#2: France, World War I, Women and the Home Front

New roles imposed upon women in France by World War I

The mobilization of France's military-age males created an unprecedented demand for women to work in heavy industry, while women in the countryside took up the burden of running many of the nation's small farms and filled local political posts. Numbers of women flocked to wartime nursing, and some took up the novel role of marraines de guerre, "godmothers" supporting frontline soldiers as pen pals. In a country whose population had long stagnated, French women became the target of an intense campaign to produce more children.

The scope of the conflict placed civilians of both sexes in jeopardy. French women suffered through the bombardment of Paris from the air and from long-range artillery. Some were maimed or even paid with their lives as a consequence of accidents in the country's munitions factories. Others endured four years of German occupation in the ten districts of northeastern France that the enemy had conquered in 1914.

However, the shifts the war brought to the patterns of women's lives had only limited long-term effects. Political efforts to reward the nation's women with the right to vote in return for their contribution to the war effort failed. Women's entry into governing posts in the countryside ended with the conclusion of the conflict. Almost all the new positions in the workforce that had opened to women were restored to men who had served in the military. The proportion of women in the workforce declined with the close of the war.

Millions of Frenchwomen were already in the workforce before World War I. Although the conflict brought them new economic opportunities in the country's factories, such openings appeared only after a period of hardship. The outbreak of the war and the ensuing mobilization shut down many of the traditional sources of employment such as domestic service, clothing shops, and parts of the textile industry. Nevertheless, even without government action to open positions for them, women entered the metal trades in large numbers by the start of 1915. The growing realization that the war would be a prolonged one, and, in particular, the huge casualties resulting from the Battle of Verdun in 1916 pushed the government to widen employment opportunities for women. By November 1918 unemployment for most women had disappeared as they entered wartime industry. In some metalworking plants, four out of every five workers were women (Downs 1995, 41).

Nevertheless, many of those women faced continuing discrimination. Women and men were given separate working areas in many factories. At first, men received higher wages for doing tasks nearly identical to those of women in the same plants. Employers often claimed

that women did not need to earn as much as men since men worked to support a family whereas women lacked such responsibilities. Complex tasks were broken down into simple steps and divided among teams of women workers. Thus, women could be identified as unskilled rather than skilled members of the workforce.

Women workers in a French war plant, 1916.

Pressure from the Ministry of Munitions diminished the wage differential between female and male workers, and a wave of strikes by women workers in the spring of 1917 likewise helped women to gain pay equal to men. Nonetheless, French society showed its ambivalence toward the new munitionettes in numerous ways. Stories circulated describing how they used their new wages to indulge in luxurious foods like chicken and chocolate. Moreover, they supposedly employed their newfound freedom to drink and engage in sexual adventure. In the harshest [lie] thrown at such women, they were accused of enjoying the war so much that they hoped it would continue indefinitely.

A more pressing concern for female workers was the set of dangers that came with factory work. War production meant exposure to toxic chemicals, dangerous machinery, and explosives. Over one hundred women were killed in a single accidental explosion in a plant near Paris (Hey-man 2002, 216). For much of the war's duration, pre-1914 safety regulations were brushed aside in the interest of accelerating arms production.

Civilian women played a direct role in the war effort by working for the military. By 1917, 120,000 women held jobs with the military as drivers, office workers, telephone operators, laundresses, and cooks (Darrow 2000, 255). Women could often fill such positions while living in their homes, and their efforts freed men to take positions at the front.

The government appealed directly to the women of rural France in August 1914 to help bring in the harvest. From this point on, farm women, who had normally tended the fields as helpers for their men, found they had to tend the land alone. For many, the burden of farming with the assistance of only very young and very old men proved too great. Shortages of draft animals and fertilizer made food production more difficult as the war proceeded. Hardship for France's farm women led to declining food production and sometimes even abandoned farmsteads. But a shortage of men in the countryside provided a few women with new responsibilities in government. In some rural communities, women took posts as municipal councilors and mayors.

Starting in the spring of 1915 some women in unoccupied France volunteered for the role of "war godmothers," marraines de guerre. The occupation of ten French departments meant that thousands of French soldiers could have no contact with home. To provide the moral support these men, so-called "war orphans," could not receive from their families, women in unoccupied areas became pen pals and a welcoming presence away from the battlefront when the soldiers received leave.

