

12-18-2014

Women in World War II

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Topical Seminar: World at War

Dr. Hicks

December 18, 2014

Women changed the course of history after World War II. Before World War II, women had briefly helped their country during the Great War but had returned home following the war. After the stock market crash in 1929, many people struggled to provide for their families which led women to take jobs again. When American joined World War II after Pearl Harbor, the large influx of men joining the army led companies in a lurch for employees. American propaganda strongly encouraged women to do their patriotic duty and to leave the household, only temporarily, to help their country. Women in America took to industry, military, and service employment to serve their country. This paper will explore the effect women's employment had on American society after the war ended; it will show the general participation of women across the country and their fight to maintain that employment in the postwar society.

The primary sources examined in this essay provide a firsthand account of women's involvement in the war. The use of oral histories from interviews provided the personal accounts needed for synthesizing postwar societal changes. Historians often concern themselves with collective memory and individual memory. Oral histories present an authentic personal memory that reflects the culture one came from. Mary Wilderhain states that she did not see any discrimination on the workplace because the management hired only white women. This makes the oral history of Wilderhain less credible because she cannot provide an unbiased approach to the workforce during World War II.¹ However, her bias is an important historical fact to consider. The bias “illuminates the frame of mind in which not only the book was written but the life itself was led. Even the most tainted sources can assist in the reconstruction of the past”, the bias plays an important part in understanding the experience women had in the postwar society.² With oral histories, historians take the risk of unreliably sources to get several different side to history, as I did in this paper. One woman has a completely different experience from another and the memories have common themes which allows the

¹ Mary Wilderhain, interview by Erika Hodges, September 1997, South Kingstown High School, English Honors Program.

² John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History* (Routledge; 5th edition, December 15, 2009), 130.

historical authenticity to come through. These interviews have value because it brings history to life; it provides a personal account of an event in history which happened over 70 years. Unfortunately, these interviews are conducted with women who are 50 years past the events which happened. Because of this large gap in time between the interview and the event which they discuss, the women often leave events out or present them out of order. Sometimes their memories become modified through the events following their experience or the retelling of others experiencing that event.

The secondary sources in this paper help to move the paper forward in a chronological sense. They provide the statistical and factual evidence for the effects of women's employment. The sources also provide a balanced perspective to postwar societal changes. They show the perspective of women and the trials they face but, on the other hand; it shows the perspective of the executives in the postwar situations they faced. *Now Hiring: The Feminization of Work in the United States* by Julia Blackwelder considers the interaction of race, class, gender, and economics in this evolution of women's studies. She blends data and oral history materials to allow the book to stand out among scholars of women's studies. Blackwelder uses data (charts, graphs, etc.) to back up her thoughts. She uses oral histories interwoven into her writing to create a deeply personal, more authentic work. It shows the women's involvement in World War II from all sides, the children and the elderly, as well as highlighting race. Blackwelder's work shaped my paper significantly. She discusses women's role in the war, including black women, and she discusses the affect it had on society. She shows how women changed society and how it would never return to the previous society it was before the war. This is essentially my thesis, so I will draw heavily from her conclusions, analyze and draw my own at the end. "Gender at Work: The Sexual Division of Labor during World War II" by Ruth Milkman discusses the role of women thoroughly and the effect of the soldiers return. Her work comes from an unbiased standpoint and allows the factual evidence to speak for itself. The author, however, cites secondary sources and doesn't highlight many personal experiences of the women. She generalizes towards the group as a whole which was beneficial but limits its ability to create a reaction to the material. Milkman's insights

into the societal changes after World War II especially relating to postwar societal changes benefit my research. She discusses the problems that women had in trying to establish their place amongst a man dominated society. These incites will allow me to deepen my research and compare this situation to those already seen before and those to come. *Homeward Bound* by Elaine Tyler May provided graphical evidence of previously known information. It gave the statistical background to what had previously been suspected but what confirmed was true.

World War II mobilized women's employment more rapidly than ever before. Before the war, society urged women to stay inside of the home; they felt that women working would have detrimental effects to the children who would later play a role in society. After America joined the war, propaganda praised women who worked in the places previously occupied by men and pressed more women to continue to leave their households. The government set up many day-cares for women who had young children so that they could do their civic duty in working. During the war, the women's labor force grew to 6.5 million women.³ The government pressured companies to hire women but also made no stipulations on their position in the company. Companies could hire women for any position as long as they contributed to the workforce in a positive manner benefitting the war.

