

The Forgotten War Story of French Women: Analysis of First World War Literature and First- Hand Accounts



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WRITER'S COMMENT: In the Spring Quarter of 2021, I took a fascinating history seminar on the participants in major Western wars starting with World War I and onto the present day. Most of the reading and discussion focused on the soldiers' experiences, and what interested me the most was their relationships with the civilian lives they had left behind. All of the novels we read were written by men, most of which contained varied levels of disdain towards civilians, women in particular. Misogyny was normalized in these texts and any female presence was almost exclusively negative. None of this was of any surprise to me, as sexism in literature is already so infamously common, but it did inspire me to search for more accurate accounts of the roles women played in Western wars. Focusing specifically on French women in World War I, I discovered that the portrayal of the passive or judgmental woman reflected in much of her time's literature hid the oppressive and patriarchal reality, a reality I hope to make more common knowledge.

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: I first met Ms. Valdez Jimenez in Fall 2020, when she enrolled in my HIS 141: Modern France lecture course. I immediately found her to be a fluid and highly compelling writer, one of the best among the undergraduates I have been fortunate enough to teach. She then enrolled in HIS 102E, a seminar in European history, in Spring 2021. The essay below is her final paper for the class: it is crisply written, well-sourced, and overall, a model undergraduate essay. Ms. Valdez Jimenez reads soldiers' memoirs from the First World War

against the grain to argue that while women could play an important role in them, they did so mainly as symbols and objects against which men defined a fragile sense of misogynistic trench masculinity.

—Adam Zientek, *Department of History*

In 1871, France lost the Franco-Prussian War after German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck engineered a dispute over Spanish succession to unify and fortify Germany. The conflict was quick and decisive—with the French suffering roughly 140,000 fatalities to Germany’s 44,000—and was an enormous embarrassment to the state. The glorious, unbeatable French army of the Napoleonic Age and before was no more. Beyond the physical losses, the humiliation was emasculating, threatening the integrity of the gendered society that championed masculinity as a driving force behind France’s strength. The First World War would be a rematch against Germany, a chance for the French Army to reassert its dominance and regain its former glory. But the easy victory people assumed did not come, and instead, Europe spent five years dug into trenches and slowly wearing away at each other in what would be the bloodiest European conflict until World War II. The favorite story of the First World War is this: the infamous trench warfare that was miserable, gory, and hopeless. Many popular novels of this war, regardless of national origin, center around young soldiers who might differ in their reasons for fighting but are in near-complete agreement of the hardships and trauma they faced. But to focus exclusively on this story erases an entire perspective: that of women. World War I novels written by and about men described the women they encountered, most often French women, as ignorant, stupid, sexually provocative, and useless. Limited by misogyny and misconstrued ideas of gender, these novels fail to depict the reality of French women fighting a war of their own.

The nature of warfare and new style of fighting separated men from ordinary society in not just a physical way but a psychological one. Although sexism and misogyny obviously predate World War I, the new reality formed in the trenches allowed soldiers’ negative conceptions of women to develop further. In previous European wars, soldiers could expect battles to last a few days at most, with long breaks from direct conflict in between. Now, armies from both sides kept their men at the front for months, if not years, at a time, where danger was constant and random. Historians Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Baker

claim that it “is now known that soldiers on a battlefield can hope to preserve their psychological equilibrium for only several months at best,” but World War I soldiers who stayed in a battlefield constantly despite injuries and exhaustion could not hope for this.¹ The constant stress was so jarring and overwhelming that a common way to cope was the desensitization and normalizing of their new lives. There was no mental or emotional room for anything other than what the soldier was experiencing in that moment. Jean Dartemont, the main character in Gabriel Chevallier’s novel *Fear*, summarized it as, “I have a single idea: get through the bullets, the grenades, the shells, get through them all . . . to be alive is to be victorious.”² His entire worldview was condensed down to the activity his senses could perceive. Any greater political reasons for war or the civilians the soldiers were supposed to be fighting to protect were no longer real. In the novel of a British soldier based on his experiences, *Her Privates We*, Frederic Manning added on to this notion by writing that “in the actual agony of battle . . . women cease to exist so completely that they are not even irrelevant.” In these mentally scarring moments of trauma, the very concept of women was removed from the soldiers’ reality. They certainly thought of women often during calmer times of the day, but the distance from civilian life was so great that they were now viewed in the abstract, rather than as real figures, because they did not fit within a soldier’s war life.

