

WOMEN OF COURAGE:
THE COMPLEXITY OF FRENCH WOMEN'S LIVES
IN WARTIME FRANCE, 1914-1918

by

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The study of women in France during World War I contains many different aspects. First it is essential to understand their place in society at the outbreak of the war and also examine the many faceted activities of the feminist movement in France from the same period. Contemporary sources from the period, in addition to further secondary research, give a comprehensive view of the effects of the war on a woman's place in society as a whole. When all these factors are taken into consideration, one unique portrait of French women in W.W.I should arise.

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This thesis is dedicated to Mlle Terry Higley who instilled in me a love of France and of history, and who spread her joy of life and learning wherever she traveled. May she always be remembered.

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I. INTRODUCTION

War is the quintessential gendering agent. Women are weaker by design, not by lack of fortitude, and are generally considered unfit for taking part in combat or warfare. Biological functions unique to the female sex are seen as their downfall in the male-dominated world that defines warfare. According to Arthur Warwick in Women at War, 1914-1918, women suffer from three physical handicaps: lesser muscular power, the time and energy devoted to maternity, and menstruation.¹ These factors make them unsuitable for participation in combat warfare. Madeleine Pelletier, a well known French feminist, once told her mother that some day she wanted to be a great general and serve the Republic. To this her mother responded, "Women are not soldiers; they are nothing at all; they marry, they cook and they bring up their children."² This was a standard belief in conservative France in the early twentieth century.

French women were at a very crucial point in their history at the outset of World War I. The years leading up to the war were loaded with action in women's movements. Rights were gradually being expanded, and women found freedom from the confines of a

¹ Arthur Warwick, Women at War, 1914-1918 (London:Croom Helm, 1977) 11.

² Marie Cross and Felicia Gordon, Early French Feminisms, 1830-1940: A Passion for Liberty (Cheltenham: Edgar Publishing, 1996) 235.

rigid home life easier to attain. However, France was still a nation imbedded with strong traditions, and any accomplishments were hard won. World War I exposes the dichotomy of women's lives at this point in French history. On one side, women were expected to wait patiently at home while the men joined the Patrie in the struggle for right and justice. Duty meant peacefully and without regret, sending loved-ones off to war. In reality, women were expected to rally to the work-place, to support the economy and their families at the same time, yet to remain socially and economically inferior to men. How could French women survive in such a bifurcated state?

The goal of this thesis is to examine the state of women's lives in France during the First World War, keeping their previous social context in mind, in hopes that a rich picture of diversity and complexity will emerge. A close study of the Parisian newspaper *Le Figaro* from 1914-1915 and research in numerous secondary sources will convey women's wartime experiences and the changes which took place in their history.

Along with a rich picture of women's lives during wartime France, the newspaper articles relating to women should also reveal changing attitudes in mainstream thought towards women. Contemporary journals, such as *Le Figaro*, offer a glimpse into the shifting attitudes of wartime culture. Framed within the feminist movement of the pre-war era and the changes that arose for women in French society as a result of the war, a close examination of the newspaper from 1914 to 1915 gives the historian a contemporary view of continuing stereotypes or changing ideals of women.

II. PREWAR WOMEN

Social Status of Women in the Third Republic

The status of women in France at the beginning of the Twentieth century was little better than that of second class citizen. French society and law still abided by the Civil Code, a set of legal and social standards enforced by the state, established in 1804 during the reign of Napoleon I. A woman was regarded as an “eternal minor” as she passed from the guardianship of her father in childhood to the protection and dependence upon her husband after marriage.³ For the most part, women were considered subordinate to men, even more so in the case of a wife to her husband. Article 213 of the Civil Code proclaims that “the husband must protect his wife; she must obey her husband.”⁴ All decisions pertaining to the household, where to live, how to spend money and so on, were the husband’s to make.

A wife had almost no legal autonomy, either; she could own land, but always held it jointly with her husband. Taxation of women

³ Paul Smith, Feminism and the Third Republic: Women’s Political and Civil Rights in France, 1918-1945 (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996) 162.

⁴ Smith 165

was the same as men, yet women had no legal power to determine how these taxes were spent. Only in 1897 was a woman declared a legal witness to formal documents and then, only with the permission of her husband.⁵ For a woman to obtain a divorce was also a difficult struggle. After being completely abolished in 1816, the right to divorce one's husband was reinstated in 1884, and then only on the grounds of guilt and not for reason of marital breakdown.⁶ Legal obstructions such as these emphasized the long tradition of woman's inferior status to men in French society.

Under the leadership of the French Third Republic (1870-1940) the "Cult of Domesticity" was the supreme definition for women. They were valued for their place in the home, as housewives and as the educators and care givers for children, though they were not considered a child's legal guardian.⁷ In fact, according to the Civil Code, married women were of the same social status as "children, criminals, [and] the mad- Article 213." Male members of the household controlled all aspects of the children's lives in the legal sense, even after they died. In the event of a father's death he would have appointed a *conseil de famille*⁸ in his will who would oversee

⁵ Smith 165

⁶ Peter Flora, State Economy and Society in Western Europe 1815-1975: A Data Handbook in Two Volumes (Chicago: St. James Press, 1983) 146.

⁷ Michelle Perrot, "The New Eve and the Old Adam: French Women's Condition at the Turn of the Century," Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars eds. Margaret Higonnet, Jane Jenson, Sonya Mitchel and Maragret Weitz (New Haven: Yale UP, 1987) 56.

⁸ Family council

the children's upbringing- a mother had no legal rights over the lives of her children.⁹

Other, more public obstacles confronted women in their everyday lives. Women could not vote or hold public office. A feminist and pacifist, Hélène Brion, said during her trial in 1917 (to be discussed further) "I appear before you [the court] accused of a political crime; but I am stripped of all political rights."¹⁰ Because they were discriminated against in both secondary and higher educational venues, women were virtually excluded from the professional work force. There were some limited occupational opportunities open to them, but for very meager wages. Only in 1907 did women earn the right to control their own income, yet they could not open a bank account without their husband's permission. Women were therefore dependent upon men both socially and economically.¹¹ If a woman was in a professional position, chances are she was not married. It was fine for young women to work... until they were married. Then the responsibility of a wife was her household and not her job.¹²

⁹ Smith 164

¹⁰ Cross 195

¹¹ Steven Hause and Anne Kenny, Women's Suffrage and Social Politics in the French Third Republic (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1984) 3-5.

¹² James McMillan, Housewife or Harlot: The Place of Women in French Society, 1870-1940 (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981) 118.

Women's Work in the Prewar Years

In the pre-war years it was not an uncommon occurrence that a woman held a job outside of the home. A census conducted in 1911 found that 38.7 per cent of French women worked outside of the home and of these women, 38 per cent were married.¹³ Women were allowed to hold jobs in various clerical positions, as telegraph or telephone operators, or secretaries.¹⁴ As for professional positions, records from 1912 note that there were 357 female medical students enrolled in Parisian medical programs. One year earlier doctor Mme Long-Landry became the first female director of a substantial Parisian medical clinic. In Paris at the outbreak of war there were several hundred female doctors, many of whom worked as interns in hospitals. The rise in progressive educational opportunities in the medical field certainly provided women with another career choice which became increasingly accepted as a viable profession.¹⁵

Besides doctors many women also worked in nursing, a

¹³ Judith Still, "The Reserve Army of Labor? French Women in the First World War," War and Society in 20th Century France, eds. Michael Scriven and Peter Wagstaff (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1991) 37-38.

¹⁴ Perrot 53

¹⁵ Steven Hause, "More Minerva than Mars", Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars, eds. Margaret Higonnet, Jane Jenson, Sonya Mitchell and Margaret Weitz (New Haven: Yale UP, 1987) 104.

profession acceptable for females. Young women were thought to be the perfect candidates for nursing jobs for a variety of reasons. First, they were considered patient and obedient, devoted to their work, calm and orderly. A female at the bedside of a wounded soldier was seen as one of the best medicines.¹⁶ Not to mention that nursing was also seen as excellent preparation for marriage. However, nursing, because of its irregular hours and huge time commitment, was a profession that was considered inappropriate for married women of the middle-class, who were expected to spend the entirety of their married lives as homemakers.¹⁷ Social work was also considered an acceptable career choice for an unmarried woman.

The largest percentage of women who worked outside of the home belonged to the working-class. They found employment in expanding industrial areas and factories which produced mainly textiles and garments. They were also employed by the state railways, the Paris Metro, and in other various state jobs. Statistics from 1911 show that 6,000 women were employed by the railways, 18,000 by the Ministry of Posts, which assigned state jobs, and 124 in the Parisian metros. The Ministry of Education also employed a large number of women. More women held teaching jobs at the primary levels (71,000) and fewer, but a substantial number in secondary teaching posts (30,000).¹⁸ Even though women were

¹⁶ McMillan 110

¹⁷ Hause, Women's Suffrage 121.

