

Research paper on women and world war i

[Parts of the World](#), [Australia](#)



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Abstract

Under the fairly broad topic heading of “ Women and World War I”, this research paper discusses the roles of women in countries directly involved in World War I, the opportunities available to them to actively support their country’s war effort, and the effects on their lives in those troubled times. Predictably, there were differences between the women’s permitted roles in the various countries discussed (United States, Great Britain, Australia, Canada, Germany and Russia). One thing common to most countries discussed in this paper is that women earned a new respect and gained an increase in status as a result of their various efforts in the war years. Many surprised not just their men and their employers but also themselves, in finding they were perfectly capable of a wide range of jobs that had previously been considered the exclusive domain of male workers. The nurses from Britain, Australia and Canada were also singled out for mention of their tremendous work in caring for the wounded. In Britain and in Canada the war was instrumental in getting women the vote. Russia stands alone in

being the one country that actually used women in combat; having formed 15 female battalions including the notorious “ Women’s Battalion of Death” in which every one of the 2, 000 women soldiers carried a cyanide capsule to be swallowed in the event of capture.

Introduction

This paper researches the subject “ Women and World War I”. Within that fairly broad title the paper looks particularly at the how the roles of women in society were affected and/or changed by that conflict. The research covers not just women in the countries of the Allies (Britain, Canada, Australia and the United States) but also women in Germany and in Russia.

The Research

Kim (2003) published an article entitled “ Where Women Worked During World War I”. It opens by reminding us that prior to that war, women typically looked after the children and family, were judged more by their looks than their abilities, and for the most part were responsible for looking after the home, the cooking, the cleaning and so on. But then, when war broke out and men were drafted into the armed forces, women began to step into their jobs and into other jobs that didn’t exist in peacetime. The jobs they filled included many traditionally held only by men, including working in environments such as heavy machine shops.

Kim also noted that the number of vacancies for the more usual “ feminine” jobs increased, too. Because many women had taken up factory and other full-time jobs, they in turn looked for domestic help in the home, to do housework and help with childcare. However, as increasing numbers of men

were drafted and posted overseas, the U. S. administration and industry recruited many women to take on roles as e. g. telephone and telegraph operators, cashiers, etc. Companies found that women in these jobs tended to be both skilful and reliable.

Other organizations like the Patriotic League, the YWCA and the Red Cross actively recruited women at this time. As Kim describes, the Red Cross organized non-working women to work as nurses and other roles in relief efforts. Many of those women were either mothers or wives of serving soldiers, and were employed in military hospitals or given such tasks as making bandages and knitting. Their women's bureau ran a national campaign to raise funds and provide needed supplies, and in persuading more men to volunteer for active service. Some of those women went overseas as part of a Red Cross group called the " Voluntary Aid Detachment".

Kim notes that prior to World War I, it was also unusual for women to take up higher education, because that was considered a pathway to working in industries that were for the most part male dominated. However, that situation changed as women began to work in all fields of industry, although there were reported issues over unequal pay. Kim also reports that women were seen to be taking on jobs that had been rare before: jobs such as lawyers and bankers, running businesses, driving trucks. It seemed that the war had not only placed new demands on women, it had changed their attitudes, too. The issues of unequal pay and working conditions became more widespread by 1918 as so many of the nation's men had gone off to war. The trades unions fought against women working in the factories, even

though their wages were only half what a man was paid, plus they often had to work in unhealthy and/or dangerous environments such as munitions factories. Eventually, these attitudes resulted in separate women's unions being formed, although they were not successful in achieving equal pay status. Employers avoided having to pay women the same rates by either replacing one man with more than one woman, or by splitting up skilled jobs into a number of less-skilled parts. Other jobs taken by women were grouped in Kim's article under the heading " Military auxiliary jobs". Those included the " Women's Land Army" which had a key role in keeping the farms operating while all the male workers were away.

Kim concludes his article by observing that the war afforded women the opportunity to demonstrate that they were more than just mothers and housewives. He describes World War I as " a turning point for women". Their role in keeping the nation moving and keeping the armed forces supplied with ammunition and other supplies was a vital one. He also notes that with time, women earned a great deal of respect for their wartime efforts, and showed that they contributed just as much as the men and had earned the right to take on the same responsibilities.