Many women took training as nurses from the Red Cross, the majority of them, middle-class women who did not need to worry about the need to support their families. This marked a significant change in the practices of the French army. The French military had been hesitant to employ female nurses up to the years immediately preceding 1914. Only one hundred military nurses were on duty when the war broke out. But 63,000 newly qualified Red Cross nurses staffed 1480 auxiliary hospitals outside the war zone, and, in the spring of 1917, some were permitted to volunteer for service close to the front (Darrow 2000, 137-141).

Concern about the size of France's population, evident among politicians and intellectuals for decades before 1914, grew into a potent pronatalist (pro-birth) movement during the wartime years. The absence of men for duty at the front brought the birthrate to an all-time low in 1915 and 1916. Frenchwomen were urged to produce babies to fill the population gap brought on by the conflict's huge casualty lists. Proponents of wartime motherhood often described pregnancy and childbirth as the female equivalent of the soldier's service at the front.

The expanded presence of women in French factories combined with pronatalism in diverse ways. Some experts warned of the dangers such work posed for women's bodies and their unborn children and urged that pregnant women workers be sent home. Others sought improvements in factory life for women and mothers, such as private rooms where women could nurse their children. The government agreed with the latter position and helped pregnant women and nursing mothers to continue in the workforce. In August 1917 factories were required to provide facilities like nurseries to ease the burden placed on working women. Women welfare supervisors were assigned to French factories with the primary task of protecting the health of females of childbearing age.

In the 12 percent of French territory occupied by the Germans two million French women faced multiple intrusions on their lives. The initial invasion brought a wave of rape and pillage. Thereafter, the shortage of food and fuel became a daily torment. Some food entered the zone through the efforts of Herbert Hoover's relief organization, but it provided only one meal a day. Those in the occupied zone had to demolish their wooden houses stick by stick for fuel. Restrictions on travel within the occupied zone as well as rigid curfews added to their burden. In a telling example of German power over the female population, German occupation authorities forcibly mobilized 8,000 women to help with the harvest in 1916. Middle-class women were billeted with females of dubious reputation, and all were subjected to humiliating public physical examinations (Darrow 2000, 117-119; Becker 1996, 635-636).

The most direct danger for women came from enemy attacks, which modern weapons now made possible against civilians behind the fighting front. Paris was first bombed in September 1914, and German airplanes and zeppelins returned regularly. Starting in March 1918 a long-range cannon located seventy-five miles northeast of the city fired shells into Paris killing hundreds of civilians. Living in cities closer to the front like Soissons exposed French women to aerial and artillery bombardments from both sides.

Although millions of women supported the war effort with their labors, women sometimes took a prominent role in opposing the continuation of the conflict. Strikes rocked French industry in the spring of 1917, with women making up the majority of those who abandoned their workplaces. Their rhetoric called not only for improvement in working conditions but also for an end to the conflict. One prominent woman, the schoolteacher and union leader Helene Brion, was arrested in November 1917 and charged with "defeatism." Tried during late March 1918, a tense moment when the Germans were mounting their final offensive on the western front, she was found guilty and sentenced to three years imprisonment.

Despite the vast changes war had brought to France's women, the postwar period saw only limited shifts in their political and economic status. The question of voting rights for women had emerged during the war since the contribution of women to the war effort seemed to call for an appropriate reward. Some suggested giving the vote to women who had lost husbands in the conflict so that the family could retain its voting influence. In the end, no change took place. The Chamber of Deputies approved awarding the franchise to women in 1919 by an overwhelming vote, but the French Senate successfully blocked the measure. One salient argument for opponents of woman's suffrage was the view that French women were too prone to follow the dictates of the Roman Catholic Church. Another argument focused on the need for women to concentrate on childbearing rather than politics in the post-war period. French women [fully] received the right to vote only in 1944.

Moreover, women lost most of the new positions in the labor force they had occupied during the wartime years. When women were hired back after 1918, the differential between the wages they and male workers received widened beyond the gap existing during the war years.

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