The War Manpower Commission urged women in the early 1940s to do their “patriotic” duty and work to support men fighting. This directly contrasted “the propaganda of nation at war and that of a nation at peace helped to create the perception that the late forties and fifties constituted a unique era of domesticity”, the 1950s would see a resurgence of the government urging women back into the home.⁴ Propaganda pressed women to work but also told them to have patience and return to the home following World War II. Women's Bureau director, Mary Anderson, stated that those planning for women to peacefully return to the home after the war had lost their sense of reality.⁵ In 1944, the

³ Julia Blackwelder, *Now Hiring: The Feminization of Work in the United States, 1900-1995*. Texas A&M University Press (November 1, 1997), 130.

⁴ Julia Blackwelder, *Now Hiring: The Feminization of Work in the United States, 1900-1995*. Texas A&M University Press (November 1, 1997), 134.

⁵ Julia Blackwelder, *Now Hiring: The Feminization of Work in the United States, 1900-1995*. Texas A&M

popular press campaigned for domesticity, while the Women's Advisory Committee of the War Manpower Commission pressed public planners to see women as permanent parts of their companies. They also supported the funding of family care programs. In 1946, the Women's Bureau stated the necessity of mothers continue working after the war. After a poll taken in 1944, 85 percent of mothers expected to continue working permanently after the war and only about one-third of the women were widows or divorced.⁶ The women expected that companies would except veterans back into their jobs and the women with the most seniority in the company would receive the jobs that had not been absorbed by those veterans.⁷

During World War II, women worked for wages at defense related jobs and because of the length of the war, worked for longer periods of time than before. Women made higher wages than before but the gender gap in pay persisted. Unemployment in African American women grew due to racial discrimination. Companies preferred white females to black females in skilled production jobs. Mary Wilderhain states, “If there was any discrimination, we were not aware of it, because it was all pretty much white women on the job...I can't remember any other races working in the clerical end of it. I'm sure that there probably was discrimination in the fact that none of them were there. They probably were not hired, and if they were hired, they were probably hired in a janitorial capacity”, she recounts that she did not witness discrimination because black women did not have the same jobs as her.⁸ This left the service jobs open for blacks because the white women vacated them to pursue higher paying production jobs. These jobs, such as food canning, had not been open to them before. Some African Americans found jobs in nursing and teaching while white women took the best industrial jobs.

Many women hoped society would change after World War II but the nation continued their

University Press (November 1, 1997), 135.

⁶ Julia Blackwelder, *Now Hiring: The Feminization of Work in the United States, 1900-1995*. Texas A&M University Press (November 1, 1997), 136.

⁷ Editor's Introduction to Ruth Milkman, “Gender at Work: The Sexual Division of Labor during World War II.” In, *Women's America: refocusing the past*. Edited by Kerber, De Hart and Dayton. (New York, Oxford University Press, 2011), 554.

⁸ Mary Wilderhain, interview by Erika Hodges, September 1997, South Kingstown High School, English Honors Program.

stance on this temporary employment for women in their propaganda. Many women had jobs in furniture, textiles, and garment manufacturing through 1950. Others enjoyed the benefits of growing clerical worker market after the war. Bette Murphy fought to work in heavy industry, she eventually became a riveter. While working, she realized other workers received the benefits that she did not. She worked on the unionization of the plant secretly to try to obtain equal compensation for all. Murphy kept her job after the war had ended and was one of the few women working in heavy industry beside a man. World War II had created “an especially unusual time for working mothers, bringing high wages, making jobs easy to find, and eroding the rule of occupational segregation” it seemed men and women could work together without the need for gender segregation.⁹

The end of World War II meant monumental changes for American society. It brought a return to normalcy for some. As veterans returned home, they found that women did not want to vacate their positions easily. There was a confusion of gender roles, married women protested the termination of their employment because they now needed the income, and in many cases, employment now gave them a sense of self-worth and independence from their husbands. The number of working married women outnumbered the amount of single women. The married women had to fight against men and single women who resented the competition. The competition between single women and married women persisted and made married women more aggressive in fighting for the seniority rights promised to them during the war. The 1947 Convention of United Electrical, Radio, and Machine Workers in Springfield, Massachusetts provided a resolution that gave single women priority over married women. Westinghouse Electric in Sharon, Pennsylvania went even further stating that management would terminate all married women if their husbands had returned from the armed forces and did not have disabilities. If a single woman got married, it would cost her the job. The management of Local 617 of United of United Electrical Radio, and Machine Workers accepted this new policy

⁹ Julia Blackwelder, *Now Hiring: The Feminization of Work in the United States, 1900-1995*. Texas A&M University Press (November 1, 1997), 132.

because of the pressures they received from the single women. Married women protested this to the Department of Labor because it violated the union's constitution, made during the war, which eventually led to the restoration of their previously promised seniority.¹⁰ Companies would fire these women without the consideration the seniority stipulations clearly stated in their union contracts. Management had reconstructed their stereotypically male jobs because they had no option, all the men had gone to war. They saw this period as a type of experiment. After the war, the men returned and though the women showed aptitude in the job, the experiment was over. They did not hesitate to return to live from the way it had run before the war started.

