

RESEARCH ON WOMEN IN BRITAIN IN THE SECOND WORLD WAR

An historiographical essay

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LIBERAL PROGRESSIVES, FEMINISTS OF DIFFERENT PERSUASIONS, HISTORIANS OF SUBJECTIVITY AND POST-STRUCTURALISTS HAVE ARGUED ABOUT THE MEANING OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR FOR WOMEN SINCE 1945. THIS ESSAY OUTLINES THEIR INTERPRETATIONS, AND ASKS WHETHER WE ARE ON THE BRINK OF A NEW HISTORIOGRAPHY.

The story of the ways in which the history of British women in the Second World War has been written, between 1945 and the present day, is one of major shifts over time, in terms of theoretical perspectives, topics considered worthy of study, and methodology. This historiography provides a window on developments within social history and women's history more widely, as well as focusing attention on the problems of competing historical perspectives, and the challenges they pose for future historians.

From the 1950s to the 1970s, sociologists and social historians were particularly interested in the idea that the war had the effect of initiating or accelerating social change. The main theoretical formulation of this view was provided by Stanislaus Andrzejewski, who proposed in a book published in 1954 that total war brought benefits to the relatively underprivileged groups who participated in the military effort, with a levelling effect on social differences. A succession of other scholars including Richard Titmuss, Alva Myrdal, Viola Klein and Arthur Marwick, applied this theory to women in the British context. Their research was informed by a liberal view of the benefits of modernisation for women.

Titmuss suggested that women's role as dependants in wartime stimulated the development of social policies which reduced inequalities and raised women's status as wives and mothers. He also drew attention to contemporary demographic changes that were fundamentally altering women's position in the family and the labour market. The increased incidence of marriage at a younger age after the war, and the birth of a small number of children close together early in marriage, meant that married women over 30 now became a major source of recruitment to the labour force (Titmuss, 1958).

In 1956 Alva Myrdal and Viola Klein investigated the trends that Titmuss had identified, and defended the married woman's dual role in domestic and paid work against the view that wives should devote themselves solely to the home. They considered the impact of the war on women to have been significant in three ways. Firstly, they believed that "sex discrimination in matters of employment almost disappeared". Secondly they argued that the "reorganization of working conditions to meet the needs of women workers assumed such dimensions that it may well be called a social revolution". Thirdly they claimed that there was a sizeable reduction in the number of married women in paid work post-war, in spite of evidence that women wished to stay in work after the war

(Myrdal & Klein, 1956, second edition 1968, p. 52-54). The thrust of their argument was that what the war had proved possible could be repeated in the 1950s and '60s : married women could be persuaded to join the labour force, and they could combine responsibilities to their homes and to the work place without having detrimental effects on either.

In the 1960s and 1970s Arthur Marwick popularised the view that the Second World War contributed significantly to the growth of equality between the sexes. Like Myrdal and Klein he argued that women did men's jobs in wartime and received equal pay, and that these were lasting gains. Unlike them he believed that government conscription "played a very minor role in the changes in women's employment". He also argued that married women became more acceptable as employees (Marwick, 1968, p. 291-294). Marwick argued that both twentieth century wars gave women greater self-confidence and a more public and visible role in paid work, politics and social life. His indicators were behavioural : women wore shorter skirts, smoked in public, went to pubs, travelled alone and had sex outside marriage (Marwick, 1968 p. 127; Marwick, 1976, p. 138). In a discussion of the effects of the war on British, French, American, Russian and German women, published in 1974, he argued that participation in the war effort "can be seen at work everywhere in further developments in the status of women" (Marwick, 1974, p. 137).

Titmuss, Myrdal and Klein, and Marwick all subscribed to the idea that the war and post-war years constituted "a period of increasing emancipation for women" (Titmuss, 1958, p. 101). However such an unproblematised view of progress for women was challenged in the 1970s by scholars working within new feminist theoretical frameworks which redefined the concept of emancipation. In the liberal view, 'emancipation' did not necessarily refer to equality with men, but encompassed the idea of higher status based on differences between the sexes. Thus it could involve recognition of women's special contribution to society as women, through practical competence and motherhood (Myrdal & Klein, 1968, p. 3), and also signs of greater feminine independence manifest for example in changes in manners and mores (Marwick, 1968, p. 127; Marwick, 1976, p. 138).

