# Home Fronts, Gender War and Conflict

Maggie Andrews<sup>a</sup> and Janis Lomas<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>IHCA, University of Worcester, Worcester, UK; <sup>b</sup>Independent Researcher

The articles in this special issue of the *Women's History Review* come from the twenty-third annual conference of the Women's History Network (WHN) held at the University of Worcester in 2014. The conference coincided with commemorations marking the centenary of the outbreak of the First World War, which was greeted in Britain with a significant level of activity by the media, heritage and publishing industries, with government funding assisting in giving the centenary a high public profile. War and conflict have a central place in mainstream history but thanks to the work of historians such as: Penny Summerfield,<sup>1</sup> Lucy Noakes,<sup>2</sup> Alison Fell,<sup>3</sup> Christine Hallett,<sup>4</sup> Lisa Pine,<sup>5</sup> Deborah Thom,<sup>6</sup> Susan Grayzel,<sup>7</sup> Susan Kingsley Kent,<sup>8</sup> Joanna Bourke,<sup>9</sup> Susan Pedersen,<sup>10</sup> Karen Hunt,<sup>11</sup> Sonya Rose<sup>12</sup> and many others, war is no longer seen as an arena of masculinity only. Women's collusion, participation and opposition to a range of conflicts are areas of increasing interest within women's history; yet there is a continuing need to question the focus and selectivity of such academic scholarship.

It was during the First World War that the term 'home front' first entered the English language,<sup>13</sup> as civilians encountered warships shelling their homes and bombing during zeppelin raids. It was the conflict in which rationing, blackouts and war pensions were first introduced into Britain as the mobilisation of men, industry and agriculture in the first mechanised war to be fought on a truly global scale disrupted and disturbed the lives of many non-combatants. Yet it is the Second World War home front which has a firm hold in both British cultural memory and research; a conflict that overshadowed the childhood of many who grew up in 1950s and 1960s Britain. Many mantelpieces were adorned by images of parents in uniform, and bomb damage remained visible in some urban areas well into the 1960s, when the popular television situation comedy *Dad's Army* (BBC 1968–77) about the Home Guard in the fictional Walmington-on-Sea on the south coast of England ensured that at least one version of the history of the life of the home front in the Second World War retained a place in popular consciousness.

Furthermore, research into the multitude of women's experiences of the First World War remains patchy; as Karen Hunt has argued, 'On the British home front the housewife remains hidden behind her more visible sisters, the munitionettes and the VADs, and her voice is much more muted'.<sup>14</sup> Thus the choice of the title for the WHN Conference: *Home Fronts: gender, war and conflict*, sought to privilege the domestic, everyday lives of women during the First World War and also to articulate a commitment to explore, not merely the

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**CONTACT** Maggie Andrews  [maggie.andrews@worc.ac.uk](mailto:maggie.andrews@worc.ac.uk)  Prof. Maggie Andrews, IHCA, University of Worcester, Henwick Grove, Worcester WR2 6AJ, UK; Janis Lomas  [j.lomas96@btinternet.com](mailto:j.lomas96@btinternet.com)  Dr Janis Lomas, 1, Exeter Road, Cannock WS11 1QE, UK.

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British First World War home front but also women's lives on multiple and varied home fronts in a range of conflicts, across diverse historical periods and geographical areas.

The conference, which reflected the research interests of many who work at or with the University of Worcester, received financial support from the Economic History Society and the Arts and Humanities Research Council funded World War One Engagement Centre Voice of War and Peace: the Great War and its Legacy. It captured the interest of those working in contemporary media and heritage industries and many academics' fascination with the effects of war on women. There were over 100 papers and 200 delegates from across the world all drawing upon the perspectives of women's and gender history to discuss, compare and interrogate multiple home fronts, from Ancient Greece and Rome to the Vietnam War, in locations such as: Africa, North America, Russia and Europe. The articles published here are only a small sample of the papers discussed at the conference but they have been chosen to reflect some of this diversity. The case studies of different groups of women on home fronts in countries such Germany, Poland, the USA, and Ireland and Britain therefore include exploration of both the English and American civil wars and the Crimean War. They are intended to stimulate debate to encourage reappraisal and scholarship of women's lives during conflict.