The civilian life was replaced by stress, violence, and trauma. Dartemont encountered so much gore and horror on a daily basis that it became incorporated into his new worldview. If he had seen any of this “outside the war,” he “would surely have fainted away in shock.”³ But in the universe of the trenches, only a few hours away from French civilians, this was normal. In *Her Privates We*, main character Private Bourne observed that although there was “nothing in war which is not in human nature,” the extreme violence men imposed on each other was “blind,” “irrational,” and uncontrollable. Despite this description of chaos, Manning’s character gloomily concluded with “c’est la guerre,” an

1 Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Baker, “Battle, Combat, Violence: A Necessary History.” In *14–18: Understanding the Great War*. trans. by Catherine Temerson (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002), pp. 15–44, 25.

2 Gabriel Chevallier, *Fear: A Novel of World War I*, trans. Malcolm Imrie (New York Review of Books, 2011), 70.

3 Gabriel Chevallier, *Fear*, trans. Malcolm Imrie (New York Review of Books, 2011), 81.

acceptance of it all, despite its horror.⁴ Although uncontrollable, war was inevitable. To resist it would be to challenge a soldier's very nature.

The indoctrination into war life went beyond enemy aggression and casualties. Through their main characters, both Chevallier and Manning included ample descriptions of the monotony and hard manual labor that took up much of the men's daily lives. The nature of the World War I battlefield required soldiers to dig, fortify, and maintain their trenches if they hoped to survive. These open-air tunnels of mud, rot, and human waste were not just their hideouts—they were the soldiers' home. This was true for the German army as well. In his memoir *Storm of Steel*, decorated lieutenant Ernst Junger described daily life in the beginning of the war as physically "taxing" and frustratingly pointless, with even reserve times "not much cosier" than the front lines.⁵ In these first several weeks, Junger was new to the war and had yet to see much combat, thus he was not integrated into war life. But as the months dragged on to years, soldiers who had spent their whole lives within the same several miles evolved the "rudimentary holes in the ground" to properly advanced dugouts "with beamed ceilings and plank-cladded walls" Junger could almost relax in "with a feeling of cosy seclusion."⁶ Of course, this level of comfort was practically nonexistent in the French and British trenches. The Germans, who were already occupying French and Belgian lands, did not need to advance as often as their opponents, whose main goal was to push the enemy out. They designed their trenches for long-term, defensive use, and therefore had the time to improve upon their surroundings. Nevertheless, the difference of quality of life did not prevent soldiers on both sides to develop attachments to their trenches, the only homes they had, and now, the only homes that mattered.

The psychological separation from the soldiers' world before the war was not just an accidental byproduct of warfare. Governments and military officials often directly intervened to promote this development. When French women petitioned their government to be allowed into war zones to visit their husbands at the rear, the military police not only forbade it but spent time and resources investigating women they suspected might sneak in anyway. And yet, the police allowed prostitutes

⁴ Frederic Manning, *Her Privates We* (Endeavor Media, 2018), 116.

⁵ Ernst Junger, *Storm of Steel*, trans. Michael Hoffmann (Penguin Books, 2004), 17.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 36, 42.

through regularly.⁷ The soldiers' contact with French women at the front was usually sexual and devoid of meaningful personal connection. This was, according to novelist Michel Corday, "[to] keep the army in complete isolation, thus protecting it against sentimental weakness."⁸ The strength of the army was in its inherent masculinity, and any threats to that, including feminine influence, could jeopardize French victory. The horrors of war and systemic misogyny of governmental rule worked in tandem to promote the distancing and dehumanization of women.