Marxist and radical feminists of the 1970s were not satisfied with these definitions of emancipation. They suspected that the idea that women had special aptitudes served to reinforce discrimination against them. Rather than applauding the practice of women taking on paid work on top of domestic work, and seeing this as raising women's status, feminists asked why domestic work should be identified solely with women, and why women's paid work was typically less valued than men's work. The new feminism saw the 'independence' apparently indicated by changes in dress styles and social behaviour as concealing enduring dependancies, both economic and psychological. The concept of 'emancipation' was replaced by that of 'liberation', which implied the removal of a system of sexual divisions which institutionalised the exploitation of women at work

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- Royal Ordnance Factory women walking along the 'cleanways'.
(Photograph Imperial War Museum, London)

and at home.

Interest in women's history in the 1970s was accentuated by the contradiction between the ideology of modernisation which pervaded historical accounts and was applied uncritically to women, and contemporary evidence of the continuing subordination of women in the home and at work. The question of what had happened in the Second World War remained an important one for understanding the opportunities historically open to women and what women had done with them. The dominance at this time of the marxist and socialist feminist perspective that it was paid work that contained the main potential for the breakdown of sexual divisions, prioritised the economic sphere in research on women. The Second World War was therefore of particular interest as a time when the demand for women in paid work was known to be stronger than usual. Research concentrated on the implications of this for the issues prioritised by the liberal progressives of the 1950s to the 1970s. Initially attention focused on women's position in the labour force, and on state intervention in the form of social policies towards women as workers. Later, a third issue implicit (though not developed) in the work of those authors was explored, that is the question of women's subjective responses to work during and after the war.

I. Women in the labour force

Myrdal and Klein argued that as a result of women's wartime work participation, sex discrimination in employment almost disappeared, and Marwick went further, arguing that this had lasting effects evidenced by the achievement of equal pay and the acceptance of married women as workers. These views (which still recur within liberal historiography) were challenged piecemeal within feminist history, and the challenges themselves stimulated debate.

For example, the idea of permanent gains in the labour market was denied by Juliet Mitchell in 1974 who understood women as a reserve army of labour pulled from dependence within the home into the labour market during the wartime crisis and pushed out afterwards, accompanied by changes in social policy and ideology as they moved in each direction. A problem with this interpretation is that it cannot apply to all women. Six million women were in paid employment before the war, 80 per cent of the number employed in 1943. The majority of women in paid work in the Second World War cannot therefore be considered part of a reserve mobilised for war work. Nevertheless, this view remains remarkably enduring as a kind of left/feminist text book account. It informed Harold Smith's research in 1986. In what he intended as a *coup de grâce* to the Marwickian view of the war expanding the employment of married women, Smith interpreted the pre- and post-war women's employment statistics (which are all partial or estimated) to mean that women, especially married women, withdrew wholesale from the labour market after the war. The difference between Juliet Mitchell and Harold Smith was that she believed women did not want to go, whereas he believed they did. These assumptions raise issues about researching women's subjective responses, which I shall come to shortly.

Smith's view of married women, specifically, constituting a reserve of labour, was contested in the late 1980s. Summerfield (1988) challenged Smith's reading of the estimates of married women's employment before, during and after the war. The most reliable figures suggested that the proportion of all working women (full- and part-time) who were married, rose during the war and after a small dip immediately post war when readjustment from war to peace production was occurring, remained high and rising in the 1950s. The proportions were 16 per cent in 1931, 43 per cent in 1943, 40 per cent in 1947, 43 per cent in 1951 and 52 per cent in 1959 (Summerfield, 1988, p. 100 and note 20). The steady improvements in married women's position as employees implied by Marwick may not have been happening, but neither were married women pulled in to the workforce and then pushed out without a trace.

During the '80s alternative understandings of women's place in the labour force were developed, which dismissed as inadequate the reserve army theory. They were based on the concept of gender segregation, and debated the determinants of this segregation, namely capitalism (the institutionalisation of capital accumulation in a class society),

or patriarchy (the institutionalisation of male dominance), or a combination of the two (Hartmann, 1981; Walby, 1986 and others). This perspective informed research which examined the contribution of the Second World War to the dynamic by which production processes were segregated into men's and women's work, with skill and pay differentials between them.