¹⁸ Hause Women's Suffrage 104.

allowed to hold such positions in the public sector, the difference in wages between what men and women still considerable. A disparity of 50 percent existed in 1911, a woman's earning power thus being significantly weaker than that of her male counterpart.¹⁹

Newspaper evidence shows that many women were actively seeking employment before the start of the war. The July 1, 1914 issue of *Le Figaro* two entire columns are dedicated to those women looking for work in the following positions: teachers, private tutors, maids, *dames de compagnie* (which is defined as translators and language instructors), governesses, cooks, cleaning women, laundresses, and home care nurses for both young and old. Domestic work was clearly another option for those seeking an income. (It is interesting to note that by the sixth month of the war, the classified adds look much the same as those from before the outbreak of the war.)²⁰

Feminist activities

The prewar activities of the feminist and suffrage movements were prominent and had been gaining importance throughout France and the whole of Europe. In France at the end of the nineteenth century, liberties for women had been increased, thanks to the

¹⁹ Still 37.

²⁰ *Les petites annonces*, Le Figaro 13 Jan. 1915: 6.

persistence of groups such as the *Ligue des femmes françaises* (L.F.F.) and the *Union française pour le suffrage des femmes* (U.F.S.F.). In the 1880's liberal republicans, supported by feminists, reinstated the right of women to divorce their husbands and greatly expanded educational opportunities for women.²¹ There was a full range of feminist publications, including *La Française*, *L'Action féministe*, *La Voix des femmes*, and *La Petite république*, which were published monthly, often weekly.²² From 1904, when only a few smaller groups were active, to 1914, the feminist movement claimed "500,00 of the avant-guard" to be in their ranks.²³

The months preceding of August 1914 saw some of the most radical and hotly debated activities of the French feminists and their supporters. During what is known as the Campaign of 1914, suffrage entered "a new phase", one of rapid social and political change. According to Françoise Thébaud, "1914 should have been the year of the Women."²⁴ In the last election of the Chamber of Deputies , a prosuffrage report was brought before the electors and was supported by 49 percent of the deputies. This "brought the suffragists within 10 votes of winning the municipal franchise."²⁵

²¹ Hause "Minerva" 101.

²² Hause "Minerva" 107.

²³ Hause Women's Suffrage 188.

²⁴ Françoise Thébaud, La femme au temps de la guerre de 14 (Paris: Editions Stock, 1994) 35.

²⁵ Hause Women's Suffrage 189.

In July, just one month before the war crisis, the suffragists organized a demonstration in the Tuileries at the heart of Paris. The Sermon of July Fifth “proclaimed the oath of the federal entente not to ‘cease raising our voices’ until they had seen women’s suffrage ‘graven in the marble of the laws!’.”²⁶ This excitement and active oath of participation lasted only four more weeks. The very last of the prewar feminist campaign was one of great triumph.

²⁶ Hause Women’s Suffrage 189.

III. LES ÉVÉNEMENTS ACTUELS: 1914-1918

When war erupted at the end of a glorious summer in 1914, all of Europe braced under the impact of abrupt upheaval. Men clamored to join the ranks and quickly found themselves in the midst of a war that was supposed to be over by Christmas of that same year. Women also reacted quickly but they dealt with the war in a different manner. Their unique and personal responses demonstrate courage and tenacity.

Wartime Work for women

The mobilization of the French army left open to women many occupations in the private sector which had never been available to them previously. Women were now left with major responsibilities, traditionally filled by males. Peasant women were to become “soldiers of the harvest,” while proletariat women “replaced in the field of labor those who are on the field of battle.”²⁷ Working-class and middle-class women had to learn to cope with family affairs, such as financing household expenses, and dealing with rising food

²⁷ Hause Women's Suffrage 191.

prices or shortages without a man at the head of the household.²⁸

Unfortunately, in the beginning months of the war many women found themselves unemployed due to the closure of the factories or industries in which they had worked (many businesses had to be closed from the start of the war till mid 1915). However, after the creation of widespread munitions factories and other booming war industries, women who had been displaced found alternative employment. For other women who, prior to the war, had never held a job, many new positions opened. A few women served as adjunct mayors and sat on municipal councils as non-voting members when men left seats vacant. Village teachers, considered to be in touch with the community, took over municipal positions left empty. Postal workers²⁹, who kept lines of communication open to other areas of the country, became important installations in villages. "One woman kept services going single-handed, despite having to make journeys under artillery fire. Another continued to telephone news from Étain during the bombardment of the town until she communicated her last message: a bomb has just fallen into the post office."³⁰

From the beginning of the war, the government expected women to take over some jobs that men had left vacant, and eventually women held positions in virtually all previously male

²⁸ McMillan 102.

²⁹ *Le Poste telecommunications et telediffusion* (P.T.T.) is a multifaceted organization responsible, not only for the mail but also for telegraphs and telephones

³⁰ McMillan 110.

dominated fields.³¹ Because factory owners considered women the last resort in the employable population, recruiting in the heavy industries was not implemented till mid-1915. Likewise, unions were hesitant to welcome women into their ranks for fear that they would drive wages down.³² Eventually the government supported and encouraged women to go to work because it freed more men for the trenches.³³ A governmental agency overseeing recruitment and employment of women in war industries called “The Board of Female Labor” was not established until 1916. Moderate feminists from different groups were appointed by the government to run the organization.³⁴ Up to this point, the government had managed to fill the majority of the jobs left unoccupied with others from the civilian population, such as laborers from French colonies and foreigners who lived in or near the French borders.³⁵

The most immediate need for women was in agriculture. Since the war broke out during the harvest season, there was much work to be done in the fields and not a lot of “man-power” with which to do it. In the August 7, 1914 issue of *Le Figaro* appeared a plea written by the President of the Council of Ministers, René Vivian, on behalf

³¹ Hause “Minerva” 107.

³² Mathild Dubesset, Franciose Thebaude, and Catherine Vincint, “The Female Munition Workers of the Siene,” *The French Home Front, 1914-1918*, ed. Patrick Fridenson (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1992) 188.

³³ Dubesset et al. 186.

³⁴ Hause *Women's Suffrage* 194.

³⁵ Dubesset et al. 186.

of the French government entitled "For the Harvest: A Call to French Women." This was definitely a patriotic approach in calling women to the harsh job of bringing in the year's harvest, but it also reflected a simple need for physical labor:

To the French Women- War was unleashed by Germany, despite the efforts of France, Russia and England to maintain peace. At the call of the Fatherland, your fathers, your sons, and your husbands answered and tomorrow they will rise to the challenge. The departure for the army for all those who can bear arms, leaves the work of the fields interrupted; the harvest is unfinished; the time for the grape harvest is near. In the name of the government of the Republic , in the name of the entire nation which stands behind you, I call your bravery, to that of the children whose age alone, and not their courage, prevents them from going to combat. I ask you to maintain the activity of the fields, to finish the harvest of the year, and to prepare the fields for the year to come. You cannot grant a greater service to the Patrie ... It is necessary to safeguard your sustenance, the supplies of the urban centers, and above all, the provisions of those who defend the frontier, for the independence of the country, civilization and Right ... Rise! Women, young children, daughters and sons of the homeland. Replace in the fields of work those who have gone to the fields of battle. Prepare yourselves to show them, tomorrow, cultivated earth, crops harvested, and sewn fields ... Long live the Republic! Long live France!

These exact sentiments were repeated the next year at the same time and for the same purpose. The importance of women taking over the places left absent by men at the front had great impact in many ways. The stomachs of the nation relied on the harvests, not only urban areas but also among those soldiers at the front who needed

extra nourishment.

The efforts of women in the agricultural realm were to be rewarded after the war because of “the valor with which mothers, wives and sisters of the mobilized have assumed the heavy task of working the earth.”³⁶ BY 1915, the government proposed that the *femmes-agriculteurs* who had worked in the fields be honored with the Agricultural Cross of Merit, accompanied by a certificate and letter of congratulations. For those outstanding women, who “replaced the men in the fields and thus aided to the prosperity of the country and the national defense”, a book of their names would be published after the war. Accolades such as these demonstrate not only the gratitude of the state towards women working in these areas but also the urgent need for labor. Extolling the women in this way throughout the war also worked as patriotic propaganda, encouraging more women to aid in the war effort.

The expansion of defense industries like chemical plants, and munitions factories were probably the largest new industries to open up employment opportunities for women. Work in this sector is therefore considered the greatest area of women’s mobilization during the war years. The best example of such new opportunities were the munitions factories in the Department of the Seine around Paris having 300,000 employees, a third were women.³⁷ These statistics changed throughout the course of the war. From about 8000 to 9000 women held jobs in the department of the Seine in

³⁶ Le Figaro 22 July 1915: 3.

³⁷ Dubesset et al. 186.

1914 which was five percent of the total work force. Women accounted for 30 percent of all workers in the Seine area by 1918.³⁸

Such a huge force as this was definitely a benefit for the French nation. Léon Abensour, a feminist sympathizer, had nothing but praise for the women who made themselves useful in the defense industry. In his 1921 book on the history of feminism he had this to say:

France had her munitionnettes, the female munitions workers who helped make victory possible, her female inspectors, measurers and master ironsmiths; she had her female operator who watched over flowing metal and those brave women who risked their lives encasing the tremendous power of high explosives.³⁹

Even though these women made a great effort towards winning the war, their employees did not always treat them with the same respect Abensour gives them. While it is a fact that working-class women's wages increased during the war years, women were still not granted equal pay for equal work. In 1918 the average wage for a woman was 7.50 - 12 francs a day, while the wage for a man was 8.50 - 18 francs a day, a considerable discrepancy. So while women were valued for their presence in the war effort, their time was not of equal importance.

