

Revolutionary or Reinforcement?: Depictions of Women in World War II Propaganda

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HIS 336: Sexual Revolutions in Europe

Dr. Tilburg

In 1940, Lord Woolton, the Minister of Food, addressed British women directly over radio broadcast:

‘It is to you, the housewives of Britain that I want to talk tonight . . . We have a job to do, together you and I, an immensely important war job. No uniforms, no parades, no drills, but a job wanting a lot of thinking and a lot of knowledge, too. We are the army that guards the Kitchen Front in this war.’¹

Often remembered as an era of national unity in the collective British consciousness, World War II has long marked a historical moment in which the boundaries of gender roles were challenged and women enjoyed access to previously restricted aspects of society, particularly in the labor force.² However, as evidenced by Lord Woolton’s confinement of women to the kitchen, perhaps this era of war was not as progressive as cultural memory renders it. Recently, some historians have challenged the narrative of progressive gender equality. They argue that the entrance of women into the public sphere of work and politics caused a crisis of gender roles. Sonya O. Rose resides among this school of thought, claiming that “mobilization for total war produced something of an ideological crisis of gender categories as the public sphere expanded into most realms of daily life, and adult members of civil society were conscripted for public duty.”³ Similarly, in his work, “The Womanpower Problem in Britain during the Second World War,” Harold Smith challenges the acceptance of the unity narrative, citing the ways in which positive changes in women’s social and political status did not endure past the Paris Peace Treaties.⁴ The

¹ Angela Davis, “Wartime Women Giving Birth: Narratives of Pregnancy and Childbirth, Britain c. 1939-1960.” *Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences* 47, (Sept. 2014): 258.

² In terms of national unity, Jose Harris surmises: “The war is widely regarded as perhaps the only period in the whole of British history during which the British people came together as a metaphysical entity: an entity which transcended the divisions of class, sect, self-interest and libertarian individualism that normally constitute the highly pluralistic and fragmented structure of British society.”

³ Sonya O. Rose. “Women’s Rights, Women’s Obligations: Contradictions of Citizenship in World War II Britain.” *European Review of History* 7 no. 2, (2000): 279.

⁴ From July to October or 1947, the Allied and Axis Powers negotiated a peace amongst the adversaries.

lack of sustained improvements to women's positionality is evident in the areas of labor and work practices. On this topic, Smith posits:

Pre-war conflicts over the status of women workers not only continued during the war, but in some important respects actually intensified. Rather than an idealized image of social harmony, the war years might more accurately be described as a continuing tug-of-war between a government committed to traditional patterns of sex discrimination and women's groups seeking to make permanent the wartime steps towards sex equality.⁵

To contribute to the discussion of whether war brought positive change for women, this essay reflects on examples of World War II British propaganda directed towards women. These artifacts give a glimpse of British society's perceptions of women and their potential to contribute to the war effort. I will utilize a gender-specific approach to historiography which Joan Scott describes as "articulating the ways gender might be used as a category of analysis, not only for direct study of the relationships between women and men, but also for a more complex understanding of politics, power, state policy, and so on."⁶ Scott's approach advocates for the "exposure of the often silent and hidden operations of gender that are nonetheless present and defining forces in the organizations of most societies."⁷ In other words, women's history must be examined in a gender system, to avoid isolationism and highlight previously silenced voices. In relation to the study of gender, the editors of *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars* posit:

As a first step, war must be understood as a *gendering* activity, one that ritually marks the gender of all members of a society, whether or not they are combatants. [...] When peace comes, messages of reintegration are expressed within a rhetoric of gender that establishes the postwar social assignments of men and women.⁸

⁵ Harold L. Smith. "The Womanpower Problem in Britain during the Second World War." *The Historical Journal* 27, no. 4, (Dec. 1984): 945.

⁶ Margaret Randolph Higonnet, Jane Jenson, Sonya Michel, and Margaret Collins Weitz, eds., *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987), 22.