The conclusions of this research were as follows. In Britain (and America) during the Second World War there was a high degree of transfer between different occupations and industries. For instance, less than half of the women who were machine and assembly workers in Britain in 1943 (47 per cent) had been in these jobs before the war. The remaining 53 per cent of wartime women machinists and assemblers had been shop assistants, waitresses, labourers, domestic servants or clerical workers. Women were drawn in large numbers into some areas and types of work previously almost entirely done by men. For example, the number of women employed in the engineering industry rose from 97,000 to 602,000 and the proportion rose from 10 to 34 per cent of the workers in the industry, between 1939 and 1943. One quarter of these women did skilled or semi-skilled jobs and were paid on the male wage scale. But even this minority of women doing 'men's work' did not win permanent access to these jobs. This was the result of the interplay of the interests of male trade unionists and employers. Male trade unionists did not see it as in the interests of the working class as a whole for men and women to be treated as an undifferentiated workforce with identical interests vis a vis capital. The process of introducing women to categories of work regarded as 'men's' work (known as 'dilution') was controlled by employer-union agreements. Trade unionist negotiators tried to use these agreements for 'gate-keeping', that is to protect their male members from the incursions of a rival labour force. They insisted that the agreements specified both that women on men's work would receive equal pay (to protect men's rates from undercutting) and that these women would be removed at the end of the war (to protect men's jobs). On the other hand male trade unionists also tried to resist the classification of work (in particular of the numerous new jobs thrown up by labour process changes in the war) as women's work, which would be paid at women's rates and lost to men thereafter. Both strategies were prompted by patriarchy, and were opposed by capital. Employers looked for ways round the equal pay agreements, to avoid paying women the same as men and to keep them on as cheap labour. And employers took the offensive in the gender classification of work on the basis of their construction of the national employment picture and their beliefs about women's innate capacities, such that many types of work, from sweeping the floor to coremaking, were redefined as 'women's work' (Summerfield, 1988, and 1989, chapter 7).

The new feminist interpretation of the wartime segregation of the labour force, summarised above, directly contradicted Myrdal and Klein's assertion quoted earlier, that "sex discrimination in matters of employment almost disappeared" during the war. On the contrary, the war was now seen as accelerating the sex-stereotyping of work which had occurred beforehand and continued afterwards. In industries where relatively small

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• Girls working as bricklayers' labourers on a housing site for arms workers.
(Photograph SOMA-CEGES, Brussels)

proportions of women had been employed before the war, sectors which employed only women expanded (for example assembly lines in electrical engineering and clerical work in offices). Simultaneously some traditional woman-employing industries like textiles and domestic service, contracted. This research, then, suggested that women were not pulled in and pushed out of paid work as a result of the war. They were redistributed as between industries and occupations within gender-stereotyped sectors of work (Summerfield, 1989 and 1993). The view of 1939 to 1945 as a period of particularly intense interplay between capitalism and patriarchy concluded that the war stimulated a process of restructuring the workforce along gender-segregated lines. In other words there were profound changes in women's paid employment as a result of the Second World War, but the outcome of those changes could not be regarded as representing steady progress for women.

Research on the wartime contribution to industrial restructuring also drew attention to changes in the composition of the female workforce, from the young single women typical of the interwar period, to the older married women typical of the 1950s. There were divergent interpretations of these changes. Smith denied that the war played a

part in increasing the proportion of married women in the workforce. In contrast Summerfield argued that the pressure of wartime labour shortage led to a rising proportion of older, married women in the labour force which was largely retained in the late 1940s. Marriage bars were removed because of the demand for labour, and the demographic changes which Titmuss had identified (balancing of the sex ratio, lower age of marriage, earlier childbearing) made more married women available for work for longer periods of their lives. Moreover, first during the war, and then again in the late 1940s, part-time working arrangements were introduced by employers to tap the supply of married women without assaulting the domestic ideology. The evidence of continuity in married women's employment appeared to invalidate the reserve army theory's push-pull model of married women participating in war work and returning to the home afterwards (Summerfield, 1993).