There are themes and debates which run through a number of the articles, that also emerged during the *Home Fronts: gender, war and conflict* Conference. War causes dislocation, disruption and disturbance; it sometimes destroys lives but this is not the whole story or everyone's story. Many women exert, to a greater or lesser degree, a level of agency in times of war, albeit that this is shaped by class, age and ethnicity, and also other factors such as motherhood and marital status, their occupation, proximity to the conflict and also the stability or volatility of the situation in which they find themselves. For example, women in North-Eastern Poland had to survive the changing front lines of both the advancing Russian and German armies and their increasing fear of a German invasion during the First World War. Women have been both victims of war and survivors; some have embraced war, others have resisted it and many have just got on with their everyday lives, seeking ways of managing and manoeuvring to get by, to cope with dislocation of conflict and find areas in which they could retain control. This is amply demonstrated in both Malgorzata Dajnowicz's article on women in the rural provinces of North-East Poland in the First World War and Lisa Pine's survey of research on women in Germany in the Second World War. In these countries, war and conflict affected women's role as consumers and purchasers, responsible for family budgets in times when the need to feed armies and nations made food a weapon of war. Both these articles also draw attention to the geographical particularity of how women experience conflict – the proximity of the front line or bombing and the various ways in which the greater potential of rural women to grow their own food shaped women's lives in war. While working-class Polish women from the towns travelled into the countryside in a desperate search for food, life for the better off in Warsaw continued much as it had pre-war for most of the war. As many of the articles demonstrate, class played a large part in how the war was experienced on the home front. There are thus different home fronts, even within one country, and within them both continuities and changes in the paid and domestic work which women undertake in times of war; many traditional roles and responsibilities continued sometimes alongside new and different tasks within the homes or the workplace.



**Figure 1** Worcestershire women harvest the hops assisted by a soldier home on leave in Britain in the First World War. Picture provided by kind permission of Worcestershire Archives and Archaeological Service.

Mari Takayanagi's detailed exploration of women who worked in the British Houses of Parliament in the Second World War illuminates how wartime could enable women to stretch the boundaries of their gender-ascribed roles – for instance, in the appointment for the first time of a woman to the prestigious role of Clerk to the House of Commons, albeit at a much lower salary. Opportunities, experiences and encounters could pave the way for individual women or groups of women to experience change in wartime. However, as Mari Takayanagi also notes, these women faced discrimination; most of the parliamentary posts opened up for women during the war were clearly temporary and were reversed afterwards. Furthermore, Janet Harrison's discussion of Lee Miller's photography for the Second World War publication *Wrens In Camera*, which portrayed the lives of women who worked in the Women's Royal Naval Service (WRNS; popularly and officially known as the Wrens), emphasises the discursive complexity, discomfort and difficulty that there can be around some of women's new and temporary wartime roles. Miller utilised a range of artistic and photography practices to draw attention to the limits that even in wartime governed women's behaviour; limits which women trespassed at their peril.

One of the continuities identified in many of the articles that follow is the degree to which the experience of the home front for large numbers of women, in numerous conflicts, has been shaped by their role as wives and mothers. Discourses which framed these roles were, however, at times stretched, renegotiated and challenged when war encroached upon domestic lives and women's ability to maintain a home. The physical and emotional proximity of conflict, which in civil war was hard to escape, shaped women's role as homemakers.. The articles on the American Civil war demonstrate this by looking at two very different aspects of the home front, with Holly Kent's exploration of dress in two Northern magazines providing insights into the way that the clothes women wore was tied to patriotism and the upholding of women's virtue. She argues that readers of the magazines found solace in the continuity displayed in the magazines at a time of great loss and