⁷ Joan Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*. (Columbia University Press: New York, 1988): 27.

⁸ Higonnet, 4.

A feminist approach to history is a necessary framework as it considers how war may challenge gender boundaries but then return to them in times of peace in an attempt to regain normalcy.

The use of wartime propaganda sent both subliminal and overt messages about what a loyal female citizen looked like during the War. The notion of a ‘good’ female citizen was entangled with questions about female sexual morality, expectations about motherhood and qualifications of a productive, patriotic worker.⁹ British wartime propaganda played to these stereotypes, painting a portrait of the ideal woman whose country is at war. Women’s roles were defined through the context of the domestic sphere, motherhood, and voluntary service.¹⁰

Just twenty years after the end of the First World War, the men and women of Great Britain would still have felt the effects of war on gender roles. One of the most lasting effects of the war was the enhanced “centrality of motherhood for constructing women’s gender identity.”¹¹ Legacies surrounding maternal instincts and the domestic sphere would therefore have influenced the subjects of many World War II propaganda posters.¹² Ideas about the role of women and motherhood during World War II mirror those of the First World War, suggesting that the Great War did not bring lasting social change.¹³ For example, the promotion of viewing women as modes of reproduction is a common trope of war propaganda rhetoric that carried over from WWI. It often equates women’s reproductive capabilities with other forms of labor or

⁹ Rose, 277.

¹⁰ The doctrine of separate spheres first emerged in the 19th century as an ideal of gender roles. In this model, women are morally superior wives who do not work for money and instead raises children and protects her family from the dangers of the public sphere. The notion of separate spheres persists.

¹¹ Susan R. Grayzel, *Women’s Identities at War: Gender, Motherhood, and Politics in Britain and France during the First World War* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 8.

¹² For example, following the end of WWI, the image of mothers as promises of renewal and procreation underscored the soldier-mother dyad that “served as a familiar, potent way to inscribe gender roles after enormous upheaval.” (Grayzel 236).

¹³ Although this paper focuses primarily on World War II, the historical framework used for analyzing gender in the first World War is still useful as they are both major world events that created great upheaval in gender roles.

contributions to the war effort. As Grayzell puts it: “As the war’s deaths mounted, generalized pronatalist concern with mothers as producers of the national resource of the next generation grew exponentially and erupted in debates about women’s moral behavior.”¹⁴ Some of the World War II propaganda posters directed at women capitalize on this tendency, such as those that attempt to influence a mother’s decision about evacuating her children due to bombings in the cities.

The crisis of gender roles is perhaps most evident in the post-war backlash in labor laws and war propaganda posters.¹⁵ During the Second World War, propaganda targeted women specifically through associations of their femininity, such as their roles as mothers and wives. Such public use of propaganda evidences government agencies’ attempts to involve women in the war effort while also trying to calm anxieties of gender transgressions. While historians disagree as to whether women’s social and political standings truly improved as a result of the war, the truth about propaganda remains; while women gained access to some improvements in the labor market, the wartime propaganda itself did not challenge the traditional gender roles of the period. Although propaganda directed towards women in World War II may have appeared as progressive challenges to the barriers of gender roles, the posters themselves actually appealed to, and thus reinforced, traditional associations of femininity.

¹⁴ Grayzell, 87.

¹⁵ Although this paper will not focus on the particulars of women in the workforce, this is a significant area of study that contributed to the possible transgression of gender roles.



This poster speaks to the supposed notions of women's priorities and dispositions of the period. At first glance, it seems to invite women into the war effort. By making do with the clothes they have, women saved up material that could be used to benefit the war, perhaps by clothing soldiers or making uniforms for war nurses. The poster also makes an interesting display of what could be considered women's on-the-home-front 'uniform.' The pictured clothes signal a certain level of wealth and access the woman must have possessed. Apparently, it was only during times of war that this woman had to be conscious of her spending habits. Therefore, this piece of propaganda assumes a limited audience: middle class white women. This limitation communicates that only affluent women could make meaningful wartime contributions.