Although the proportion of all women in paid employment did not expand permanently as a result of the war (it was 34 per cent in 1931 and 35 per cent in 1951), the changes in the composition of the female workforce meant that there were important differences in women's experiences of paid work after, as compared with before, the war. These differences were both in terms of the kind of work a woman might do (assembly work or office work rather than domestic service or textiles) and the points in her life cycle when she might do it (not just as a young single woman on leaving school, but also as an older woman after marriage and childbirth).

II. Women and social policy

The marxist feminist analysis of the use of women as a reserve army of labour during the war, attributed considerable importance to the role of the state in mobilising the reserve for war work, and returning it to the home afterwards. Juliet Mitchell, for example, argued that social policies were developed to free women from the home through the provision of various services which substituted for women's private domestic work in the home. These included wartime nurseries, the evacuation of older children, and various types of collective feeding (such as workplace canteens, British restaurants and school meals). Mitchell's argument was that this destabilised the family on a temporary basis, and was justified by wartime rhetoric.

After the war the family was restored both ideologically and in social and employment policy, by the abrupt withdrawal of services substituting for the wife and mother, and by women's removal from war work. Mitchell identified postwar psychoanalytical theory about the mutual dependence of the mother and child (Bowlbyism) as a major component of the ideological reconstruction of the family which informed postwar social policy. "After the war political stabilization and economic reconstruction brought about a restoration of conservative social forms. Nurseries and communal restaurants were closed down. Where women had been recruited to industry they were now encouraged to marry and, if married, barred from most professions and many jobs: instead

of national workers they were to be private wives”, and above all mothers, whose place was at home with the children. “From the psychoanalyst John Bowlby, whose work was popularized on radio and in women’s magazines, we learnt that a person sucked his emotional stability literally with his mother’s milk” (Mitchell, 1974, p. 228).

Mitchell’s work stimulated research into both parts of the argument : the idea that social policies were developed to free women from domestic work during the war and snatched away at the end, and the idea of an ideological about-turn to justify the process.

Denise Riley (1983) argued that the wartime rhetoric around women workers was contradictory in that women were expected to be both full-time mothers and active citizens who must contribute to the war effort. Services like the wartime nurseries were justified on all sorts of grounds other than as mother-substitutes (such as that nurseries benefited the child and that nurseries compensated for inadequate mothers). They were not abruptly snatched away at the end of the war but were phased out as responsibility for them shifted from central to local government. After the war, Riley argued, the government did not use Bowlbyism (which became prominent in the 1950s not the ’40s) to get women back home. In fact, wartime and postwar ideology conflated ‘woman worker’ with ‘wife and mother’. Especially in the pronatalist discourses of 1945-1950, the primacy of the second role meant that women could not be taken seriously in the first. “Women’s war work, even in presentations of their collective heroic capacities, was work done by ‘women’, marked through and through by the gender of its performers, and consequently by the especial temporariness of the work of women who were mothers ... Everything about the employment of married women in industry militated against their being taken seriously as real workers : by 1945 the dominant rhetoric held out an opposition between the mother and the woman worker. The postwar collapse of the war nurseries only underlined the ‘special nature’ of temporary concessions to working mothers” (Riley, 1983, p.195, emphasis in original).

Other researchers like Pat Allatt found the same message in a range of authoritative, semi-official communications including the Beveridge Report on Social Insurance, Army Education literature and women’s magazines. They emphasised that women workers were a temporary and exceptional phenomenon, and that women’s normal condition was one of dependency within marriage and motherhood (Allatt, 1983).

In an in-depth study of the wartime social policies accompanying the mobilisation of women, Summerfield argued for a yet more complex picture (1983, 1989). There were competing discourses concerning women’s role during and after the war in areas such as child care, shopping and feeding. Patriarchal expectations about women (such as those identified by Riley and Allatt) were in tension with the demands of wartime production. The needs of production promoted policies providing substitutes for women with the possibility that these would become permanent on the grounds of the (continuing) needs of the labour market, and also of social justice. On the other hand patriarchal