The women who chose to work in these factories came from various backgrounds; some were simple housewives, members of the

³⁸ Dubesset et al. 185.

³⁹ Dubesset et al. 184.

petite bourgeoisie, or women whose husbands were part of the working-class. Physical strength and stamina were criteria for employment, yet women's work was considered low or unskilled. As a result, women entering the work force in this area rarely received any special training; all learning was on the job. Factory owners did see some positive attributes in women that made them desirable to hire. Women were considered patient which made them suitable for carrying out monotonous tasks, dexterous because of their smaller hands, and more prone than men to pay attention to detail. However, a woman was also considered "uninventive" and not competent enough to make important decisions; therefore they were rarely placed in positions of responsibility.⁴⁰

As civil servants women also held important posts which had formerly been off limits to them. Gabriel Hanotaux, of the Académie Française, wrote an editorial entitled "The Work of Women".⁴¹ He stated that "one is beginning to see the multiplication of the little hats of women drivers, and women coachmen throughout Paris". He also notes the multiplication of female faces at the post offices and banks. " These women are valiant, applied, attentive; they have a hard time managing their pain, but it is necessary to encourage them, to guide them in this new phase of the community where they are called to take the place of men who are at the front."

Another editorial about "The Woman of the Metro" describes the turmoil of being a woman in control of a crowded metro

⁴⁰ Dubesset et al. 189.

⁴¹ Le Figaro 20 June 1915: 2.

platform. "Since August, 1914, we have been assured that it is not necessary to have a vigorous man punch holes in our metro tickets. To sum up, the metros are running fine, no accidents thus all is well..." Apparently, the women who were employed by the city of Paris took their jobs very seriously, even in the face of unruly customers: "And so, the man refused to get off of the metro. *La dame du metro* cried, exasperated - Naughty kid, come here! - "Naughty kid", the words of a little girl. She who said it immediately had tears in her eyes. She stomped her foot. She was very upset. The man, who had refused to step down , laughed a little in her face and took off."⁴²

The two articles cited above do not give a particularly positive image of women who entered the work force. Although many women were praised for stepping into men's shoes, the newspaper editorials still reflected a bias against women in men's positions. Even though the bulk of these articles are positive in nature, could it be that men wanted to remind women that they were only filling in these places until they could reclaim what was rightfully theirs? A phrase such as "little women's hats" or images of a woman reduced to the tears of a little girl clearly demonstrate the reluctance of men to accept the participation of women in the public work force outright, no matter how much they were needed to keep public facilities open.

During the first year of the war journalists realized it was necessary to demonstrate the importance of women in the work

⁴² Le Figaro 17 Oct. 1915: 1.

force and exhibited their pride in these women by frequent articles. Women at work outside of the normal “female” professions were still seen as curiosities, not surprisingly journalists took notice of these non-conventional, wage earning women, even if it was in a time of war. Since women were not legally allowed to hold public posts, either elected or appointed, the title of the following article: “Young Woman of 22 Mayor of Village.” especially evoked notice. Originally printed in the feminist newspaper *La Française* as a letter written by the woman herself, *Le Figaro* decided to reprint this slice of life article no doubt for its original content:

I learned that in my neighborhood, the mayor and his advisors had been mobilized, and affairs were not going so well. I went to the Prefecture where they said to me “Don’t return to your post at the Red Cross where they are calling you and take advantage of this time to help reorganize your community.” I convinced the members of the municipal council that very day to let me stay on with them. I had hoped that one of them would want to take over the post of mayor; that was not to happen. A boastful discussion ensued where old arguments of the past were brought up and nobody wanted to take charge: “You shouldn’t have stayed, young lady- not one of us is capable of doing the work and none of us have the time either.” “As long as the Red Cross doesn’t call me back, I accept the post gladly, by if they do I’ll refuse the position.” “Well then, we’ll coordinate a petition so that you can’t leave!” Very worried (because with all my soul I wanted to heal the wounded) I went to find the sous-prefect [under-constable] to explain the situation: “Young lady, you should not have any doubts that it is your duty to stay here. At the Red Cross you can be easily replaced, we can’t do that in this community where you are indispensable. You will be able to prove your patriotism even more by remaining here

than going there. I will release you of your duties to the Red Cross and I am convinced that you will fulfill your task here very well. At any rate, it is a great honor that you have been chosen to fill this post..."

In the commentary at the end of the article by the editor of *Le Figaro*, declares that this is another woman won over to the feminist side, perfectly content to be a female in public power.⁴³

One of the best known characters to emerge from the war, the Red Baron, flew to his fame as a pilot. Strictly a male occupation, right? Wrong... Some women dared even to cross this gender boundary. According to an article appearing September 1915, eight young women were in fact licensed pilots and ready to fly their first missions for the glory of France:

They are eight, exactly; eight young women, who before the war, by the strength of their hearts, conquered their pilots test, and whose air exhibitions allowed them a small living. And voila! Fourteen months later they are grounded and can no longer "take to the air." All of this upsets them. Two of these aviators came yesterday to share with us their anger. Both young, elegant and serious like all other middle-class women who have never left the ground. One of them began to speak in an almost childlike voice. "Would you be willing to speak for us, sir? What we ask is simple. We would like, as all women do at this time, to help in some way and to utilize our profession. Aviators are welcomed everywhere. Why push away female pilots?" This young woman who spoke with such softness pulled from her handbag a letter covered with signatures and with seals. This letter

⁴³ *Le Figaro* 11 May 1915: 1.

indicated that she was military... Her companion who was not part of the military spoke up and said sadly, "What does that mean that you don't want us?" Their airplanes are dispersed among faraway hangers, because they don't have the right to fly in them as long as the war goes on. The sky is, for the moment, a site off-limits to the public, I mean to say civilians, only those in the military... One of the girls says: "Doesn't the Health Service accept the aid of women? All in all, we don't ask any favors. We simply wish to be treated like the women in the Red Cross are treated." "That is not the same thing, Madame." "Why isn't it the same thing, Sir?" "Well, the Red Cross is in the background and does not take part in the war directly. They heal the wounded soldiers but they are not soldiers themselves. There is not a reason why women cannot be included in flight, just so that they aren't flying military missions." I saw, in the smile of my questioner that she was thinking, "This man doesn't understand at all," and rapidly she replied: "Sir, it is not a question of us becoming soldiers, nor couriers, and we do not want to take part in the bombardment of villages. Let us stay behind the lines, like the women of the Red Cross, and we will do our work there. Everyday, planes are brought from the front, destroyed, distorted, full of holes. They are transported to places to be repaired. And when, like new, they are ready to go back, they are given to the care of a pilot who takes it back to the front. Don't you see that our little group of pilots would be very well employed at this service? Around Paris there are four hangers and two of us could work at each... Through aviation we earned lots of money which is something that the war has taken away.. Doesn't it seem reasonable that during the war we should still be able to make money through our profession. This military work would be good for the country and we could still earn a living. We want to live honestly.." And with that they took their leave of me⁴⁴.

⁴⁴ "Nos aviatrices s'ennuient," Le Figaro 27 Sept. 1915: 1.

It is interesting to note that these women are not only expressing their desire and right to fly planes in wartime but also demanding that they be able to make a living in their profession. The newspaper editor seems attentive enough to hear out their argument but he then makes no comments on whether or not the sky is a woman's place during war. Presumably, since it is a rare thing to see a woman in combat at the end of the twentieth century, a woman born at the turn of the century certainly met with a losing battle. Women were allowed to cross the gender barrier only in limited areas, which led to their confusing situation within wartime France.

Another complex position women found themselves in during the war was their new position title of "working mother", a relatively modern notion. The conflict between motherhood and earning a living was something that laborers and feminists had to deal with when large numbers of women streamed to the war industries. Some provision had to be made for young children and mothers with infants who were still nursing. After an inquiry conducted by the Committee on Women's Work in 1917 found that women in war related industries rarely took the maternity leave that they were entitled to, it was decided that pregnant women should be seen by midwives provided by their place of employment. The Committee also recommended that nursing rooms and *garderies* (day-care centers) be established in factories so that women would have a safe and controlled environment in which to place their

children while they were at work.⁴⁵ The Ministry of War was hesitant to implement such actions for fear that it would hinder female recruitment but, convinced by the Committee as well as the League Against Infant Mortality, the government finally took actions which provided for the needs of both mothers and children.

The provisions for mothers were quite extensive. A 1917 law proclaimed that women who were nursing young children would receive time off from work to accomplish this task; they were allotted one hour a week for one year. In addition, employers of a hundred or more women over the age of 15 were required to install nursing rooms on the premises or somewhere close by.⁴⁶ According to first hand accounts, "these buildings are as modern and as sanitary as can be... Competent nurses care for the babies during the day."⁴⁷ These measures ensured healthy children and enabled women to combine work and motherhood.