The poster also presents the choice to mend clothes as a sort of sacrifice. While the boys were on the Front, the women at home could feel involved in the war effort by refusing to spend

¹⁶ Donia Nachshen *Go Through Your Wardrobe—Make-Do and Mend* (poster) (Great Britain).

more money on clothes; recycling a wardrobe became essential to a British victory. Although the poster seems to give women an important role within the war effort, it in fact reinforces the stereotype that women spend unnecessarily unless instructed otherwise. In an attempt to encourage mindful spending habits during the war, this propaganda poster popularizes the stereotype that women are naturally inclined to spend, rather than save.

The poster's message harbors an air of condescension. Women cannot control their 'natural' tendencies and therefore must be reminded—or perhaps scolded—into the responsible practice that would contribute to the nation's war effort. Noticeably absent from this poster is the imploration for *men* to go through their wardrobes in order to contribute to the war effort. The depiction played to the assumption that women were thrift-less spenders and, in regard to shopping, have little to no self-control. As a result, they required the interference of the Board of Trade to tell them that they must make do with what they have.

In addition to the poster's implication that women are naturally inclined to spending money, the message of "Make-do and Mend" reinforces the association between household work, (such as sewing) and femininity. To mend clothes, one might need knowledge of sewing and this poster suggests that because the figure is a woman, she has the necessary, practical knowledge to repair clothing—an assumption that underscores the association of household responsibility with the role of womanhood. Although this poster intended to encourage women to contribute to the war effort, it did so by confining women to the literal closet—or wardrobe—that is the domestic sphere.



The Women's Voluntary Service (WVS) was initially founded to recruit women for Air Raid Precautions, an organization that assisted those impacted by the air raids. Specifically, the WVS is well-known for its role in evacuating children from major cities to avoid danger from enemy bombings. In this depiction of an evacuation, every visible face in the poster appears to be happy, even excited, to be venturing away from familiarity into the unknown. How can the positive portrayal of children fleeing threats of violence be reconciled with the likely trauma the evacuees experienced? Beyond this misleading representation, the poster prominently features women in various occupations. Here, women take on an active role in the war effort; they are directing child evacuees and driving cars.

However, even when depicted as serving the nation's aims, women's positionality remained relevant to their reproductive capacities. For example, this piece of propaganda

¹⁷ Jack Mathew, *Women Wanted for Evacuation Service* (poster) Women's Voluntary Services, (Great Britain).

features women organizing children for evacuation; women were allowed access to the war effort through *children*, the products of reproduction. Each portrayal of women in this particular piece of propaganda reinforces a certain stereotype of femininity. Just off-center, a mother lifts her child on to the evacuation vehicle; a woman's role as mother is reinforced. To the right, a housewife offers goods to a female driver; a woman's association with the domestic sphere, specifically that of the kitchen, is reinforced.¹⁸ All of these portrayals contribute to the cultivation of wartime women as 'domestic soldiers.' Particularly in portrayals of mothers, wartime propaganda often equated women with soldiers through their experience of childbirth; the only perceived way for women to be able to relate to the horrors of war that men were enduring was through the recalling of the "bodily pain of sacrifice" that mothers undergo in reproduction.¹⁹

Even though this scene could be seen as a positive portrayal—many women actively invested in the nation's fight—the poster demonstrates the confines of feminine service, such as a woman's relegation to the home, or roles in non-combative scenarios.²⁰ In other words, women had a role to play in the war effort but they were restricted to jobs centered around children and the domestic sphere.²¹

¹⁸ One childhood evacuee later recalled the kindness of WVS volunteers sharing bread and cheese with the children. Even in roles such as a WVS volunteer, women in the war effort often took on maternal roles. (Mawson 26)

¹⁹ Grayzel, 236.

²⁰ As Rose explains, "the War Office attempted to keep women out of the direct line of fire, and did not permit them to carry firearms." (Rose 279).