expectations restrained pressures to 'free' women through state-sponsored collective measures. The state was driven neither entirely by the interests of capital, nor by those of patriarchy, and the outcome in terms of social policy was a set of compromises. For example, state provision of child care greatly increased, but was never intended to be anything but temporary (symbolised by wartime nurseries in huts and church halls), and even after the expansion there were not enough places in nurseries for all the children of women workers. Those unsuccessful in the search for a nursery place, who wanted to do war work, were officially advised to find private minders. In terms of employment policy the vital compromise was the development of part-time work during the war, presented by the Ministry of Labour as a way in which women could combine the two roles of worker and housewife, without injuring either. The implication of these wartime social policies was that "the great bulk of wartime domestic work was thrown back to the private sphere of a woman's own resources and those of her family, friends and neighbourhood" (Summerfield, 1989, p.185). In the area of social policy, according to this analysis, there was little to undo at the end of the war.

Riley and Summerfield argued in different ways against both the liberal progressive view expressed by Myrdal and Klein and others, and the marxist feminist position taken by Mitchell. There was no social revolution in the organisation of women's work and domestic conditions as a result of the war, nor was it the case that such a revolution took place for the duration of the war to be reversed at its end. State provision of substitutes was partial and temporary during the war, and patchy after it. Women were expected to reconcile home and work privately, and part-time work was (for the state and the employer) the ideal compromise, compatible with ideological constructions of the primacy of domesticity in a woman's life.

III. Subjectivities

An issue on which most of the research mentioned above touched, but which it did not explore in depth, was what women themselves wanted during and after the war. Liberals assumed that women welcomed the modernising improvements which they believed they were witnessing. Myrdal and Klein suggested that the reduction in the number of married women in paid work post-war occurred against the wishes of the women it affected, who wanted to continue to work after the war. The marxist and socialist feminist argument that paid work was the path to liberation, also suggested that women should have welcomed wartime changes in employment and the development of state services for domestic work, and that they should have wanted to retain them. Mitchell assumed that women wanted work and nurseries after the war. Riley (1983) confessed that she shared this assumption, and the perspective on which it was based, but confronted an absence of evidence to support her view. She could not find a hidden history of feminist agitation for nurseries and work. As a result she felt herself, "oscillating between two explanatory models: the one of saying, 'Women really did want to work, they did want nurseries; if we read the responses to these flat questionnaires

correctly, we can surely decipher these wishes; or we can uncover the buried evidence of meetings, demonstrations and petitions to reveal their wants.' And the second of saying, 'Well, no wonder women were, on the whole, indifferent : what else, given these political conditions and these circumstances of work, could these women have done in 1945 ?'" (Riley, 1983, p. 190-1).

Riley saw the problem initially as one of historical methodology and later as one of theoretical perspective. In 1983 she posed the methodological question, how can we discover "why and how people produce particular formulations about what they want ?" (Riley, 1983, p. 190). Wartime surveys used loaded questions which produced ambiguous answers. Retrospective accounts recorded in autobiographies or oral histories could not be trusted, because it would be impossible to strip away "the patina of historical postscripts and rewritings" by which they would be distorted (Riley, 1983, p. 191). Riley started to question the assumption underlying the pursuit of evidence of what women wanted, that is that women in the past had a set of clearly defined needs and wants which research could uncover. Her discussion of the difficulties of accessing women's subjective feelings about the effects on them of the Second World War, led to her later theoretical formulations about women's history. Writing now from within a post-structuralist framework she argued against the use of 'women' as a category, the record of whose experiences might reveal women's consciousness and agency, and for an emphasis on deconstructing the discourses generated by powerful sources, which defined 'women', constructed gender relations, and controlled the parameters of possibility in men's and women's lives (Riley, 1988).

Since the late 1980s, scholars have applied to the Second World War the post-structuralist view that the way to understand social change is not in terms of taken-for-granted categories such as gender, class and nation, but through the analysis of the discourses which, as part of a dynamic process, produce such social identities. Important theoretical elaborations of this idea have come from the United States; for example Jean Bethke Elshtain argued that the construction of women as essentially non-combatant has historically been vital in wartime, since women and home are the icons of nationhood for which men are fighting. Hence, Elshtain argued, war polarises gender identities rather than levelling differences between constructions of masculinity and femininity (Elshtain, 1987). M.R. and P.L-R Higonnet took the parallel view that the mobilisation of women for war did not, as might be expected, upset the traditional construction of gender identities because, although women took on work previously reserved to men, the wartime roles into which men moved were military ones, at the front or just behind it, and were more highly valued than those which they left for women. Consequently the "dynamic of gender subordination" remained as it was. The Higonnets characterized the construction of wartime gender relations as a "double helix", a structure with two intertwined but never meeting strands. During war, definitions of masculinity move along the male strand of the helix, towards the military front, while femininity shifts along the female strand into previously male domains, but remains subordinate to the