The entrance of women and mothers into the work force created a paradox in the traditional ideology about a woman's place. Both liberal feminists and the political right saw benefits to having women enter the work force but for differing reasons.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Mary Lynn Stewart, Women, Work and the French State: Labor Protection and Social Patriarchy, 1879-1919 (Montreal: McGill-Queens Press, 1989) 189.

⁴⁶ Anne Cova, "French Feminism and Maternity: theories and policies, 1890-1918," Maternity and Gender Policies: Women and the Rise of the Welfare States, eds. Giselda Bock and Pat Thane (London: Routledge, 1991) 132.

⁴⁷ R. Louise Fitch, Madame France (New York: The Women's Press, 1919) 123.

⁴⁸ Dubesset et al. 187.

Conservatives felt that women made a sacrifice for the homeland when they supported both wartime industries and their families at the same time. It was a demonstration of heroism, loyalty and patriotism. Of course when the war concluded, conservatives also believed that women would return peacefully to their homes.

Feminists declared that the entrance of numerous women into the work force during wartime was just the first step to the normalization of female wages and job opportunities. Certainly, thought the feminists, peacetime would only improve the situation.

The Home Front

Clearly, not all women during the war found it necessary to supplement their lives by finding a job. One of the most revealing areas of the participation of women toward the war effort was their participation in the many charitable organizations that arose as a result of the conflict. These organizations were bound to be a large part of women's lives. By the end of 1915, it is likely that every woman knew someone who was in active service at the front and her activities revolving around charitable groups could have acted in many ways. These organizations enabled women to contribute to the welfare of the nation at a time of special need and may also have acted as support groups for women who had either lost a loved one in the war or were in constant worry of doing so. A woman who had never worked in any capacity other than housewife may have also

felt more comfortable in one of these less radical, more apolitical groups.

For the most part charitable organizations were headed by either aristocratic or bourgeois women.⁴⁹ These women had not only the time but also the money required to run a charitable organization. While women of the middle and lower classes found themselves in charge of earning wages for their entire family, aristocratic and wealthier women would have had the luxury of a fixed income and thus, fewer monetary worries.

The evidence of upper-class and aristocratic women giving time and money to aid the war effort is well documented in the news during the first year of the war. In January 1915 one such instance was the object of newspaper comment. The Duchess of Vendôme and her daughter, the princess Marie-Louise, held an art auction in order to benefit the auxiliary hospital at Neuilly.⁵⁰ Another aristocratic *benefactrice*, the Baroness Lejuene (born princess Marguerite Murat), submitted to the newspaper her idea for an organization called the *Association d'aide aux veuves de militaires de la grande guerre*.⁵¹ This organization would function to perform three tasks: freely to give support in all administrative and judicial matters, to help find employment, and to allocate financial aid.⁵² In almost all other

⁴⁹ Hause, Women's Suffrage 191.

⁵⁰ "Charité," Le Figaro 24 Jan. 1915: 3.

⁵¹ Association of Aide for Widows of the Great War

⁵² "Secours et communiques; Pour les veuves," Le Figaro 16 April 1915: 2.

editions of the newspaper, any action taken by aristocratic women and their families was printed daily, almost as if it were a continuation of the gossip columns of the pre-war era; a sort of “Who’s Who” in wartime charity.

It is not surprising that the majority of women depicted in the newspapers fulfilled the ultimate images of “charitable women.” Journalists in a mainstream newspaper such as *Le Figaro* would have felt more familiar with a woman who was working out of her home knitting socks for soldiers than another who was driving ambulances behind the front lines. And in fact there were those women filling the traditional role of the homemaker who still managed to help in some way. *L’Oeuvre de l’amélioration du logement ouvrier* (The Charity for the Improvement of the Workers Living) organized a campaign for people to send packages to soldiers on behalf of families who were too poor to send anything themselves. The packages contained warm blankets, hats, gloves and anything that would keep the soldiers warm in the cold and frozen trenches.⁵³ No doubt many women spent hours at home making such items. Other women took it upon themselves to set up impromptu canteens in train stations. When the sick and wounded arrived from the front, these charitable women made it their duty to feed the soldiers and make them as comfortable as possible.⁵⁴

One interesting “charitable work” that arose during the war was the phenomenon of *les marraines*, or godmothers. These were

⁵³ “Les Secours,” *Le Figaro* 26 Jan. 1915: 3.

⁵⁴ “Une œuvre modeste et belle,” *Le Figaro* 28 Feb 1915: 2.

women who, out of the goodness of their hearts, wanted desperately to befriend a soldier without family because “it is really horrible, especially now, not to have any family and not to receive something in the mail once in a while” (writes a 15 year old maid).⁵⁵ Twice in the course of the first year of the war *Le Figaro* ran letters that had been sent to the editor out of the hundreds they had received:

Sir, From the bottom of my heart, I would like to correspond with one of our soldiers who is asking for a fairy-godmother. I am a woman of the people, so not rich but I really want to go without different things for a soldier who has deprived himself of everything to defend me. They are very admirable. Please send me the address of the poorest and worst-off .

After receiving bags of letters like the one above, the editor asks how is it that these young girls still have so much love to give after such a long time at war? He concludes by saying that it is good to know that “till the end, there will always be fairy-godmothers.”⁵⁶ Women are again placed in their proper role as care givers, needed to keep the home fires burning and the civilian morale in a positive state.

⁵⁵ “Pour nos soldats: Une marraine,” Le Figaro 17 June 1915: 2.

⁵⁶ “Pour nos soldats - Un marraine,” Le Figaro 18 Oct. 1915: 3.

Women on the Front

Red Cross Activity

The activities of organizations run and staffed primarily by women can be best characterized by the actions of the Red Cross. Not only did these women organize efforts towards aiding those left in the civilian capacity, but also their work with the wounded and sick in field hospitals and care centers elsewhere was immeasurable. During the course of the war, nurses at the front lines and at military hospitals became heroines and folk symbols for women throughout France - icons for the war.

The Red Cross effort of World War I in France was actually formed of three different women's organizations that had already existed before the war. On August 7, 1914, merely one week after France declared itself at war, the mobilization of women's groups into Red Cross units had begun. The three branches of the *Croix Rouge* who acted were the *Association des Dames Françaises*, *L'Union des femmes de France*, and *La Société Blessé Militaire*.⁵⁷ Each of these groups was associated with the Red Cross yet acted

⁵⁷ Association of French Women, The French Women's Union, and The Society for Wounded Soldiers.

independently. One reason for this was that each group consisted of women a different social class. The S.B.M. was made up of aristocratic and wealthy women, the U.F.F.'s members were of the upper-middle class, while the A.D.F. drew members from the lower middle-class. Such class divisions can be explained in the words of R. Louise Fitch, a contemporary of the war: "France is not yet a democracy in any sense of the word, though it is a republic."⁵⁸

In order to make the public aware of what kind of services the Red Cross had to offer, these groups together ran an article in *Le Figaro* stating how many hospitals and beds the French people could count on from them. The organizations had a total of 34,250 beds distributed among 600 hospitals and clinics; they requested donations in order to establish twice as many.⁵⁹ Near the end of the war these numbers more than doubled, and by 1918 the number of nurses associated with the Red Cross was estimated to be about 55,000 (Fitch, 43). In Marseilles alone there were seventeen auxillary hospitals and *services de santé* (medical annexes) which among them contained 3714 beds. Over the course of the war their facilities received 80,000 soldiers who accumulated 3,800,000 days of total hospitalization. At the start of the war Bordeaux, a town in Western France far from the hostilities, had a hospital with only 880 beds. By 1918, with the help of the Red Cross, sixteen more auxillary hospitals were funded and 7162 more beds made available

⁵⁸ Fitch 42.

⁵⁹ "La mobilisation de la Croix Rouge," *Le Figaro* 7 Aug. 1915: 2.

in this area.⁶⁰

Women's groups acting independently of the Red Cross used their own funds and resources to initiate drives to increase their supplies and buying power. The president of the U.F.F., Mme Perouse, with the aid of Mme Chabanaud and Mme Charles Benoit, declared that they would arrange for the donation of an ambulance to the front lines. This same organization also offered classes for those women wishing to become nurses' aides and created a canteen for children whose mothers were military employees or working towards the war effort.⁶¹

Accounts from the first year of the war depict the way in which these heroines near the front lines were seen by the general public. Some articles concentrate on the bravery of the women, and others recount stories of great losses and reasons for mourning. The sacrifices made by nurses were held in the highest regard and their deaths often warranted special honors and posthumous awards. The manner in which some of these women died at the front lines was often just as gruesome as deaths in the trenches. Even though they were women, their bravery in death was celebrated just as a man's would have been, and the awful details of their deaths were not glossed over.

One very explicit article, "Women of France," appearing in the February 15, 1915 issue of *Le Figaro* is among the first to detail the activities of females working near the front lines. These women

⁶⁰ McMillan 110.