The second " legacy" was that women in industry became more unionized. Although the existing trades unions were hostile to women's employment – much the same scenario as in the U. S. as described by Kim – the large numbers of working women forced the unions to accept women. Bourke notes that female trade union membership increased 160 percent during those war years, compared with a 44 percent increase for men. However, women's wages remained low – typically half that of the male rates. British

employers employed the same techniques as Kim reported were used in America to avoid increasing women's wages. At the end of the war, Bourke reports that most of these working women were forced to return to their homes. Their contracts of employment were often expressed as being "for the duration of the war". Day nurseries that had been set up during the war to help working mothers were closed, obliging many to return home to care for their children. Also, there was a great deal of pressure from now-unemployed returning soldiers who saw these women as "taking their jobs". Because of now high unemployment among women, there were also issues such as single women and widows claiming preferential rights to work over married women. Other changes with the end of World War I included hospitals that had taken on female medical students during the war, rejecting female students in the 1920's "on the grounds of modesty". Even the London County Council decided in 1924 to compel female schoolteachers to "resign on marriage".

Although some believe that the war was responsible for property-owning women over 30 getting the vote in 1918, Bourke believes it was more to do with feminist movement lobbying and the support of the Labour Party, who were in government and needed to call a General Election. With so many voters (men) being overseas and therefore unable to vote, they decided to widen the franchise to secure more votes in the election. The change of eligibility meant that over eight million women obtained the vote in 1918. Another web-based article that includes some British perspective is entitled "The Roles of Women Who Were There". As the title suggests, the article is about the women who went to war, rather than those who played their part

in their home countries. It mentions FANY (First Aid Nursing Yeomanry) nurses, whose tasks included cleaning the treatment rooms for wounded soldiers, disposal of bodies, arranging bath facilities and running soup kitchens for soldiers in the front line, and even driving ambulances. Those nurses served wherever their services were needed. Many nurses were wounded, several were awarded military honours, and sadly some died and were buried overseas. There were also women who actually joined the armed forces. Although both the U. S. Army and Navy wanted to recruit women, what are referred to as “technicalities” made that difficult in the case of the Army, so the Navy and the Marine Corps benefitted by taking on some 13,000 American women who were given the same status as men. The U. S. Coastguard also recruited women, but removed them from their service when the war ended. A rather bizarre section of the same article refers to women who disguised themselves as men so that they could actually join in the fighting. According to the article they included women from several nations including England. The article comments that since they were in disguise, details of numbers involved and fatalities are not known.

An article entitled “Women in wartime” (updated 2009) on an Australian Government website describes the involvement of Australian women in a number of wars. Regarding World War I, the article notes that when it began, women in Australia were expected to continue to run their homes and bring up their children, but also to join voluntary organizations to help support the war effort. Unlike Britain and the U. S., there was not a great increase in female employment during World War I. Some women campaigned for female conscription while others opposed it with equal vigor. Wives or

mothers of Australian servicemen were awarded medals for their personal involvement with the war efforts.

Another article discussing the roles of Australian women in World War I is published on Skwirk, an Australian online schooling site. Entitled “ Nursing” in the section: History / Australia and World War I / Women and the war, it focuses on those Australian women who – rejected by the government when they offered to serve in the war – decided to find another way to help. At the time, women’s active involvement in the armed forces was forbidden.

Women then were not even allowed to do factory work; it was considered “ unladylike”. As far as active service was concerned, the government even prohibited female doctors from overseas medical service, on the premise that would be incapable of coping with the sights and the physical demands involved. However, nurses of the Australian Army Nursing Service started travelling to support their troops overseas in September 1914. They worked in most of the theaters of war, doing their work wherever they could. Their workload was immense. The article mentions one makeshift tented hospital in which a matron and 45 nursing staff cared for 1000 patients. In another situation, it was reported that onboard hospital ships, one night-duty nurse and an orderly might be responsible for 250 patients. Above all they had to maintain good spirits whilst confronted by all the suffering of their patients. It is said that allied soldiers often remarked that the Australian nurses were exceptionally kind and caring. The article recounts that 2139 nurses served overseas, of whom 25 died and seven were awarded medals. In conclusion, the article notes that not only their profession but the Australian public as a whole greatly respected them for their World War I service for their country.