Women often received termination for pregnancies and married women received incredible discrimination. The women who maintained their jobs after the war felt constant insecurity about their positions in the companies. In 1950, Ohio, women received a questionnaire about their lives but they never turned them in. They feared that any information given would put their job in jeopardy.¹¹

Rose Kaminski took a job as a crane operator. After training, management terminated her in favor of a returning veteran who had returned home. This led her to return home until she could find work elsewhere.¹² Catherine Ott, who worked as a part of the Women's Auxiliary Corps in 1944 stated she “originally wanted to go with the Army of Occupation to Japan for a year, because the war was then over. But my husband wanted me to come home. I didn't really want to. I figured we would be married for the rest of our lives. But he insisted. So I applied for my discharge and got out”, men played a large role in women returning to the home.¹³ There was a postwar resurgence of domesticity both in actuality and ideologically speaking. In 1947, the number of women in the workforce fell to 4.6

¹⁰ Julia Blackwelder, *Now Hiring: The Feminization of Work in the United States, 1900-1995*. Texas A&M University Press (November 1, 1997), 140.

¹¹ Julia Blackwelder, *Now Hiring: The Feminization of Work in the United States, 1900-1995*. Texas A&M University Press (November 1, 1997), 128.

¹² Julia Blackwelder, *Now Hiring: The Feminization of Work in the United States, 1900-1995*. Texas A&M University Press (November 1, 1997), 128.

¹³ Catherina Ott, interview by Tara Melish, September 1997, South Kingstown High School, English Honors Program

million from the previously stated 6.5 million in the early forties.¹⁴ Women returned to the home either because they wanted to return to their traditional family unit or due to the manipulation of an ideological domestic society. Despite the prevalent domesticity ideology, more women than ever before had joined the workplace in the fifties. Rise in female employment, especially among married women, occurred more rapidly than in the early forties. The issue at hand no longer pertained to whether or not women would remain in the workplace but instead which women would stay and on what terms.

Female veterans did not receive any better treatment than those women who worked on the home front. The treatment was inconsistent. On one side, they received poor treatment and on the other side, they received benefits for their service. For example, Marjorie Peto served as chief nurse for the 2nd general hospital in England and in France. After the 1945 victory in Normandy, she returned to find her nurse abandoned by the military.¹⁵ The Women's Air force Service Pilots (WASPS) flew noncombatant missions in World War II. 35 of the 1,074 women died in the line of duty and by the end of the war they had disbanded. The military did not offer them military insurance during their service or G.I. benefits following their service. In 1978, the remaining survivors received veteran's status and in 2009 when only 300 of the 1,074 remained alive they were awarded a Congressional Gold Medal.¹⁶ Males who returned from the war received parades and praise from their participation, women received disdained looks and unemployment. By the end of the war, 300,000 women had served in the military. In 1948, three years after the war had ended, Congress passed legislation that provided women with benefits from the military but they still restricted the women to noncombatant roles.¹⁷ Some women, like Judith Weiss Cohen, joined the Women's Auxiliary Army Corps and after the war went to graduate

¹⁴ Julia Blackwelder, *Now Hiring: The Feminization of Work in the United States, 1900-1995*. Texas A&M University Press (November 1, 1997), 124.

¹⁵ Julia Blackwelder, *Now Hiring: The Feminization of Work in the United States, 1900-1995*. Texas A&M University Press (November 1, 1997), 142.

¹⁶ Editor's Introduction to Ruth Milkman, "Gender at Work: The Sexual Division of Labor during World War II." In, *Women's America: refocusing the past*. Edited by Kerber, De Hart and Dayton. (New York, Oxford University Press, 2011), 555.