change. The experiences of Southern women differed greatly from this, as Susan-Mary Grant's article shows. Many Southern women were forced from their homes and their role in the domestic sphere was changed beyond recognition as they tried to negotiate a space for themselves in a world where the home front that they had known had become all but uninhabitable. Hannah Worthen's case study discusses how, two centuries earlier, women in the English Civil War and the Interregnum sought to mitigate the deterioration in their material circumstances that the war had brought by engaging in the political process. As both Susan-Mary Grant and Hannah Worthen's articles demonstrate, women in civil war situations were not passive but active agents trying to protect and provide for themselves and their families.

As is often the case, it is the voices of women from the higher echelons of society that have survived in the archives. During twenty-five years of the Women's History Network in Britain there has been a growing awareness that there are many areas of women's lives in conflict which are in many respects somewhat hidden from history. Some of the articles in this issue draw upon media sources such as magazines, others use official archival materials, but many utilise personal sources, memories, letters, diaries and memoirs. The writing and recording of lives, and a commitment to keep these writings for posterity, is perhaps more often the prerogative of the better off. The experiences of the poorest women, those who were itinerant workers, marginalised or not considered 'respectable', were rarely recorded in such ways. Laura Lammasniemi's article uses reports of court proceedings to provide glimpses of the lives of working women who were subject to the draconian Regulation 40D in First World War Britain. This law meant that women could find themselves imprisoned for allegedly infecting soldiers with venereal disease, their incarceration dependent on the uncorroborated word of the infected soldier. Her research also demonstrates how the strategies some governments evoked in their pursuit of war could be overwhelming for working-class women, leaving them with limited autonomy. This is also true of Paul Huddie's work on soldiers' wives and widows in Ireland during the Crimean War. Many of these families had to find a source of income, enter a workhouse or beg for charitable assistance as they were left destitute when their husbands were sent to fight in the Crimean War. Although any help they were given was unregulated and extremely patchy, it marked the beginning of the recognition that the state owed some level of responsibility towards the families of their armies. One of the themes to emerge in these and other case studies is that the increasing significance of the home front in the conduct of war has resulted in corresponding developments in governments' actions to take responsibility, exert regulation and control or provide some welfare for those on the home front in times of war. Both Huddie and Lammasniemi's articles also suggest that the fault lines of countries involved in conflict lie in many directions; British imperialism shaped the experience of Irish women during the Crimean War, and of working-class British women during the First World War when their civil liberties were collateral damage in the British government's desire to assure the Canadian government that they were taking action to protect the health of their troops. They also suggest that the intertwined discourses of femininity and female sexuality are sometimes brought into relief in wartime.

This collection of articles suggests that there are multifarious histories of home fronts; and a multitude of individual women encountering war and conflict in different ways – one woman's history is never the history of a group, a country or a conflict. Nevertheless, most histories of women on the home front are framed by technological advancement.

Communication technologies – the postal service, press, media and film – create new links and facilitate new interconnections between the fighting and home fronts. Developments in weapons technology, including gas and atomic bombs, increase the range of warfare and its devastation on the home front. Hence, we have placed articles in this collection in chronological order, beginning with the English Civil War in the seventeenth century and ending with the German home front in the Second World War.

## Notes

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## Notes on contributor

**Maggie Andrews** is the professor of cultural history at the University of Worcester, whose research and publications focus upon domesticity, war and the home front in twentieth-century Britain. She is a Co-Investigator, leading on the theme of gender and the home front, for the Arts and Humanities Research Council funded World War One Engagement Centre Voice of War and Peace: the Great War and its Legacy.

**Janis Lomas** is an Independent Researcher and previously worked as a Social and Women's Historian at the University of Birmingham. She recently edited with Maggie Andrews: *The Home Front in Britain: images, myths and forgotten experiences* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).