⁶¹ "La mobilisation de la Croix Rouge," *Le Figaro* 7 Aug. 1914: 2.

apparently worked for a branch of the Red Cross through the *L'Union des femmes de France*:

The Union of French women has been struck by another grief: Mlle Houdin died at the hospital of Verdun from typhoid fever contracted while at the bedsides of our wounded. Five other nurses have already become victims of their devotion: Mlle Gilles was killed by a shell in Luneville while taking the sick to an underground shelter; Mlle Cagnard killed in Cambrai by a bullet received in the face; Mlle LeDantec in Morlaix, died of an illness contracted while dressing the wounds of the severely wounded; Mme Philbert, killed during the bombardment, while she was returning to the hospital. Later, "The Book Of Gold" will be published of all these devotions but it is right to now cite the names of a certain number of devoted and courageous women who have sacrificed their lives for those of our soldiers. For example: Mlle Despierre, Mme Soudeillette, Mme Quinet Others have been taken prisoner: Mlle Picard, Mme Koltz, Mlle Maffre... Most of them are still in the hands of the Germans. In Arras, like in other localities, Mme Denise, Milles Levesque, Le Fer, de la Motte and Curiez... have not deserted their posts, whatever the violence of the bombardment may be. It is the same for all of the teams of nurses attached to the hospitals of the invaded regions.

The women in this article are treated in a very masculine way; their wounds are real and were obtained in the realm of combat though they were not among those fighting. Shown in this light, the subject of typical female fragility and timidity is deconstructed. A journalist could simply choose to depict the woman in her "natural" role of care-giver and as a source of solace. This is done to some extent, but besides this the danger in which these women placed

themselves is made evident, giving them greater credibility in the male realm of war.

Not only were women lauded for their bravery in death but honored with awards as well. These awards were generally bestowed upon those who had fallen in the line of duty; however, some women were honored just on merit earned while in the military hospitals. The *Medaille d'Honneur des Epidemies*⁶² came in four different categories: gold, silver, and bronze medals and the mark of satisfaction. According to articles published, these medals were given to women who continued their brave efforts in the hospitals or health annexes near the front lines. A short account of some women given these awards appeared in the October 7, 1915 issue of *Le Figaro*. Each woman is named, as is her place of birth, rank in the Red Cross, and hospital location. Her home town was no doubt listed in order to give credit to those regions contributing to the war effort through the aid of their patriotic women.

Some articles listing the Medal of Epidemic recipients were much more detailed and commanded a heading of their own instead of being in a specific section of the newspaper.

“ French Heroism- Medals of Epidemics” - Miss Stephens (Alice), and English nurse at the temporary hospital #23 in Houlgate, who contracted typhoid fever while healing, with the greatest care, the most serious of the ill who had also contracted this affliction. Mlle Burlin, a nurse of the Union of French Women, for the devotion with which she gives comfort to the injured at the auxillary

⁶² Medals of Honor for Epidemics

hospital #108 in Commercy; having suffered an injury in her right hand made it necessary for two surgical interventions. A *Medal of Honor For the Epidemics*, in silver, was awarded to Mlle Mery (Angele), a volunteer nurse in Vannes, for the devotion with which she gave aide to the sick at hospital #54, suffering from scarlet fever; she contracted the same grave form of this sickness.⁶³

While this account is not necessarily uplifting, the women are still portrayed as heroines. Citations such as these functioned not only as recognition for those women sacrificing their energy at the front but also as a real eye opener for the public. They show what women could accomplish when placed in dire situations. At the very least, the issue of a woman's worth outside of the home gradually entered the mainstream.

Prostitution and sex

For the most part, any woman who came into contact with a soldier while on her tour of duty was most likely a member of the many medical teams which supported the front. There was also another kind of woman who found work at the front lines: the prostitute. Prostitution was more common than not, and established brothels were found frequently just behind the line of fire. With the covert cooperation of the military, which turned a blind eye to the

⁶³ "L'heriosm Français," Le Figaro 15 Feb. 1915: 2.

prostitutes, they established themselves just behind the front lines and could expect fairly regular wages and hours. These “working women” were often given 400 francs a day for an 18 hour shift in addition to a rest period in Paris once a month. At first, professional prostitutes feared that they would be recruited into more conventional jobs as a result of the male labor shortage, but just the opposite proved to be true. “From 1916, new houses were opened up to try to keep the pace with the inordinate sexual needs of men” in constant fear of death.⁶⁴ Prostitution, while not the optimum means of employment for women, definitely made its mark during the war years.

While some women near the front lines willingly became prostitutes or mistresses to German soldiers (*femmes à Boche*), others became victims because of their sex.⁶⁵ Men far away from home took to brutalizing women, and the consequences of these actions became a concern of the French authorities. Special arrangements were made for women who had been raped and as early as April 1915, an organization was formed which would care for those women who had been victimized by German soldiers:

In the maternity wards of Paris, women who fear repercussions in their own towns, will be welcomed as long as it is necessary and with complete discretion. They will be transported there free of charge. The children who are left at the maternity wards will be placed in the care of the government and their birth

⁶⁴ McMillan 106.

⁶⁵ McMillan 108.

parents will remain unrecorded.⁶⁶

This was in conjunction with an 1893 law by which the state was required to give free medical care for the survivors of rape and their babies.⁶⁷ Children of such unions were known as “Boche babies” (Boche being the derogatory French term for Germans) and were often abandoned after birth. A home for these children and other abandoned babies was established in Lyon in 1916.⁶⁸

The subject of *les indésirés* (undesired ones) who were the issue of a violent act, fueled anew the debate over the legalization of abortion. Hatred of the German fathers induced vicious opinions - people asked, “should the child of a barbarian come to life?” Senator Louis Martin proposed that penalties against abortions in the occupied territories be terminated and Victor Marguerite (author of a scandalous 1922 novel, *La Garçonne*) “demanded the right to abort - in order to suppress these monstrous beings in their embryonic form.”⁶⁹ Others expressed the opposite sentiment against abortion. Founder of the feminist magazine *La Française*, Jane Misme argued that “It is true that sexual violence leaves marks on the woman. But a pregnancy is not a pollution, it is a manifestation of life.” Ultimately, abortion was not declared legal and women were given

⁶⁶ “Pour les femmes victimes de Allemands,” *Le Figaro* 9 April 1915: 2.

⁶⁷ Cova 132.

⁶⁸ Fitch 114.

⁶⁹ Cova 132.

the option to either abandon their babies to the state or keep them if they wished. According to R. Louise Fitch “ a mother [often] kept the Boche baby - because it needed her and was helpless.”⁷⁰

It is interesting to note that in the debate over abortion, the right of the mother is not discussed. Rather what upset people was the idea of bringing a “monstrous being” to life that upsets people. This raises the issue of the invasive force of the State into a woman’s life. The idea that a woman could or should control her own body was, at this time, a debate that was just beginning. Legally, since a woman had no rights of guardianship over her children, it comes as no surprise that the masculine State determined how a woman treated her body. This is especially true in the case of rape, for when the father of the child is absent the government must step in and take over the paternal role. Even in World War I, where women in France were beginning to realize real freedom for the first time and encounter public responsibilities, the state continued to maintain absolute power over their bodies.

⁷⁰ Fitch 114.

Women in the occupied territories

For the people in the zones occupied by invading forces, life held more everyday perils and dangers were rife. Madeleine Pelletier in her war diary tells of a courageous inn-servant, who calmly recounted how a shell exploded next to her.⁷¹ Residents also faced anti-French propaganda and humiliation at the hands of the German army which led to a severe loss of civilian morale. The danger of being killed or taken prisoner by hostile forces was real and immediate. On January 25, 1915, *Le Figaro* reported that women and children had been taken prisoner by German troops:

“ Women and Children, Prisoners!” - The Times has published interesting and moving articles about the condition of certain population in the invaded territories. That the Germans kill and destroy is not, unfortunately, surprising. But that they have taken into captivity seven to eight hundred women from Saint-Michel and 143 children from Hanonville. Why? Is it to suppress, in areas where it is difficult to receive fresh supplies, useless mouths? Not with our French reasoning can we explain the reasons for the acts of the Germans.

The same article goes on to explain other instances of women and children being affected by the German invaders. In Marcheville

⁷¹ Cross 154.

some weeks earlier, women, young girls and children had been sent to Germany. According to news from the prisoners themselves, they were taken to a refugee camp in Bavaria that held about 650 or 700 captives. The latter were reported as being "not too bad off, except they complained because they were not allowed to bring enough warm clothing."

The safety of families in the occupied territories, now usually headed by women, was of great concern. "To protect mothers, to save babies, is an important task in times of peace, sacred in times of war" affirmed Paul Strauss, Senator.⁷² Of the two million people who became refugees from the northern and eastern regions of France, about 75 percent were women and children.⁷³ In many regions entire towns were evacuated to enable their populations to escape the dangers of warfare, but this was not the case everywhere. Presumably, some people left behind in villages had no close relations with whom they could seek shelter, or they had to stay in the war zone in order to keep the family business running, especially if they were agricultural farmers. However, towns people would send children to shelters managed by Red Cross volunteers if these shelters were available. One such shelter was located and used by the village of Furnes:

" Women Killers" - Yielding to the pressing advisory warnings of the civil authorities, most of the families in Furnes have sent their children several kilometers away

⁷² "La Criox Rouge maternelle," Le Figaro 26 Sept. 1915: 1.