²¹ Although originally in reference to the effects of World War I, Grayzel's analysis applies: while "governments drew upon traditional notions of gender to exclude women from combat, they were willing to shift other assumptions about gender in order to enlist women's support for specific aspects of the war effort." (Grayzel 243).



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This piece of propaganda makes use of many tropes of femininity. An elderly lady literally steps out of the rank of soldiers, thus evoking the ‘domestic soldier’ in perhaps its most literal portrayal. The poster’s message, “Caring for Evacuees is a National Service,” underscores this point, elevating domestic and maternal care to that of national importance. The opened-arm figure seems to represent a new surrogate mother for the evacuating children. Her service to the country was through *maternal* care, again linking motherhood and nationalism during periods of war. The mother herself appears apprehensive, perhaps conflicted by the choice of whether to evacuate her children. The poster capitalizes on numerous stereotypes of femininity, each a reinforcement of the socially sanctioned ways women could contribute to the war effort.

²² Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, *She’s in the Ranks Too! —Caring for Evacuees is a National Service* (poster), (Great Britain), courtesy of Hennepin County Library.



Evacuations from major British cities began as soon as war broke out in September 1939 when Germany invaded Poland. However, a six-month period in what is now referred to as the Phoney War, saw little to no combat between the opposing Allies and Axis Powers. Despite this lack of immediate danger, propaganda posters appealed to women, specifically mothers, to comply with the evacuation of their children from the city of London. For example, the poster above demonstrates that, even during a period of little fighting, mothers were targets of the government's propaganda. As the London skyline and Hitler himself loom, the Ministry of Health attempts to sway the mother in her decision to keep her children safe. The poster directly implicates women through their maternal role. This direct address sent the subliminal message that "the only role women could *alone* perform, which rendered their services invaluable, was

²³ Her Majesty's Stationery Office, *Don't Do it Mother* (poster), (London).

motherhood, the concern of all women.”²⁴ By capitalizing upon supposed maternal instincts, the government became involved in mothering.

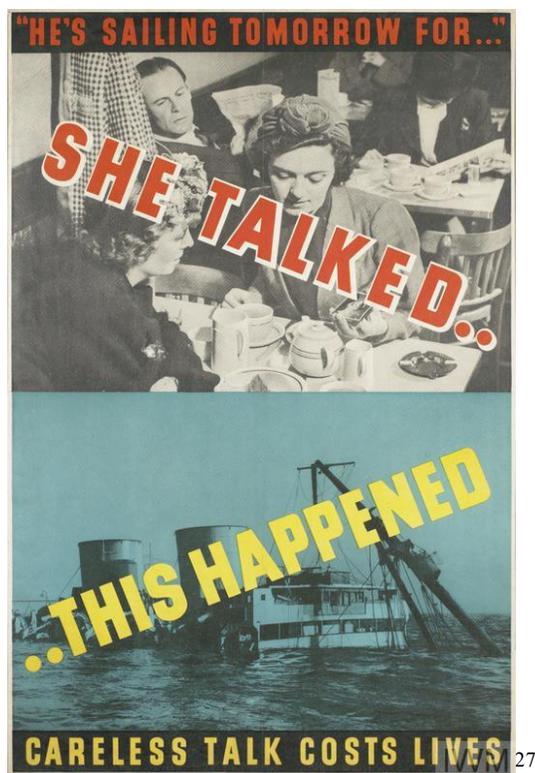
Although pregnant women and mothers with infants were also evacuated, many other mothers were left with the decision to either obey the government’s orders and separate from their children, or defy orders and keep their children close while potentially putting them at risk.²⁵ The Ministry of Health called explicitly upon mothers, and the government became directly involved with the lives of mothers and their children. Deciding how to keep their children safe was considered foundational to motherhood, but this right seems to have been superseded by the government’s increased authority during total war.