• Three grandmothers in the war industry.
(Photograph Imperial War Museum, London)

position on the male strand, maintaining the gender hierarchy (M.R. & P-L.R.Higonnet, 1987, p. 34-35).

Such analyses have been taken further in the context of popular media, notably cinema. For example, Antonia Lant explored British 'home front' films to uncover the relationship of the representation of women to the construction of British national identity in the Second World War (Lant, 1991). She argued that the use in these films of women in 'masculine' roles, wearing utility clothing and uniforms, projected a specifically 'British' image, oppositional to the glamorous American femininity of Hollywood movies which hitherto dominated British screens. But she also argued that the British wartime portrayal of women caused tensions with the traditional understanding of woman's role as mother, wife, daughter or sweetheart who "kept the home fires burning" while men went to war to defend her and the values for which she stood. Lant concluded that there were signs of struggle in the construction of British national identity in the films and other products of popular culture and propaganda that she analysed. The need to attenuate signs of sexual difference in the cause of constructing the image of a peculiarly British national war effort, was in tension with the need to preserve and emphasise femininity as a symbol of everything for which men were fighting (Gledhill & Swanson, 1996). Di Parkin revealed the same tension in the context of policy towards

women in the military. The shortage of military personnel led to the use of women to fire anti-aircraft guns on one gunsite, but the experiment was shortlived because of masculine outrage. Members of Parliament objected to women firing guns, affirming in doing so the traditional social construction of femininity. Women were life-givers not life-takers: they could service those employed to kill, but not do the killing themselves (Parkin, 1989). Even though Lant's formulation was arrived at by a very different methodological and theoretical route, it parallels the conclusion of materialist feminist historians of the 1980s, including Parkin and Summerfield, that the interests of capitalism and patriarchy were brought into conflict over the mobilisation of women for war.

Other types of public discourse have been deconstructed by post-structuralist historians concerned to discover answers to the question of how gender relations were shaped during and after the war. For example Julia Swindells argued that the demobilisation debate which took place in the British parliament in November 1944 produced a political strategy and a consensus "by which women were sold frocks for jobs, in the guise of coming home to heaven" (Swindells, 1995, p. 232). According to her analysis, this debate praised women for their contribution to the war effort, while simultaneously writing them out of national identity which was now 'gendered male'. The debate redefined women as "the traditional sustainer of that family life which is going to supply the returning 'Britisher' with his comforts" (Swindells, 1995, p. 228). Rather than rewarding women, like men, for their participation in the war effort with the promise of new opportunities for paid work, the debate "reconstructed gender difference" by promising women opportunities to be glamorously dressed once more.

Alluring though the practice of deconstructing public discourses may be, other historians of women in the Second World War remained committed to the unearthing and analysis of private feelings. For example, in contrast to Riley and the kinds of historical writing to which her doubts and insights led, Harold Smith was confident that it was possible to tell what women wanted in the 1940s. He argued that women did not want to do paid work during and after the war, and he supported those who argued in the 1940s that women "fervently wish themselves back into their pre-war way of life" at the end of the war. He also argued that women were not dissatisfied with traditional sex roles and that "the war's most important legacy for women was a strengthening of traditional sex roles rather than the emergence of new roles" (Smith, 1986, p. 225). He based his argument on a combination of autobiographical evidence, survey reports and contemporary commentaries. But Riley was right that such evidence is highly ambiguous. Summerfield criticised Smith's uncritical reading of the survey evidence by applying some of the insights of post-structuralist approaches to them. The surveys themselves needed to be seen as part of the discourse of postwar reconstruction, which located the desire for women's 'return' to marriage and domesticity not only in the minds of men, but within women's own hearts. A close reading of women's replies revealed a more complex picture than the survey authors' firm concluding statements. Women expressed their perennial uncertainty about how to balance the demands of domestic work and the

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- The first woman railway guard, working in the London district.
(Photograph SOMA-CEGES, Brussels)

pressure of economic constraints. Women were saying that their decisions about full-, part-time or no work after the war would depend on a number of material contingencies, including the availability of work in their area, whether or not they married, their husbands' employment prospects, and the cost of living (Summerfield, 1992, 1993).