In Canada, according to an article entitled “ Women and the War” from the archives of the Queen’s University, Ontario, women had to give their written permission for their spouse or their sons to enlist in the armed forces.

Because many refused to give that permission, propaganda posters urging them to give it were commonly displayed. According to the article, it was considered at the time be an honorable thing for a man to enlist, gaining him and his family immediate respect. The article also notes that many Canadians “ saw war as a glorious and heroic event.” Much as in other allied countries already covered in this paper, women in Canada provided a great deal of support for the war effort. In excess of 30, 000 worked in the munitions plants and over 5, 000 were employed by the civil service. There were even more than 1, 000 women working for the Air Force as drivers and similar motor transport-related roles. Also, much as described in regard to Australian women, over 2, 000 Canadian nurses played a most important role in supporting the Canadian Expeditionary Force fighting in Europe.

Another article entitled “ Women Get the Vote 1916-1919” from the A Country by Consent Canadian history website, describes how women in Canada progressively were allowed to vote, at least in part as a consequence of the war. According to the article, the efforts of women in taking over men’s jobs, caring for their families and working in voluntary organizations forced the government to act. Women received their federal votes in three separate stages. First, under the Military Voters Act of 1917, nurses and other women serving in the forces were allowed the vote. Then the Wartime Election Act extended the vote to women whose husbands, sons or fathers were serving abroad. Finally, in January of 1919, the vote was extended to all

Canadian women over the age of 21.

Compared with the countries so far discussed, the situation in Germany was different, according to a European History article by Wilde (n. d.) entitled “Women and Work in World War 1”. He notes that whilst in Britain about two million women took over men’s jobs, in Austria a million, in Russia women working in industry increased from 26 to 43 percent, and in France the increase was around 20 percent, in Germany the numbers were much smaller. According to Wilde, that was mainly due to trade unions, which were fearful that women would be cheaper than men and therefore take their jobs. The German government passed a law called The Auxiliary Service for the Fatherland which addressed only men between the ages of 17 and 60. Although they largely excluded women from paid employment that did not deter the government from using women as forced labor in occupied territories.

A paper by Sowers (2003) entitled “Women Combatants in World War I: A Russian Case Study” notes that towards the end of WWI the German War Office did set up Women’s Work Centers, which used some 700, 000 women, mainly in armaments manufacture. The main focus of Sowers’ paper is Russia. She reveals that unlike all the other countries so far described, Russia actually used women in combat roles. Sowers singles out for mention their first of 15 active female armed units, this one known as “The Women’s Battalion of Death” and comprising 2, 000 female soldiers. Each one carried a potassium cyanide capsule, to be taken in the event of capture. But while those fiercely patriotic Russian women were going into battle, Russian civilian women were involved in their own battle, but this time against their

own rulers. An article entitled “ Dutiful Daughters: Women in Revolutionary Russia” by Adams Rychkova reports that although women had stepped into thousands of jobs vacated by Russia’s fighting men and so had hoped to gain proper respect for their gender, this proved to be not the case when Russia’s overstretched economy began to collapse as the war went badly for them. Soon, massive unrest resulted in the February 1917 Revolution and the abdication of Tsar Nicholas II.

Conclusions

The research has shown that for the most part, women in countries involved in World War I did whatever they could in what they saw as patriotic duty to support their country and their menfolk, often whilst continuing to manage their home and raise a family. In all cases other than Russia that support stopped short of actual combat duties, although some other countries allowed women to serve in other roles in their armed forces. In Britain and in Canada the war was indirectly influential in gaining women the vote, and in most countries discussed women gained a new sense of increased status and independence, having proved their value to society in wartime employment or in voluntary activities, and now being able to choose from a much wider range of employment opportunities than had previously been the case. In some instances, postwar employers saw the value of employing highly capable women in jobs that prior to the war had generally been open only to men.

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