Although this poster interferes with a woman’s autonomous choices as a mother, it still glorifies the maternal role. As it preys upon maternal instincts, the poster also recognizes the redemptive role of motherhood. Women may not have been soldiers in combat, but their role was still significant. This woman may not have witnessed fighting or served in a volunteer position, but she was a mother—a role that takes on new meaning during periods of war.²⁶ In other words, although a mother’s agonizing choice was exploited here for the government’s propaganda, motherhood was still recognized as a role worth addressing.

²⁴ Grayzel, 118.

²⁵ Many mothers could not afford to send their children out of the city. Therefore, because of financial reasons, these mothers were denied even the choice of how to keep their children safe. In this way, the poster required a certain degree of privilege in audience.

²⁶ During times of war, mothering is often equated with soldiering as a form of service to the war effort.



Whereas the previous poster alludes to the redemptive power of motherhood, this piece of propaganda calls on only negative stereotypes of women. In regard to women's status in the nation's membership during the war, this particular poster sends subliminal messaging about the ideal female citizen: trustworthy and vigilant. This piece of propaganda portrays the opposite and calls upon society's stereotype of women as loose-lipped gossips. Consequently, it directly links an overheard secret with the deaths of Allied soldiers and defeat of the British navy.

The poster characterizes women as too emotional to be trustworthy—especially if a lover is involved. Many men at the time resented the women at home, perceiving their continuation of home life as a betrayal; this poster capitalizes on fears of what women would do when left to their own devices. If one assumes that the woman is not referring to her *brother's* location, it is safe to assume that her relationship with the soldier was romantic, perhaps even sexual in nature.

²⁷ Her Majesty's Stationery Office, *She Talked...This Happened—Careless Talk Costs Lives* (poster), (Great Britain).

The propagandic message was clear: this woman's promiscuity put brave British soldiers in danger.

By linking a conversation among female friends to the defeat of a British naval mission, the poster elevates women's untrustworthy-ness with a threat to national security.²⁸ British citizens should not only be wary of foreign spies, but the women among them—their natural inclination to gossip may pose a danger to the British soldiers abroad. Propaganda also reinforced a sense of paranoia among the British population. The man peering over the woman's soldier, likely meant to be a spy, could be any man in a restaurant; therefore, citizens should act with extreme caution, as “careless talk costs lives.” In this instance, women's status was defined as a liability that must be monitored.

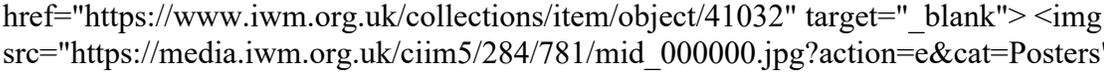
When examined together, these pieces of wartime propaganda present a rather contradictory characterization of British women during World War II. In some cases, women were called upon to make decisions for their children's safety or they were trusted to evacuate vulnerable citizens from the city. On the other hand, some posters portray women as untrustworthy and as threats to national security and the Allies' success. Therefore, even in seemingly positive portrayals of women in wartime propaganda, stereotypes of femininity prevail. In the public consciousness, these caricatures of womanhood confined women to the domestic sphere and defined their utility in relation to motherhood. Instead of dispelling myths of femininity and promoting equality during wartime, propaganda sanctioned stereotypes of womanhood.

²⁸ Such sentiments have roots in the ideas of sexuality that emerged in WWI: “Women in the so-called home front who instigated sexual misconduct were viewed as internal threats to the nation's welfare.” (Grayzel 122).

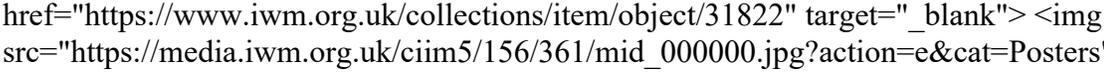
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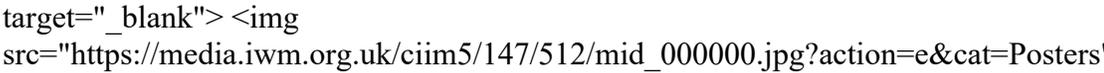
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