The use of categorical statements about all women, however, is the kind of historical approach which Riley targetted when she pointed to the need for historians to break out of the universalising category 'women', or be implicated in the, at root essentialist, construction of feminine identity. But rather than abandoning 'women' in favour of the study of the construction of feminine identity, some historians have continued to insist on the value of researching women in the Second World War, as a diversely composed social group constituting a focus of enduring interest. Exploration of the effects of differences of, for example, age, class, region and ethnicity on subjective responses to wartime and postwar work has begun. For example in pursuit of class differences, Margaret Allen mined Ministry of Labour sources for cases of middle-class women who successfully resisted official efforts to draft them into war work which was tagged with a different class identity from the professional or clerical work they had done before marriage. She also used autobiographical sources to illustrate the disinclination of married middle-class women to undertake war work at all, preferring to construct themselves as keepers of hearth and home (Allen, 1983, p. 410-411). Ben Bousquet and Colin Douglas have opened up the study of ethnic differences among women in the war, through their research on the racist recruitment of women in the British Colonies. The British government excluded black colonial women from service in Britain, until a black woman from Bermuda was accidentally accepted in the Auxiliary Territorial Service in 1941, because it was assumed that she was white. After much inter-ministerial debate, rather than provoke civil unrest in the islands, the British government from 1943 recruited a limited number of well-educated black women from the Caribbean (Bousquet & Douglas, 1991, chapter 7). Bousquet and Douglas used oral history interviews to record the experiences of their recruitment, journey to Britain and reception in the 'Mother Country'.

Researchers who used oral history and autobiographical sources to illuminate the history of women as a diverse social group in the Second World War, were less convinced than Riley that the "patina of historical postscripts and rewritings" overlaying such accounts negated their value as historical sources. The interest of radical feminism in women's culture and experience stimulated the development of feminist oral history in the 1980s, as well as documentary television presentations such as *The Women's War* (in the Channel 4 *People's War* series, 1987) based on women's personal accounts of what happened to them in the war and how it changed them. This influence encouraged a shift of research attention away from the focus of marxist and materialist feminism on women in paid work, and relaxed the pressure of enquiry in order to allow women's own priorities to surface. The extensive use of autobiographical and oral history sources in a book comparing women's experiences in both world wars (Braybon & Summerfield,



• Toddlers playing outside at a wartime nursery in Oxford, 1941.
(Photograph Fox Photos, London)

1987) revealed that whether to do paid work or not during and after the war, was by no means the only issue which was important to women. This research indicated a wide variety of wartime experiences which women felt were important at the time and for their later lives. These included separation from family, social mixing, friendship formation, sexual encounters, participation in labour processes, variations in health, improvisation in the face of shortages, and readjustment to postwar home and work circumstances. Some of these issues, such as that of sexual experience, have been pursued further. Summerfield and Crockett analysed both the wartime discourse of male and female sexuality, and individual women's accounts of wartime sexual experience. They suggested that the discursive construction of women in public war roles was that they were sexually suspect, but that individual women found ways of both benefitting from and resisting this identity (Summerfield & Crockett, 1992).

The wealth of oral history evidence of women's experiences in the Second World War now available, including recent collections by Mavis Nicholson (1995) and Bette Anderson (1994), as well as older ones (e.g. Pam Schweitzer et al, 1985), makes it impossible to regard the war as a period in which no changes took place for women. The testimony recorded in such volumes emphasises the emotional and psychological changes women

experienced as a result of the war. Braybon and Summerfield called their 1987 book *Out of the Cage* because many women recounted the effects on them of the wars, through the analogy of being “let out of the cage”. This was undeniably how some women felt, even though (as Braybon and Summerfield argued) other sorts of evidence concerning women’s social position indicated strong continuity in the subordination of women at work and at home, within the context of the process of gender restructuring of the workforce, referred to earlier in this paper.