⁷³ Fitch 112.

from town to specially reinforced barracks in the countryside, one can only hope, out of the way of the bombardments. It was these barracks which were bombarded Saturday. The bomb fell on a part of the establishment meant for the administration of the facility. It killed Mlle Pauline Van Hee, a rich bourgeois from Furnes, and wounded two Canadian nurses: Miss Saunders and Miss MacLean. At the time of the bombardment these courageous women were preparing dinner for the children. ⁷⁴

Unfortunately, neutral shelters for children were not exempt from all dangers.

French citizens who had not been evacuated or relocated were often forcibly taken into Germany to work in German munitions factories, whether they were male or female.⁷⁵ January 1915: "The entire male population [of Avillers] between the ages of sixteen and sixty was taken into Germany... No one knows what will happen to the women, young girls, and children left behind."⁷⁶ In August 1915, young women in the Department du Nord were put to the task of filling sandbags for the German army entrenched near their villages.⁷⁷ Most deportations affected mainly the male population, but in some instances women accounted for a large percentage of those involved. Around Easter 1916, young women and girls were

⁷⁴ "Tueurs des femmes," Le Figaro 13 Nov. 1915: 1.

⁷⁵ McMillan 101.

⁷⁶ "Des femmes et des enfants prisonniers" Le Figaro 25 Jan. 1915: 2.

⁷⁷ France, *Ministre des affaires étrangères*, The Deportation of Women and Girls From Lille (New York: G.H. Doran Co., 1916) 4.

taken from larger towns in northeastern France to work in the fields of Ardennes and the Aisme. This is known in government annals as the “Deportation of Lille.” The events and conditions of this mass deportation are shocking, especially when seen through the eyes of those who lived through the horror.

During Holy Week 1916, General von Graevenitz of the German army posted orders in the towns of Lille, Roubaix, Tourcoing and the surrounding areas, stating that girls 15 to 20, young women, and men up to the age of 55 were to prepare themselves for eventual deportation into the regions of Aisme and Ardennes for the purpose of agricultural work.⁷⁸ When the deportation was complete, eventually 25,000 people had been carried off, of whom about one-half female. Madame Marie of Lille gave the reason they were needed as follows: “on the pretext of difficulties caused by England in the matter of provisions and of the refusal of the men out of work to volunteer for work in the fields, the Germans have embarked on a forcible evacuation of the population. ” Only mothers with children under 14 were spared. Each person was allowed 30 kilograms of luggage, and they were advised bring their own eating utensils, wool blankets and good, sturdy shoes.⁷⁹ Much to the shock of these villages, raids “compelling” the inhabitants to comply with orders began in the middle of the night, the day before Easter. “Young girls, of an irreproachable life - who have never committed any worse crime than trying to pick up some bread or a few potatoes to feed a

⁷⁸ France 5.

⁷⁹ France 11.

numerous family - have been carried off," declared the Bishop of Lille.

Depositions taken by the French government after the return of the citizens give the most intriguing accounts of the events as they occurred. According to Mlle Argentine A_ , age 27, those deported were forced to work without compensation of any sort, neither money nor nourishment. Mme J. R_ , age 25, claims that "all we women were subjected to inspection every five days like women of the town. Those who did not accomplish their task ... were beaten by the Germans, especially with a cat-o'-nine tails." Women were forced to work in the fields, even under fire and at night. Mlle V_ , age 27 stated: "My sister was engaged on this work [potato harvesting] between the lines of the two combatants, in spite of the continual bombardment." In one instance, a bomb fell in the field where a group of young women were threshing wheat. Consequently, the Germans took shelter in nearby cellars but forced the girls to continue their work.⁸⁰

Arguments of outrage directed at the German army were expressed again and again and reveal not only concern for the health of the girls taken but also concern for their social status and virtue. The Bishop was concerned for the morality of those taken: "Morality is exposed to perils, the mere idea of which revolts every honest man, from the promiscuity which inevitably accompanies removals *en masse* involving the mixture of the sexes or, at all events, of

⁸⁰ France 40-45.

persons of very unequal moral standing.”⁸¹ Both “modest girls and prostitutes,” both servants and their female employers, were carried off in trucks in the same manner. In many of the letters of protest much is made of the fact that there was no regard for the social standing of the women. This concern reflects the importance of women’s modesty, chastity and morality in French society, not an unheard of notion but one that conveys the influence of the conservative laws and ethics of Napoleon’s Civil Code.

Everyday lives

In the context of war, social activities and *la vie quotidienne*⁸² were bound to change. The dramatic shift in demographics was certainly one of the first things to be noticed. According to an early unofficial census taken of Paris right after the start of the war, of the 1,807,044 inhabitants of Paris, 949,067 were women while only 505,486 men remained.⁸³ Already in August the government had acted to secure the well-being of those women whose husbands had been mobilized. “The state has created a law that fixes an allotment of 1F 25 per day for each woman without resources and whose husband

⁸¹ France 16.

⁸² Everyday life

⁸³ “La population: ceux qui sont partis, ceux qui restent,” Le Figaro 22 Sept. 1914: 2.

is serving the *tricolor*.”⁸⁴ Along with the wife’s allocation, children were to receive 50 centimes each.⁸⁵ This law did not account for other dependents of the mobilized; thus, sisters, mothers or mother-in-laws who were often reliant upon a male member of their family, had to find another source of provisions

The daily lives of women living in France at this time depended on their social status. Lower-class women were almost always obligated to find work. Women who had previously run a business with their husbands would have continued to do so, often taking in other women in search of part-time work. The response of those asked how a woman’s life had changed due to the war, was often ambiguous. There was the usual “maintain the country and normal life in the absence of men” and “support the morale of the men at the front,” but any mention of abnormalities was conspicuously absent from news journals⁸⁶. The adaptation of women, especially Parisian women, reflects how much the war had become integrated into everyday lives:

...Women adapted right away. In the name of simplicity they pay less attention to their appearance and more time on economics. They no longer rival one another in elegance but in charity. Some gather on a daily basis at their homes, knitting clothes destined for our soldiers, or else they visit the wounded, sick, and the lame. They

⁸⁴ Popular name for the French flag; “Pour les militaires,” Le Figaro 12 Aug. 1914: 2.

⁸⁵ Gertrude Atherton, The Living Present (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Co., 1917) 44.

⁸⁶ Le Figaro 1 July 1915: 1-2.

offer their services in the canteens or other charities...⁸⁷

Towards the end of 1915, the content and tone of articles appearing in *Le Figaro* reveal that war had become a fact of life, a necessary evil, so-to-speak. Changes in the daily lives of women which had occurred at the beginning of the war became less noted and accepted more freely.

Feminism and the War

Declaration of war changed the mission and purpose of the suffrage and feminist movements in France, as it did in most European countries. Previously, feminist groups had not only been devoted to women's rights but also to the rights of humanity. Thus many groups had abandoned pacifism. In 1914 most major women's groups had participated in rallies which promoted pacifism throughout the world. These groups were of course also fiercely loyal to their nation -- which was only logical given that their main focus was on gaining the right to be involved in government affairs. The invasion of French territory and the threat to national security caused the abandonment of pacifism in favor of patriotism. The feminists declared that it was the woman's duty to defend the honor of her nation and to support that nation by any means. It was the

⁸⁷ "L'Adaptation," *Le Figaro* 23 Jan. 1915: 1.

time for women to show their patriotism for a country they loved and of which they wanted to be active citizens. The *Ligue française pour les droits des femmes* (L.F.D.F)⁸⁸ declared: "We will claim our rights when the triumph of Right is assured."⁸⁹ Thus, the focus of the feminist movement shifted as a result of the war.

Using their own resources and members, feminist groups all over France made known their commitment to the national defense. At the very beginning of the war, feminist publications went out of print due to the sudden upheaval and impact of the war. Over time a transformation took place in the literature and publications of feminist groups. No longer were there columns devoted to women's causes; rather, newspapers continued publishing but with a different message. Two feminist newspapers, *La Française* and *Le droit de femmes*, resumed their publication in the six months after the declaration of hostilities, but instead of articles relating to women's issues and suffrage, commentaries aimed at boosting morale and promoting patriotic feelings in the female populace. More radical groups such as the *Group des femmes socialistes* and the *Section française de l'internationale ouvrière* also backed government policies regarding national defense.⁹⁰

An exemplar of feminist duty was Mme Marguerite de Witt-Schlumberger, the president of *L'Union française pour le suffrage*

⁸⁸ French League for Women's Rights

⁸⁹ Hause, *Women's Suffrage* 191.