Any honoring or glorifying depiction of femininity was almost always conceptually removed from mortal French women and centered around men's issues. French soldiers prayed to the Virgin Mary, mother of Christ, and worshipped other female heroines like Joan of Arc.⁹ But these glorious icons were not regarded as actual, physical women. Rather, as historian Margaret H. Darrow assessed, they were "female in the way that Virtue, Liberty, and the Republic [were] female"¹⁰—feminine only to romantically portray these values as pure and beautiful. The Virgin Mary and Joan of Arc were not women but spiritual champions of French glory and, by extension, champions of individual men. Any real woman who was recognized as a World War I heroine resembled these abstract icons as much as possible. They were described as simple, nurturing, and endlessly self-sacrificing for the good of men. After all, Darrow wrote, "it was not a heroine's role to play a soldier's part."¹¹ The romanticized and rare French heroine fit into the soldier's war life only because she lived to serve him and existed in no other sense.

The real French woman was replaced by a vague and oversimplified caricature that represented the opposite of masculinity, and thus by nature stood opposed to the soldier's success. She was ignorant, stupid, privileged, and often obsessed with sex. When soldiers finally did interact with French women during the war, the caricature they had formed in their minds crashed with civilian reality. The encounters described in World War I novels are therefore unreliable and often inaccurate,

7 Margaret H. Darrow, *French Women and the First World War: War Stories of the Home Front* (Oxford, United Kingdom: Berg Publishers, 2000), 105.

8 *Ibid.*, 105.

9 Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Baker, "Civilization, Barbarism, and War Fervour," in *14–18 Understanding the Great War*, trans. Catherine Temerson (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 2002), pp. 113–158, 131.

10 Darrow, *French Women and the First World War*, 24.

11 *Ibid.*, 111.

as the authors' sexist biases exacerbated during their own times in the war heavily skewed their interpretations of the French woman's life and behavior.

Part of anti-woman bias came from resentment soldiers harbored toward civilians who had been spared the horrors of war. In Chevallier's *Fear*, Jean Dartemont was seriously injured and sent to a military hospital to recover, which was largely run by female nurses. The abrupt transition from intense firefight to peace and recovery forced Dartemont and his fellow wounded soldiers to directly confront the privileges the war denied them. A common response was to vilify and condemn the nurses, many of which were of higher social classes. Dartemont asserted that nurses only cared for them as a "patriotic task" but secretly looked down on the men with scorn.¹² Beyond his resentment of their relatively soft lives, his perspective was affected by his insecurity over his social class, which had not mattered at the front. He analyzed and critiqued any act of kindness from nurses. Through his rationale, nothing any of them did was truly genuine, so they were irredeemable. Dartemont was not alone in his derision. One of his friends, Sergeant Nègre, would jokingly adopt an alter ego of the Baron de Pocolotte, an exaggerated military official through which Nègre could "express himself without inhibition, knowing that his words of wisdom [would] not be heard by stupid civilians, people for whom he feels the deepest contempt."¹³ His bitterness was so intense it turned to active hate, and women, who supposedly glorified the war that had so injured him, were "just wombs" and nothing else.¹⁴ The soldiers' envy of civilian life exaggerated their perceptions of women to be ignorant and disrespectful of their trauma. Their contempt justified any sexism exacerbated in the trenches and only used these interactions as more evidence to support such prejudice.

Authors of World War I novels often projected their own perceptions of sex and masculinity onto their female characters, who they would make sexually provocative and immoral. In Chevallier's *Fear*, sexuality was often directly tied to a soldier's masculinity, the characteristic he relied on most to give him strength in the war. Soldiers injured in war were emasculated, and for nurses to see them in that state only amplified their shame and thus their continued resentment toward the women that

¹² Chevallier, *Fear*, 103.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 92.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 113.

cared for them. When Dartemont encountered a soldier who lost his testicles in a war injury, he claimed to notice the nurses infantilize and mock him. They no longer had the “discrete air of submission and fear” women had toward men, a submission which was obviously motivated by the obsession with sex all women had.¹⁵ Dartemont, who was injured himself and had spent months in mortal danger, lacked the control over women he was used to having. His assessment of women as submissive creatures who craved men was his reassurance that no matter how emasculated he might feel, his identity as a man still gave him natural power.

