

Review: Gender, War and Politics: transatlantic perspectives, 1775–1830

Karen Hagemann, Gisela Mettele and Jane Rendall (Eds) ;Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2010;  
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Not so long ago, a book on gender, war and politics would have been a rare thing indeed. The histories of women and of masculinity tended to emphasise the 'private' aspects of human experience; and, although historians of war and politics were perfectly happy to talk to each other, they rarely conducted conversations with gender scholars. In British studies at least, the big exception to this always used to be the early twentieth century, where women's experience of suffragism and wartime service, and men's experience of the trenches, provided a fertile meeting place for these historical sub-disciplines. More recently, historians of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries have been catching up in this respect, by emphasising how the wars of revolution and liberation were fundamentally concerned with building nations around a highly gendered conception of the citizen soldier, transforming gender relations, political systems and the conduct of war in the process. Much of this exciting new work has been produced by the international 'Nations, Borders and Identities' research group, including this substantial and important collection of essays.

It is impossible to do justice to each of the seventeen individual chapters in a short review, but the titles of the book's five sections give a flavour of their contents. The first part focuses on 'Empire, Colonial War and Slavery'. The editors are keen to emphasise that imperial war in this period 'has to be integrally associated with the development of the slave trade' (p. 11). That is indeed true of the Caribbean and North America, although slaves fought on different sides in these respective revolutions, and the book also has several chapters on regions for which this theme is less helpful. Furthermore, David Eltis's opening survey of the slave trade concludes that 'European revolutions exerted only a minor influence on abolition' (p. 55). The connection between race and revolution really comes together in the final part, 'Demobilization, Commemoration and Memory', where Cecilia Morgan and Gregory T. Knouff offer superb studies of the post-war societies that emerged in Upper Canada and Pennsylvania.

Parts three and four are entitled 'Warfare, Civil Society and Women' and 'Patriotism, Citizenship and Nation-Building'. The chapters here largely take a 'war and society' approach, which has long been a productive avenue for women's history. Wartime provides a fascinating context for studies of civil society, and chapters here explore women's opportunities for participation in the public sphere via activities such as publication, patriotism and philanthropy. Other chapters expand our understanding of the more direct ways in which women could be involved in war, taking in roles such as camp followers, laundresses and prostitutes. The comparative international perspective of the

collection is here especially useful: Thomas Cordoza argues that there is a significant difference between the British sutler and the French vivandière, since the latter were necessarily wives of serving soldiers. Female soldiers are a favourite topic for gender studies and there is repeated reference in the collection to these celebrated cross-dressers, although the numbers are frankly tiny (even in the armies of Revolutionary France, we are talking about fewer than a hundred out of two million).

It is one of the great ironies of the study of war and gender that the men who did the actual warring have received so little attention. 'War and society' arguably tells us more about society than war, and more about civilians than soldiers. Again, it is historians of the Great War who have pioneered work on combatant masculinities, but the second part entitled 'Masculinity, Revolution and War' makes a superb case for the potential of this approach on this earlier period. Stefan Dudink and Catriona Kennedy offer detailed studies of the officer corps of the Netherlands and Britain, respectively; and Alan Forrest gives us a fascinating insight into the role of masculinity in the citizen armies of the French Revolution. In general, then, this impressive collection ranges widely in terms of geography and themes. It offers a suggestive survey of the many ways in which the study of warfare can be enriched by a gender perspective, and will undoubtedly inspire future work on this fascinating period of history.