

Citizenship during the great war

Government



At the onset of the First World War in 1914, England was experiencing a social transformation fueled by years of massive immigration from central Europe and changes prompted by industrial and technological developments. The availability of inexpensive immigrant labor and these developments produced a social environment that permitted a realignment of gender roles and the potential for a revolutionary shift in the role of women in British society.

Nicoletta Gullace's central premise is that there was an appetite for social change in prewar Britain and that cultural instability produced by the war allowed those social forces to coalesce, which Gullace details. Among these were the lingering humiliation resulting from scandals experienced during the Boer War of 1900, which left the British public with little desire to engage in further foreign conflict. The outbreak of the World War neutralized that bias, and horrific reports of German Army behavior reversed the sentiment.

These reports detailed the suffering endured in the populated areas of Belgium that were behind the German lines, creating an overwhelming sympathy for the victims of German abuse that transformed the British perception of the war role they needed to play. The War also produced new unprecedented internal social realities, including a million women going to work in British factories. British society was transformed by the ensuing changes and one of the least understood changes, according to Gullace, was the restructuring of the political and economic roles thereafter played by women.

There were radical external forces affecting British society as well. Early in World War I, atrocity stories appeared accusing the Germans of inhumane

brutality. These reports saturated the British media, fueled by alleged first hand accounts by private citizens, newspaper reports, novels, songs, and even official government investigations. The official Bryce Report concluded that the lurid tales of mutilations and sexual atrocities were in fact occurring. Bryce had relied upon media reports and their original sources as his primary source to reach his conclusions, which were discounted by later historians.

Gullace refers to this “wartime imagery” as at once being “...sentimental and sexual, patriotic and pornographic, effective and subversive (p. 18). This imagery painted the German foes as, “One vast gang of Jack-the-Rippers,” guilty of sadism such as raping and mutilating naked women and bayoneting babies. Gullace illustrates the social influence of these stories as demonstrated by the 1915 play, “Rada,” which had a dramatic scene where the women of a household were being raped by German soldiers. A young daughter cries out, “Oh British! British come! Come quickly British!”

Gullace also attributes the exaggerated atrocity stories to the media’s hunger to exploit public passions to sell newspapers, and the government’s compulsion to justify British involvement in another foreign war. Gullace describes the latter circumstance in terms of the pre-war British self-image. It had faltered during the 1900 Boer War when it was discovered that British soldiers had sexually abused imprisoned Boer women and the shame was still carried in the national conscience. Now, in 1914, Gullace posits, the atrocity stories permitted the British public to escape that stigma onto higher moral ground.

Gullace also examines the cultural forces that produced the social phenomenon of British women asserting their patriotism at the expense of the

men. It became fashionable and socially acceptable for British women to ostracize those men who they believed were avoiding their patriotic duty - which was to join the Army and fight. The sentiment received popular approval and was officially sanctioned. The "ideal" British man was characterized everywhere as "Tommy Adkins," the popular term for a British soldier - who was brave, cheerful, and fair.

Gullace cites this image as an outgrowth of the literary works of Rudyard Kipling during the Boer War, idealizing the British soldier. One poet characterized Tommy Adkins as the "...guardian of England's honor, avenger of her dead, and protector of her children." (p. 36) The image of Tommy Adkins seized the public's fancy and deviation from soldierly and patriotic sacrifice was not tolerated. Gullace quotes one newspaper editor's advice to a female reader who wanted to hold on to her man, as: "...there is much we can do at home.

One of the things is to cheer our dear ones, - husbands, sweethearts, fathers, and brothers - and send them off to their calling with brave, noble hearts." (p. 53) Perhaps the epitome of these passions can be best realized by The British Women's Union appeal to its members to "GIVE YOUR SONS." British women were in the patriotic vanguard, something unique in British history. The "White Feather Brigade" and "The Order of the White Feather" organized women to confront male shirkers and present them with the symbol of cowardice - the white feather.

The white feather leagues didn't last long, but they did presage the organization of feminists into what would emerge as the Suffragette Movement. One of Gullace's central theses is that the role at home that

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women played in the war prepared and persuaded the British nation that women were due complete citizenship, and that meant Suffrage. Gullace describes this political acquisition as a “ negotiated right,” and cites previous work by Susan Kingsley Kent, illustrating that until the revolutionary gender changes produced by the war, men and women had inhabited separate social spheres.

Taking advantage of the war time opportunity, women had asserted themselves into a full share of patriotic responsibility, they would then subsequently leverage into an equal share of social power. Women’s rights to full citizenship aren’t conventionally linked to the events and consequences of World War I, but Nicoletta F. Gullace makes a persuasive and detailed case that the British ladies of that era successfully fought their own war that led directly to women's suffrage.