¹⁷ Julia Blackwelder, *Now Hiring: The Feminization of Work in the United States, 1900-1995*. Texas A&M University Press (November 1, 1997), 143.

school using her G.I. Bill. Some women received benefits from their participation in the war while others did not. The treatment was very inconsistent with the individual women.¹⁸

In 1946, management dismissed nearly all of the women from the high paying industrial jobs. Women could not remain in the homes for long because they could no longer afford to. Civilian jobs paid more than military job and living costs rose because of the postwar inflation. Wages rose a bit but women's wages grew half as fast as men. Demobilization brought massive firing of women and then rehiring of those women. The question of whether society would return to the “traditional” roles of the prewar era permeated society. Women had a conflicting choice to make, whether to continue working for pay or to return to the home. Because women worked in what management considered “men's jobs”, demobilization became increasingly difficult, especially on women. However, a 1943 survey of 146 executives, 60% of the executives states that women, without training, had equal or greater workmanship to that of men in similar work.¹⁹

Women would start protests or strike against their employers for fair wages and better hours. Helen T. Dauster talked about her participation in a union during an interview, “I was a school librarian in Randolphville School, because at that point, we went out on strike and that was a really tough time, to strike or not to strike, and I did...it was for salaries and class sizes and all that sort of thing, and we did win”, she represents the women who fought for the equal rights they felt they deserved.²⁰

Even though many women fought to maintain their jobs, there were many women who did not want to stay in the work place. Other women thought that not returning to the home meant the end of the “traditional” family. Wilma Briggs, a woman who played professional baseball during the war years, states, “I think that was the beginning of the downfall of the family. The family unit started to

¹⁸ Judith Weiss Cohen, interview Jason Gelles, September 1997, South Kingstown High School, English Honors Program

¹⁹ Editor's Introduction to Ruth Milkman, “Gender at Work: The Sexual Division of Labor during World War II.” In, *Women's America: refocusing the past*. Edited by Kerber, De Hart and Dayton. (New York, Oxford University Press, 2011), 560.

²⁰ Helena Dauster, interviewed by Sandra Holyoak and Ross Abramowitz, March 23, 2006, Rutgers Oral History Archives.

disintegrate right after the war when Rosie kept riveting. Families found out that they could have two incomes. And now, 45 years later, parents need those two incomes to survive. Because of that, nobody's home", she believed women should have returned the home to continue the "traditional" familial lifestyle. The family boom in the late forties and early fifties happened because people had enthusiasm about returning to a life of peace and economic success. They wanted to move on with their lives and put the war and the Depression in their past. Historians believe that the postwar American family experienced a rise in domesticity and it maintained the prevailing stereotyping of gender roles.²¹ A graph from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services shows a flooded birthrate of 10 million from 1945-1948²². The fifties brought a time of harmony among Americans, they had just finished fighting a war against other countries and needed this era of prosperity to move forward from that strenuous time.

I believe there is no definitive event that points to change for women after this time. Many women attempted to change their situations as Blackwelder states in her book. World War II marked a complete change in gender roles for many women and it certainly started a trend in independence which led to the women's rights movement. I believe there is not one specific event that moved women to challenge society for more rights. World War I showed a small movement of women coming out of the household, followed by the Depression which forced more women to work out of necessity. As stated throughout the essay, World War II saw women stepping up for their country in a patriotic sense. All of these events, including those during the Cold War, fostered a time of independence for women who realized they no longer needed a man to support them when they had the same faculties a man did. Most secondary literature on women's involvement in World War II focuses on how women fought for

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Elaine May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (Basic Books (October 9, 1988), XIV.

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Elaine May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (Basic Books (October 9, 1988), XIV.

their rights to stay in industry. While this is certainly the case, data shows that many women returned to the home and felt that staying in industry did not help their traditional family unit. Most women, in fact, felt that women constantly working depleted the importance of a traditional family and was the beginning of the disintegration of traditional families. I believe that through this research I can conclude that postwar societal changes showed an inconsistency for women's roles in society. Many women wanted to fight for their rights and independence while others enthusiastically returned to the home to continue their roles as homemaker from before the war.

After World War II, women's employment grew to 30% in the 40s. While some women returned the home, the majority of women stayed working and supported their family through the fifties. The forties showed a marked shift of women into nontraditional production jobs, nontraditional professions, and supervising positions not seen before this time. The time that followed showed a period of peace and prosperity and showed an increase in domesticity which historians do not usually focus on. I believe this period of economic prosperity following a time of war showed the importance of the country banding together to return to something familiar. Many women, however, fought for their right to independence and changed the role of gender in America. Their involvement is significant because it meant the movement of women outside of the household in large number which America had never seen before this time.

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