Beyond resentment was the general misogyny so prevalent among European men. Both authors and the characters they expressed themselves through interpreted any interactions with women with the assumption that men were intellectually superior in all cases. In *Fear*, when Dartemont was not directly arguing with them over the realities of warfare, he apparently “led the nurses into traps of logic and ensnare[d] them in syllogisms.”¹⁶ Tragically, dogma and centuries of domesticity prevented them from conversing at his level. While this specific scene is fictional, it suggests Chevallier’s own opinions of women as mentally inferior to men. Through Dartemont’s eyes, their perspectives and arguments were likely limited and misrepresented as foolish and unfounded. Frederic Manning also revealed his prejudice through Private Bourne in his own novel. When Bourne and his companions were temporarily at the mercy of three French women who suspected the men of being deserters, he described himself as a charming and pacifying manipulator who easily talked them down. “Women,” he claimed, “are notoriously influenced by a man’s facial expression . . . they have, in reality, about as much intuition as an egg.”¹⁷ Although the women opted to not report the men to the police, they did not fully acquiesce and kept their leverage over the soldiers. But Bourne, incapable of comprehending a situation in which a woman might hold power over him, rationalized the whole interaction as the men “humouring” the women and reduced them to lucky simpletons. *Her Privates We* joined the many World War I novels to rework characters’ mindsets and capabilities in order to erase any evidence of women successfully challenging gender norms.

15 Ibid., 97–98.

16 Ibid., 111.

17 Manning, *Her Privates We*, 146.

Sometimes the misrepresentation of women and skewing of events came out of complete lack of consideration of a woman's position, as male privilege impaired their accounts. In one occasion, Private Bourne watched as a corporal groped and fondled the breasts of a young French girl who was serving drinks "while she squealed and wriggled to make him more adventurous."¹⁸ The true level of consent of a fictional girl in a novel cannot be determined, but certainly similar scenarios occurred in real life. The girl's protests, which were assumed by the other men to be in cooperation with the corporal, could have been legitimate. Even if they had not been, a poor, young French girl living in a warzone was likely not in a social position to resist a soldier's advancements without repercussions. Men's constant assumptions of feminine interest ignored the uneven power dynamics women and girls had to live within.

This was especially true of confrontations between French women and occupying German soldiers. Ernst Junger described his encounters with civilians as charming and amusing, most specifically because of the girls. When he got lost on the way to guard duty, he sought directions from a small hut, only to find a seventeen-year-old girl hidden alone inside. To Junger, she was "spirited" and refreshing.¹⁹ When he returned to see the girl he dubbed "Jeanne d'Arc," she treated him to supper and he was "made as pleasantly welcome" as he had hoped.²⁰ While it was very likely accurate that "Jeanne d'Arc" made herself hospitable and friendly, Junger neglected to consider her extreme vulnerability to him and the fear she may have had of retaliation if she acted any other way. She was, after all, young, unarmed, and entirely alone. Weeks later, Junger quartered in the home of a French family who would have had little to no choice in the arrangement. When the "beautiful daughter" attempted to prevent him from entering her family's bedroom, he "took this to be one of her little jokes [and] pushed back," and knocked down the door, only to realize she was "completely naked."²¹ His inability to distinguish flirtation from rejection in this instance calls into question all other assumptions he made of women's behaviors and intentions. Like other men of his time, he could not comprehend that women might think differently than what common sexist rhetoric dictated they did.

18 Ibid., 71.

19 Junger, *Storm of Steel*, 52.

20 Ibid., 53.

21 Ernst Junger, *Storm of Steel*, trans. Michael Hoffmann (Penguin Books, 2004), 81.

Both Junger and Bourne had privilege as men and foreign occupiers, meaning female cooperation, whether personally consensual or not, was usually coerced.

Many of the World War I novels and nonfiction literature written by men were insightful and historically useful accounts of the trench soldiers' stories. But more often than not, their biases prevented them from providing an accurate description of women. French women in the First World War may not have been active combatants, but their roles went beyond the shallow and cosmetic portrayals the novels suggested. They adapted to the new war culture and struggled in navigating the contradicting patriarchal rules that the war only further complicated. Despite its erasure in popular media, the French woman's war story was just as rich and developed.

