

# Female Patriotism in the Great War

Professor Nicoletta F. Gullace, University of New Hampshire

*But the educated man's sister – what does “patriotism” mean to her?*

– Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas* (1938)

While Virginia Woolf felt that “the educated man’s sister” lacked entirely his reasons for “being proud of England, for loving England, for defending England,” she had little choice but to concede that during World War I, such women threw themselves into the war effort with astonishing patriotic fervour. How, Woolf asked, can we explain “that amazing outburst in August 1914, when the daughters of educated men ... rushed into hospitals, some still attended by their maids, drove lorries, worked in fields and munitions factories, and used all their immense stores of charm ... to persuade young men that to fight was heroic, and that the wounded in battle deserved all her care and all her praise?” Her answer lies in the visceral antipathy she believed middle class women felt towards their insular domestic education. “So profound was her unconscious loathing for the education of the private house ... that she would undertake any task however menial, exercise any fascination however fatal that enabled her to escape”(Woolf, p. 39).

Woolf’s estimation of the motivations of women who threw themselves into war work contained more than a grain of truth. For many middle-class women the opportunity to escape the limitations of their sex roles by engaging in war work was irresistible. Yet for many of these same women, and for the thousands of working-class women who took up war work in munitions factories, in transportation industries, and on the land, the lure of wartime wages, along with a love of country shared with their men – however undeserving “England” may have been of such affection – motivated those who undertook the myriad of activities recorded in this unique collection of documents and photographs [[Volunteer Corps 1-9](#)]. Suffrage activists like Millicent Garrett Fawcett recognized that engaging in patriotic work might strengthen women’s bid for the vote, which, indeed, they gained on a limited basis directly after the war [[Suffrage and Politics I-III](#)]. Others, particularly middle-class and aristocratic women of means, threw themselves into unpaid charitable work. They often raised large sums of money for benevolent causes, such as hospitals, comforts for the troops, and charitable relief for refugees displaced by war [[Belgium 1-16; Benevolent Organizations 1-8; Relief Funds I-II](#)]. Indeed charitable work was appealing to a variety of women, including those who were on principle opposed to war but wished to offer assistance to the men and women displaced by it. This collection documents the activities undertaken by British women, at home and abroad, during World War I. The

following essay will attempt to put their patriotic contribution within its historical and scholarly context.

### **War or Peace?: The Scholarly Debate over Women's Attitudes**

Scholars studying the history of women during World War I have varied greatly in their assessment of the degree, sincerity, and importance of female patriotism. During World War I, women were warmly praised for their intense patriotism and their loyal response to the war [[Employment 18](#)]. Contemporaries pointed out that women had sacrificed husbands and sons to the war effort and had volunteered their time, money, and labour in support of Britain's cause. Feminists pointed to women's patriotic activity as evidence of women's entitlement to the vote, while even many Conservatives came to recognize women's unique patriotic contributions. The enthusiasm with which women undertook war work has often been interpreted as a telling sign of their unequivocal support for the war. Not only did women sign up for Red Cross work, enter munitions factories, and devote their energies to charitable causes, but by the end of the war thousands had donned uniforms, enlisting in military auxiliary units and in female police forces [[Army 3-6](#); [Volunteer Corps 1-9](#); [W.R.A.F. 1-2](#); [W.R.N.S. 1-20](#)].

Despite the patriotic sentiments expressed by millions of British women, however, women were also strongly represented in the small and much-abused pacifist movement that worked indefatigably for a compromise peace [[Suffrage and Politics II, 8](#)]. Involvement in the pacifist movement split the leadership of the largest suffrage organization in Britain as pacifist members of the National Union of Suffrage Societies pressed their organization to sponsor their attendance at an international women's peace meeting to be held at the Hague in 1915.

The heroic actions of these pacifist women have interested scholars who have studied the feminist roots of British pacifism and who have argued that anti-war activities were more significant to the development of British feminism than the patriotic response of those who supported their government. The literary contributions of pacifist women have also been widely studied and make up an important part of the literary and poetic cannon of World War I. Because this document collection was compiled by the Imperial War Museum in the years following the war to record women's contributions to the war effort, patriotic activity will generally be more prominently represented than pacifist activity. Students interested in women's antiwar activity are invited to look up the Women's International League of Peace and Freedom and to refer to the notes in this essay for further reading.

## **Patriotism and domesticity**

Women's patriotic activity during World War I began in the home. Government propaganda persuaded women to conserve food, to buy war savings bonds, and to encourage their men to enlist. Both pronatalists and feminists regarded motherhood as a contribution to the State, and a variety of organizations encouraged women to bring up boys fit to become soldiers. These traditional activities turned the home itself into a sort of surrogate battle-front as women were reminded that "The Kitchen" was "Key to Victory," or that she who saved two slices of bread helped "defeat the U-boat" [[Education 4; Food 1-24](#)].

Perhaps the most problematic expectation for women was the widely held idea that they should encourage their men to enlist. During 1914 and 1915, Great Britain, alone among the major powers, maintained a volunteer army, necessitating a massive recruiting effort to supply the army with soldiers. Offering such encouragement could result in the irreparable loss of a son or lover or his return home disfigured and battle-scarred. Despite such potentially heartbreaking consequences, government propaganda posters encouraged the "Women of Britain" to "SAY GO!" and many organizations took it upon themselves to preach to women of their patriotic duty to send men to war. Women participated in recruiting drives, giving speeches at Trafalgar square and Hyde Park, as well as speaking at music halls and in other venues where men congregated to seek entertainment [[Army 0](#)]. This milieu, however, also fostered the notorious white feather movement, where women – particularly young flappers – went through the streets bestowing the "white feather of cowardice" on men wearing civilian clothes.