⁹⁰ Hause, *Women's Suffrage* 90.

des femmes. She sent five sons off to war and stated: "in these solemn hours, one can cry on the inside, but one does not cry on the outside, one works."⁹¹ Her "Call to Women" in the July 11th edition of *Le Figaro* demonstrates just how supportive of the war she expected women to be. Called the Apostle of the suffragists by the editor of the paper, her demand that women show support and love for husbands, brothers, fathers and lovers at the front spoke to women of all classes, whether or not they were in favor of previous feminist credos.

Women of France, we are all sisters in the love of our country and in our duty towards the national defense. Do not forget that we are going to be put to the test, remember that the entire world is going to judge the quality of our soul and the valor of our spirits. It will be by the manner in which we treat our soldiers and certainly in the manner in which we let them depart from us. If we are upset with France or if we mistreat our loved ones, or are indignant at being the mothers of soldiers, or sisters without courage, or fiancées without moral valor, what will the world think of us?... Each woman who reduces the sense of duty to the homeland in any man's mind should be treated as a criminal! As we fight not only for the country, but also for the principle of Right and Justice in the world, our duty must be to accept this not like a heavy burden but as an honor and a joy. Women of France, my sisters, we must wait in patience and without recrimination to see again our hopes [for suffrage]. Our desires, no matter how legitimate, must become subordinate to the defense of the nation. We must accept these responsibilities, and accept the duties that have been laid upon us.

⁹¹ Thébaud 24.

She warns not to let feelings of distress show on one's face, for this will upset the morale of the soldiers going off to fight. In her appeal, she makes simple yet dignified pleas to women, which will help the entire country through the war. It is obvious that if the U.F.S.F. once espoused the ideas of pacifism, they had rapidly been abandoned in favor of defending the nation.

The rejection of pacifist manifestos was not embraced by all women who had been involved in the feminist movement. Hélène Brion stands out as one who adhered to her strong beliefs and her conviction that a pacifist ideal was far more ethical than defending national borders. School teacher and member of the *Groupe des Femmes Socialistes*, she acted as a figurehead for anti-feminist groups and the government in the later war years. Because of her pacifist ideals and publications she was arrested (1917) and tried (1918) for "defeatism". Officially, she was charged with "having distributed, or having made others distribute, brochures, tracts, and leaflets of such a nature as to aid the enemy and to exercise a harmful influence on the army and civilian morale."⁹² After spending the four months preceding her trial in jail (one usually associated with common prostitutes), she received a three-year suspended sentence and suffered the revocation of her teaching license. Her refusal to abandon teacher's union meetings despite a government ban for the war years, and her involvement in socialist publications made her a prime target for those in the government looking for a scapegoat to blame for the declining morale in the public sphere. The

⁹² Cross 193.

need for such a figure came after huge military losses, army mutinies, and the rise of both trade union and civilian pacifism in the spring of 1917.

However, the loyalty of most prominent feminist groups to war time causes did not go unobserved by the men who had so recently been wary of their work:

The help of "feminine France" has not gone unnoticed by our glorious combatants and among all the dedication that is shown to our wounded, immeasurable are the devotions of women. ...The suffragettes want to become full citizens or at least be treated like citizens... Yet they have not let this come in the way of their aid to the service of *le Patrie*. ... the gesture of the suffragettes should touch our hearts. The violent political debates, the attacks that start in their name, have not made their cause popular. However, they have made every effort to lend their aid... Three cheers for the suffragettes.⁹³

The interest of the newspaper and its support of the feminists come as no surprise, given that these women, for the most part, had been transformed into fervent nationalists. In the first year of the war profeminist or prosuffrage writing is scarce in *Le Figaro*. There was very little of this activity to report because most groups had been disbanded or reorganized. No doubt, if there was news of the suffrage struggle, the editors felt it of little importance in the face of national strife.

As rapidly as the European nations had mobilized for war, the

⁹³ "Le loyalism des suffragettes," *Le Figaro* 25 Feb. 1915: 2.

feminists mobilized their power in order to support the war effort. No longer were their concerns the rights of women but the defense and support of the nation. Feminist groups encouraged their members to abandon all other causes in favor of the war effort. While peasant and working class women were encouraged to take over the jobs their husbands had held, bourgeois women found their place among the various charitable groups founded at the outbreak of the war or in those which were more established such as the Red Cross.⁹⁴ The feminists believed that every woman could make a difference by taking up one cause or another. Each was equally important.

Feminist groups reorganized in order to form committees useful to the war effort. They concluded that "women could best aid the war effort by replacing men in military and civilian capacities, thereby releasing more men for the front."⁹⁵ Again, the right to work and support oneself and family goes hand in hand with the feminist goals, this time in the arena of war. Unfortunately, neither the military nor trade unions felt that the enlistment of women for the work force by these feminist groups was needed. As mentioned before, the government was slow at calling women to work, and not until 1915 did it create a placement office for employment. "Different than in England, there was never in France an organized effort to assemble feminine forces, and the substitution for men in the work place by women was much less rapid than in Germany."⁹⁶

⁹⁴ Hause Women's Suffrage 191.

⁹⁵ Hause, Women's Suffrage 194.

⁹⁶ Thébaud 31

Nonetheless, feminist groups did take on the challenge of organizing such a recruitment. The *Ligue Française pour les droits des femmes* regrouped in mid August 1914 and placed themselves at the hands of the government:

The L.F.D.F., anxious to fulfill its duty in light of recent events, is placing itself at the disposition of the mayor of each *arrondissement* (regional district) in order to assure the continuation of administrative work for families in need and the unemployed. In effect, the Ligue will organize in each district bureau of information and a women's service, headed by a delegate of the Ligue and controlled by its committee.⁹⁷

A collaboration of five major feminist groups plus the feminist press created the *Office central de l'activite feminine*. Together they recruited some 8,600 women between December 1916 and December 1917.⁹⁸ This was only a small percentage of women who were eligible for the work force, but without the strong support of the government, feminist groups found it difficult to organize female recruitment on a national level.

Most feminists believed that a time of war was not an appropriate time to wage a political campaign, so they dedicated their attention to other social matters. Concerns for family replaced those for the individual woman. This was so-called "social

⁹⁷ "La ligue Francaise pour les droits des femmes," *Le Figaro* 12 Aug. 1914: 4.

⁹⁸ Hause, *Women's Suffrage* 194.

feminism". *L'Union française pour the suffrage des femmes* turned its efforts towards displaced refugee families from the occupied territories as well as reuniting displaced families and soldiers.⁹⁹ These ventures and others maintained a large and active group of women fighting for important causes, however different they may have been from those of the prewar years.

One major wartime feminist concern that had not been at the forefront of their platform previously was that of alcoholism. Literature on the subject said that "alcohol was worse than the German at destroying a nation."¹⁰⁰ The feminists felt that an alcoholic nation was a weak nation and so the epidemic must be abolished. Anti-alcohol rallies were held throughout 1916 and 1917, while new laws were instituted to reduce the occurrence of alcoholism. Decrees outlawing public drunkenness and "the sale or gift of alcohol to soldiers in the war zone" show the success of this campaign.

Since France's defeat by the Germans in the Franco-Prussian war in the 1870's, a concern over the dropping birth rate and the promotion of childbearing, known as *natalism*, had grown as a popular social and conservative concern. According to natalists, France's relatively slow population growth due to the declining birthrate weakened the nation and led to France's defeat. During World War I proponents of the natalist cause revived the issue with even greater concern.

⁹⁹ Hause, Women's Suffrage 196.

¹⁰⁰ Hause, Women's Suffrage 195.

Some feminists latched on to the natalist cause in the name of patriotism and nationalism, even though it compromised many progressive feminist goals. Due to their liberal ideas, feminist groups had long been attacked as being the cause of falling birth rates. They counteracted this claim, saying that *denatalité* was not the fault of feminists but the result of government and employers' failure to support pregnant women and mothers with children. Despite these previous debates, feminists took on natality as one of their main causes in order to support the *Patrie*.¹⁰¹ *L'Union française pour le suffrage des femmes* declared in 1916 that it was a woman's moral responsibility to bear children. They claimed that it was the "woman's sacrifice for the war." Mme de Witt-Schlumberger proclaimed that "all those households of good health who refuse to give a child to the fatherland in the first year after the war shall be regarded as deserters."¹⁰² Patriotic, almost militant views took over. For the duration of the war feminists who had once been devoted to woman turned their attentions to France, another victim in need of faithful supporters.

¹⁰¹ Cova 132.

¹⁰² Cova 131.

IV. ANALYSIS: CHANGES AND COMPLEXITY

Historical analyses concerning the condition of women in France during the Great War vary depending on which aspect of change is examined. Some historians see World War I as a watershed for women in France; others depict a nation that experienced a conservative backlash as a result of the abrupt changes which took place in society. Through evidence found in the contemporary newspapers, one realizes that both theories are valid, yet it is important to process this information with a critical eye.

First it is important to examine these conflicting theories in relation to what really happened to French women when peace finally came. Leon Abensour stated that “women realized more progress in three years than in fifty years of struggle.”¹⁰³ Women did realize more economic freedom and educational opportunities but it was a “freedom born of necessity.”¹⁰⁴ Few rights were granted to women during the war and even then, more out of necessity than from the action of a sympathetic government. Some laws of the Civil code were relaxed; on July 3, 1915 women were granted full paternal powers in cases where “their husbands were incapable of acting for themselves.” As it turned out, this was a temporary

¹⁰³ Hause, “Minerva” 99.