Women in France actively sought ways to contribute as much to the war effort as they were allowed. Even before the official start of the war, when war panic began to take hold across Europe in the 1910s, women explored different avenues of engagement. They advocated for the canonization of Joan of Arc, government recognition and funding of the French Red Cross, and universal male conscription.²² They were actually successful in all three of these areas, but none of the new changes significantly incorporated women into the formally recognized war effort. Joan of Arc was a champion for male soldiers, not female fighters, and although many women did participate in the Red Cross after 1914, the role came with anti-feminine criticism of its own. As the anticipation for war increased, so did serious debates among women over how they should best support their men and country. One journalist, Andrée d'Alix, suggested women should prepare to take over men's roles "[in] banks, the civil service, factories, and especially in agriculture," while eccentric socialite Jane Dieulafoy went as far as to call for a military reserve of women.²³ Few took Dieulafoy's ideas seriously, and no opinion went unchallenged. But the overwhelming commonality was the desire to provide in the most appropriate way possible.

The Great War came suddenly, before any consensus could be made. Just as armies rushed to mobilize, so did civilian life completely transform into the home front, and women scrambled to find their new social place. Perhaps the most well-known form of female war service, the

²² Darrow, *French Women and the First World War*, 23.

²³ *Ibid.*, 42.

Red Cross and military nursing became a popular volunteering option for women of almost exclusively upper-class status. The work was either unpaid or offered meager wages, so middle- and working-class women could not leave their families and livelihoods to participate for free. “If only I were rich,” workers’ rights activist Louise Delétang lamented, “if only I had the time!”²⁴ In 1916, the military created the job of Temporary Military Nurse, a paid position, in response to the growing shortage of nurses. But in Delétang’s view and that of her peers, “the program was too late” for working women who had committed to other work elsewhere.²⁵ Participating at the war front was simply not an option for most French women, thus explaining the roster of high-class socialites described in Chevallier’s *Fear* and other similar novels. Nurses made up only a small and specific demographic of the larger female population, and to shrink the perception of World War I women to only them would be entirely misleading.

Other favorite forms of involvement among rich women were more accessible to the middle and some of the working class. The *marraines de guerre*, “a peculiarly French creation,” was a letter-writing program in which civilians, but mostly women, could “adopt” a soldier at the front so that he may receive feminine comfort.²⁶ The program encouraged and reinforced the idea that women during wartime should direct their time and devotion to their beloved men in the trenches and that, if they did not have a loved one to long for, they should find one. The *marraines de guerre* were initially praised for their patriotic duty but soon became subjects of ridicule. They were accused of using the program to “collect” soldiers of lower classes than them so they could infantilize and patronize them.²⁷ Resentment of class and hierarchy was a common theme among lower-ranking soldiers, and many accounts reveal dislike of their own military officers who enjoyed luxury while they suffered. But when class and gender combined, male-written literature and contemporary journalism could intensify to hate. The *marraines de guerre* participated in a system that promoted patriarchy and centered men, but they were discounted in written works as privileged opportunists.

24 Ibid., 134.

25 Ibid., 140.

26 Ibid., 79.

27 Ibid., 81.

Women who worked in regularly direct contact with soldiers were frequently sexualized or at least accused of being sexually motivated. The trope of the *marraine* falling in love with a stranger through letters appeared in contemporary fiction, and both soldiers and journalists alike assumed nurses, driven by sex, lusted after their patients. But Margaret H. Darrow's research revealed that this "romantic/erotic theme . . . was almost entirely absent" in women's own written accounts.²⁸ Many tried to protest this false narrative publicly, with one nurse pleading with her audience to please not "believe those cute stories that come out several times a week on the fourth page of the newspaper."²⁹ Jean Dartemont's self-important assumptions that his nurses were sexually fascinated by him were simply unfounded in reality. Rather than lust after their patients, female nurses commonly reported either disgust or "aesthetic distancing" upon seeing the exposed and injured male body. Multiple accounts compared male bodies to Renaissance paintings and one to a Greek vase, while many others "felt nothing but disgust."³⁰ Misogynistic soldiers who felt emasculated by their injuries and their temporary physical dependence on the women who healed them might have projected their sexual insecurities onto the women, but these feelings were almost entirely unreciprocated.