Personal testimony can be collected, presented and enjoyed with no (or minimal) editorial attempt at analysis or generalisation, as it has been in the books by Anderson, Nicholson and Schweitzer mentioned above. But if it is to be useful for the understanding of social change, Riley’s challenge concerning the effects on private remembering of the process by which the past is publicly commemorated cannot be ignored, even if her conclusion that the use of such sources is futile, is rejected. Personal testimony needs both to be tackled more systematically, and not to be treated as though it unproblematically describes the past as it was.

Dorothy Sheridan’s research on the influences of popular culture on memory is helpful in isolating and specifying the content of the “historical postscripts and rewritings” within which women may have framed their personal accounts. She argued that four stereotypes have dominated popular reconstructions of women in the Second World War since 1945, “the resistance fighter”, “Rosie the Riveter”, “the long-suffering housewife and mother” and “the girlfriend”. She argued that popular images do not include “the woman in uniform”. This absence, coupled with the feminist rejection of militarism of the 1980s, meant that “women talking in the 1980s ... about their wartime experience in the Army, are negotiating quite difficult terrain” (Sheridan, 1990, p. 38). Anti-militarism might make it difficult to admit to military enthusiasm, although on the other hand the feminist emphasis on women’s rights to equal employment opportunities might make it possible to celebrate doing a man’s job in the military. In particular Sheridan emphasised the pressure on women to re-evaluate as ‘choices’ the main features of their lives since 1945, especially marriage, motherhood and the incidence of paid work. Sheridan raised, although she did not answer, a vital question concerning the determinism implicit in post-structuralist approaches : how far are feminine identities imposed upon women, and how far is it possible for women to choose their identities and hence themselves to determine the courses of their own lives ?

In a new book, to be published in 1998, Summerfield has taken further this approach, focused on popular memory, to women’s subjective responses to the Second World War. The new book systematically explores the relationship between issues of concern in women’s oral history accounts of wartime experience (such as leaving home, obtaining work, relationships with men and women, and life after the war), and constructions of those same concerns in popular culture during and since the war. She suggests that, in reconstructing their wartime lives, women attached themselves to one of two types of

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- Trafalgar Square, 1942 : a woman in Women's Auxiliary Air Force uniform. (Age Exchange Theatre Trust, London)

wartime feminine identity available (and in tension) in popular culture. On the one hand was the figure of the woman who contributed heroically to the war effort in a man's job, and on the other was that of the woman far from combat, who stoically endured the pressures and privations of war. The book presents an analysis of the often unexpected ways in which women retrospectively negotiated not only these rival wartime discourses, but also the interpretations of the Second World War available in the historiography discussed in this essay, in reconstructing their wartime lives.

IV. Conclusion

We have traced here a journey across time, through the territory of the history of women in the Second World War. We have viewed the influence upon this historiography of liberal progressive views of the war as a moderniser of women, and of the marxist feminist riposte that the war was an occasion for the exploitation of women as a reserve army of labour which was returned with an ideological flourish to the home after all-out mobilisation. We have explored the materialist feminist re-readings of this process, which reformulated it as one in which the war intensified the gender segregation of a female labour force composed of women who were increasingly diverse in terms for instance of age and marital status, as a result of a conflict between two sets of interests in the position of women: those of capitalism and patriarchy. We have seen how doubts about the possibility of obtaining reliable evidence of women's own preferences at the end of the war led at least one historian from socialist to post-structuralist feminism, and hence away from 'experience' to the exploration of discourses which allegedly defined and controlled gender identities. Others using this theoretical and methodological approach revealed tensions within popular constructions of gender and national identity, between representations of women as de-feminised participants in war, and as icons of femininity symbolising the traditional objectives of war. We have explored efforts to understand the meaning of personal testimony concerning the effects of the war on individual women. Finally we have identified the challenge which the historiography of women in the Second World War poses to historians in the late 1990s: can a history of women in the 1940s be written that retains the insights of analyses which point to the material effects of powerful and oppressive discourses concerning appropriate roles for women, at the same time as allowing historiographical space for the diverse accounts of individual women concerning the effects of the Second World War on their lives?

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development of the paper presented here. The interpretations in this paper remain, of course, my own.

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