During World War I, virtually every "private" domestic activity was militarised, as food, fertility, and moral authority were all to some extent commandeered by the State. In this way, even women who remained at home with young children were encouraged to make patriotic sacrifices and to contribute to the war effort through their domestic management. Some would hang signs outside their doors informing passers-by how many men from that house were on active duty; other signs would proclaim the woman inside to be a patriotic conserver of eggs or a contributor to a "Win the War" fund. The home was thus linked to the front through family connections, postal correspondence, and symbolic professions of patriotism.

## **New Female Labour Forces**

No aspect of women's patriotic contribution to the war effort has received more attention than their enlistment in formerly male occupations [[Employment 1-82](#)]. Photographs of women in wartime collected by the Imperial War Museum show the voluminous documentation of women doing non-traditional jobs, such as filling shells, collecting tickets, shovelling coal, or cultivating fields. Their

novel dress – often trousers – gave these changes a startling visual quality that made the changes in women’s roles seem truly revolutionary. While women from the labouring classes were well represented in the workforce long before the Great War, they were congregated in traditionally female trades such as the garment industry, laundry work, unskilled industrial labour, and service industries. The Great War removed able-bodied men from the home-front, causing labour shortages and fuelling proposals to allow women into traditionally male occupations. In July 1915, Mrs. Emmeline Pankhurst, a prominent pre-war suffrage activist, received a subsidy from the government to organize a “great parade” in which women would demand “the right to work” [Employment 13]. The overwhelming willingness of women to sign-up for industrial and other types of work gave ammunition to the government which was able to persuade labour unions to relax rules against “dilution” – the filling of skilled positions by non-union labourers. During 1916, with the advent of conscription in Britain and ever-increasing demands for manpower among all the belligerents, women began to replace men on production lines in unprecedented numbers [Munitions I, 1-14, 15-17.]. Advocates of women’s work reminded the public that shells made by a wife could “save her husband’s life,” rhetorically placing the welfare of both family and nation in the hands of patriotic working women. Female munitions workers, in turn, considered themselves to be the loyal supporters of the men at the front, some referring to themselves as “Tommy’s sisters,” highlighting their intimate connection to their enlisted “brothers.”

While World War I saw an unprecedented movement of women into formerly male occupations, many of these gains did not last. Women were promptly demobilized from their industrial and transportation occupations as the war began to wind down in 1918. Governments were concerned that returning soldiers be able to find jobs and, despite the protests of feminists, many women were turned out of the jobs they had done during the war. A number of changes nevertheless remained. It was at this time that clerical work came to be heavily assumed by women, and wealthy Britons complained frequently after the war that they were never again able to find such docile and cheap servants. The experience of assuming what many women considered to be interesting, skilled, and well-paid work would leave its mark on women, despite a post-war embrace of the reassuring normality of family and home [Munitions IV-VII].

### **Red Cross and Medical Work**

Perhaps the most glamorous memory of women’s participation in the Great War revolves around their work as nurses on or near the front lines. Film adaptations of Ernest Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms* or the image of Julie Christie as the nurse Lara in *Dr. Zhivago* have helped to perpetuate a vision of glamorous young nurses bravely serving the wounded against the backdrop of romance and war. Indeed non-fictional accounts like Vera Brittain’s *Testament of Youth* also helped create and

sustain such images. While Red Cross work attracted many provincial girls to activities no more exciting than rolling bandages at a local church, it offered an extraordinary outlet for female patriotism. Many middle class women like Vera Brittain volunteered to become VAD nurses, some of them actually serving – as Brittain did – under fire in France and in Eastern Europe [[British Red Cross Society 8-16](#)]. Among the photographs and documents in the Imperial War Museum Collection are pictures of women engaged in some of the most dangerous types of female medical work [[British Red Cross Society 1-27](#)]. Women served in World War I as field nurses, as ambulance drivers, and as stretcher bearers, often receiving honours and decorations, formerly reserved for military men, for their acts of bravery in the field [[Decorations and Honours 1-8](#)]. Edith Cavell was a nurse who was shot as a spy by the Germans for smuggling allied prisoners to safety, while Lady Muriel Paget ran a mobile hospital unit on the Russian front [[Russia I](#)]. The activities of medical women – whose labour was spurned by the British government at the beginning of the war – helped to establish medical women and gain them new respect in the eyes of the public as well as among the men whose lives they saved.

## **Patriotism and the Vote**

The relationship between women's patriotic support of the Great War and the awarding of women's suffrage has been frequently debated in the scholarly literature. Contemporaries almost universally attributed the passage of women's suffrage to the new-found respect women had gained through their loyalty, patriotism, and material assistance to the war effort [[Suffrage and Politics II & III](#)]. Indeed, women's patriotic support of the war undoubtedly undercut the case against the woman's vote by demolishing pre-war arguments that denied women's military and imperial importance. As the essay on suffrage in this collection shows, however, many scholars have challenged this idea, pointing out particularly that younger women, who made up the majority of female war workers, did not get the vote. Since the vote was only awarded to women over thirty, many women whose patriotic efforts had contributed to the reappraisal of female enfranchisement did not get a say in national elections. Furthermore, the gains they had made in the workforce were soon rolled back with demobilization and the return of jobless soldiers. How sincere, then, was the praise and gratitude that Britain showed to its women? The documents in this collection will help students to evaluate the extent to which women redefined themselves with their patriotic support of the war effort. It will also offer students the opportunity to form first-hand judgements on the many questions that surround the history of female patriotism in the First World War.

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