The war-zone women of France were not the simple and enticing girls Bourne and Junger encountered in their respective novels. Many of them were peasants who struggled to make a living for what was left of their families, and they existed in a state of complete vulnerability to the nearest army, regardless of its nationality. Those who lived in French-controlled areas became "mouths to feed" and general inconveniences. The priority was the military, so women and children "ceased to represent France" and were "made expendable in order to protect the army."³¹ Their new label as hindrances to French victory made them natural enemies of their own country, allowing them no more significant protection than those under German occupation. Civilians were allowed to stay on their lands only if their existence benefitted the army. Women were expected to willingly provide soldiers with food, lodging, and on occasion, sex. To resist would be to label herself a liability when her survival depended

28 Ibid., 156.

29 Ibid., 156.

30 Louise Weiss, *Mémoires d'une européenne: Tome 1 (1893-1919)* (Paris, 1968), 192.

31 Darrow, *French Women and the First World War*, 103.

on the military's good view of her, so "it is not surprising that relatively few women officially complained of rape."³² Thus, the various instances of feminine hospitality found in *Her Privates We* and *Storm of Steel* are contextualized as coerced scenarios and not just examples of French women offering natural subservience to men. The vilification of women in German-occupied zones as whores and spies was also not grounded in evidence. Historian Deborah Buffton's archival research revealed most French women "continued their lives as best they could," and any cooperation with Germans was less an anti-French sentiment and more an effort to adapt to their new lives.³³ War-zone women had nearly no autonomy, were at the mercy of military whim, and had no army fighting to protect them. World War I left them with no country and no real choice but to submit to passing soldiers whose written works memorialized them as willing reprieves from battle.

The French woman's world beyond her interaction with soldiers was also hindered by patriarchy and centered around men. Many joined the workforce when their breadwinners volunteered or were conscripted, and by 1918, about 430,000 women were employed in the defense industries alone, earning less than men "by as much as 40 percent."³⁴ Female workers were often criticized for engaging in masculine labor and thus challenging the gender roles France so relied on to strengthen its army to victory. And yet, if a woman stayed at home, she was also criticized for refusing to bolster the nation's productivity to ensure a stable home for men to return to once the war ended. No matter how they acted, women were depicted as anti-patriotic and disgraceful. Their very existence as feminine beings contradicted the glorious masculinity so desired for the state. Regardless of public perception, however, financial need was a crushing and unavoidable reality for many working-class women for whom the war meant the threat of starvation. Government efforts to support its impoverished population included meager military allowances and national unemployment benefits, neither of which provided livable income.³⁵ High-society women made attempts to help by running *ouvoirs*, or charity workrooms. But Louise Delétang, who had been critical of the classist nature of the Red Cross, reported that in one

32 Ibid., 105.

33 Ibid., 123.

34 Ibid., 170.

35 Ibid., 172–173.

ouvoir, “women worked six and a half hours a day in return for a meal,” and other workrooms were not much better.³⁶ While their experiences were incomparable to violence and trauma of the trenches, they were not, as men often suggested, living in peace and luxury. Many women and girls had become financially responsible for their households overnight, and sexist gender constructs only further limited their options, which would ultimately prove to be to the country’s detriment.

Sexism and misogyny were not invented in World War I. The gendered imbalance of power in twentieth-century France was a continuation of centuries of social oppression of women, and gender dynamics would continue to evolve long after the war ended. But the style of warfare the trenches introduced permanently altered how men processed and rationalized the world around them, including the concepts of womanhood and femininity their superiors so often demonized. The patriarchal system of soldiers’ former lives combined with their new psychological distance from civilians to create a specific brand of sexism that bled into newspapers, magazines, memoirs, and fictional literature. This did not mean World War I veterans did not love their mothers, sisters, or wives—all of which were women they could acknowledge as fully dimensional beings. But the woman as a concept became a villain, the feminine enemy of masculine France. Attempts to understand the war solely through the eyes of men would greatly skew the history of the other half of France’s population. The French woman’s story of war contribution, survival of military pressure, and governmentally imposed poverty would remain lost in favor of the classic trench-war legend.

36 Ibid., 176.

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