¹⁰⁴ Hause, “Minerva” 104.

measure taken in consideration of the war.¹⁰⁵ On March 20, 1917 women were granted the right to be legal guardians of orphaned children. Of course orphaned in this sense meant those who had lost their fathers.¹⁰⁶ In 1918 it was perfectly normal to see a young woman walking alone, un-chaperoned, whereas before the war a sight such as this would have caused quite a stir. Yet social and legal equality for women, who demonstrated their unflinching bravery along side men, still did not exist.

The creation of war industries and the wartime economy actually produced a false view of women in the work force. While working-class women benefited during the war from wider job opportunities and increased earning power, this empowerment was short-lived. During the war, what was seen as the creation of new jobs for women was actually just a redistribution of labor from males to females. Since the traditional female industries were shut down or severely reduced, women simply took over positions formerly held by their male counterparts.¹⁰⁷ Some women chose to do so out of patriotism but many others did so out of necessity. As a result "women... were alleged to have conquered not merely the right to work but also, thanks to their new-found economic independence, a new and recognizably higher status in both the family and society."¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵ McMillan 129.

¹⁰⁶ Smith 166

¹⁰⁷ Still 40

¹⁰⁸ McMillan 99

After the Armistice and the demobilization of men in the military, those men who were able, reclaimed their jobs from the women who had worked during the war years. Female laborers could work alongside men, provided that the employers wanted to hire women. Without a shortage of manpower, women had to take second pick at jobs.

The feminist movement, while organized during the war, suffered many changes and losses. 1914 was to have been the “Year of the Woman,” but it was of course eclipsed by the war. By 1919, the continuing struggle for suffrage seemed unimportant to many who had suffered such great losses in the preceding four years. Old leaders had died or drifted away in the frenzy of war. Feminist literature, which had proliferated before the war, was now difficult to come by because of expensive labor and printing costs. Some women may have simply lost interest in the fight for the vote because of immediate concerns at home. For example, *La Petite republicque* lost 87 percent of its readership between 1914 and 1917.¹⁰⁹

The suffrage struggle which had long been the focal point of feminist groups was shelved by many who supported the national defense but now also favored social concerns rather than strictly feminine concerns. Even those who still actively supported universal suffrage found themselves devoted to other causes created by or during the war. Pacifists who had forsaken their stance in 1914 in

¹⁰⁹ Hause, Women's Suffrage 204.

support of patriotism were now active in support of the League of Nations. Other feminists who had given their time to social feminism during the war felt obligated to continue efforts in this area. Many women decided that “France was more in need of children than voters” and therefor took on the natalist cause.¹¹⁰

As a result of the war, feminist efforts became divided and concerns strayed from those which had been the priority in the prewar years. Thus the feminine voice became weaker. Some women, during the war, still believed that women would gain the right to vote in 1919. “Feminists tell us that women, because of their valor in this time of war, are galloping towards the title of electors” was the first sentence in the May 15th, 1915 editorial of *Le Figaro*. In 1916 *La Française* published an article stating that in the next vote of the Chamber of Deputies, women would certainly be granted this fundamental right.¹¹¹

One goal that women may have conquered during the war was the right to better employment opportunities; however, the one goal that is the key to equal citizenship is the right to be a member of the voting community. The hard work of the French women in munitions factories and other areas of the wartime economy would seem to have bolstered the feminists’ argument that women were an integral part of the community and therefore should have the same rights as men: “ The war showed to all the moral and intellectual aptitudes, professionally and socially, energetic and physical of

¹¹⁰ Hause, Women’s Suffrage 122.

¹¹¹ McMillan 98.

women.”¹¹² French women were not granted the right to vote, however, for another two and a half decades after the end of World War II, signifying the continuing confusion over women’s position in French society.

The complexity of women’s wartime role can be noted in the newspapers. Using them as a primary source not only allows a glimpse at how attitudes towards women metamorphosed, but it also reveals how stagnant the feelings of the old traditions remained. The extent of articles in *Le Figaro* pertaining to women’s lives in the first year of continuous warfare is an extremely valuable commentary on perceptions and expectations.

Not to be forgotten is the fact that all wartime publications were subject to censorship. *Le Figaro* was the first Parisian paper censored- the August 14, 1914 appeared with a four inch gap at the bottom of the page.¹¹³ Censors usually applied their scissors only when military details were involved, but any news which gave an extremely negative perspective on war issues was subject to removal. In the interest of national defense and morale, the papers were encouraged to self-censor.

“News and facts” were the most common subjects deleted from papers.¹¹⁴ The government figured that the less the people knew about the events of the war (battles, enlistments, casualties etc.)

¹¹² Thébaud 37.

¹¹³ Jean-Jaques Becker, The Great War and the French People (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1985) 50.

¹¹⁴ Becker 52.

the better. A fair amount of detail was allowed in the press, but only to a certain degree. The journalists were therefore left with news of the "home front," which for the most part contained human interest stories about women. Not only were women's activities non-classified, but they also made great pieces of propaganda. Through this dissemination of details about women's lives, it is easy to trace varying attitudes towards their role in the war.

Articles written just after the declaration of war are the most flagrant in depicting women in their traditional roles: the image of a train station, women with children, throwing flowers to soldiers on trains departing for the front. "They prepare to show a calm and resolute face when it is time to say good-bye" and "they dare not say one word which would soften the courage of men."¹¹⁵ Women are almost euphoric and have not the "slightest doubt in the soul" as they report to work in the factories in support of the Patrie.

Romantic images of women were also written. "The Ambulance Under Fire," a weekly fictional series, depicted different women in difficult situations at the front.¹¹⁶ One woman, Mlle Canton, drives her ambulance to rescue soldiers even when the Germans are advancing. The need to fictionalize women in this manner betrays a refusal to show women real respect in journalism. Daily lives of female medical personnel at the front were not expressed in the

¹¹⁵ "Paris," Le Figaro 8 Sept. 1914: 1.

"Le départ d'un train" Le Figaro 19 Sept. 1914: 1.

¹¹⁶ "L'Ambulance sous le feu," Le Figaro 10 Jan. 1915: 3.

early papers. Unless they were injured or killed, women at the front remained anonymous and therefore silent to the public.

Progressive reports of the female contribution to the war, aside from the Red Cross or charity, began publication almost a year after the war commenced. An article entitled "The French Woman" ran May 11, 1915, in which the typical French woman is compared to other patriotic and heroic women of the past while put into a modern context. "She marched heroically to the factories with her babe on her back" like a modern Athena, ready to take on the responsibilities of a nation at war. It is interesting to note that the author cannot separate the mother from the child, thus placing the woman in a semi-traditional role. Here the author recognizes the paradox in which war places women. Her complex role as both mother and worker placed the French woman in a crux between gender boundaries.

Yet this same author also says, "A new sociology is waiting that will arise from the ruins of the old."¹¹⁷ The author reconciles this new order with a Biblical reference. The French woman is compared to Eve, who walked out of the Garden of Eden arm-in-arm with Adam, connoting the same fate that awaits both man and woman, an equality which never before existed. French women would have to deal with the same challenges that await men after the war. In reality, no matter how courageous women acted during the war, ultimately the patriarchal society refused to give them any more power. Typically positive, yet extremely stereotypical, the exposure

¹¹⁷ "La femme Française," Le Figaro 11 May 1915: 1.

women received in public journals did little to help further the feminist cause.

V. CONCLUSION

Each portrayal through the journal articles presents a unique situation for every woman depicted. The radical departure from traditional roles by some is countered by all those who conformed to the prewar mold of womanhood. When examined as one complete text there is a dual image that emerges from the analysis of the news articles. Progressive and more traditional women come to life within the papers, and while they have contrasting approaches in fulfilling their roles as wartime women, their goal is the same- to preserve and to serve. So from the diverse women depicted in wartime literature one portrait is painted: the courageous woman.

Even though women were held in high regard for their tireless work in wartime France, no amount of recognition or thankfulness on behalf of the nation raised them from their status as second-class citizens, with hardly enough rights to function in society. For all the praise they received in the papers, the lives they sacrificed for soldiers at the front, the hardships of deportation, and the long hours in munitions factories, the conservative government barely recognized their contribution to liberty once all the peace treaties had been signed. The Third republic, which was to stay in power until the Second World war, reinstated prewar ideals, and virtually ignored all the progress made in women's movements. Clearly women had become more visible in the public sphere as a result of

publications widely read throughout France for the duration of W.W.I. Women were praised for their service to the Patrie, but the government "expressed pleasure that victory allowed women to resume their roles in the home."¹¹⁸ Apparently the diversity and complexity of women's lives during the war only led to more confusion when the old world and the new world met in peacetime. The popular icon of the courageous, liberated women which appeared during the Great War, evaporated into myth until another war could revive her.

¹¹⁸ Hause, "Minerva" 103.

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