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Alison Fell, ed. *French and Francophone Women Facing War/Les femmes face à la guerre. Modern French Identities*, ed. Peter Collier, vol. 67. Oxford and Bern: Peter Lang, 2009. xiv + 285 pp. \$57.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-3-03911-332-3.

Review by Martha Hanna, University of Colorado, Boulder.

Alison Fell concludes her introduction to *French and Francophone Women Facing War/Les femmes face à la guerre* by stating that the sources analyzed in the various essays that constitute this collection “form a fascinating account of women’s complex relationship to war” (p. 7). But do they? They certainly range widely, from the memoirs of women who bore arms against the First Republic in the Vendée to contemporary novelists grappling with how best to render in prose the atrocities committed during the Algerian war and the Rwandan genocide, but there is nonetheless a striking (and, I think, unconscious) uniformity to almost all the analyses. Although the authors’ collective objective—to remind us that war is not now and probably has not ever been a uniquely male enterprise—is admirable, the essays offer very limited ways of understanding how women experience war. In short, the literary and discursive sources that form the backbone of this book present women either as victims (primarily, but not exclusively, of rape) or, more frequently, as heroines: of military valor, progressive causes, political resistance, or voices of cultural illumination. In this regard the collection ironically (and not necessarily self-consciously) imitates long-standing popular understandings of how men have experienced war: as victims of its brutality or as heroes. Whereas we know that this stark polarity fails to capture the multiple and nuanced ways in which men have experienced war over the centuries, this volume does little to suggest that similar varieties of experience also apply to women.

Two essays that concentrate on the brutal victimization of women in wartime bookend a series of essays that emphasize the heroic dimension of women’s engagement in or retrospective rendering of wars from the Revolution through the two world wars to the Algerian war. Certainly the most memorable essay of this collection is Ayelevi Novivor’s wrenching analysis of how women have attempted to give voice to the suffering inflicted on women during the Rwandan genocide. Whereas most of the essays in this collection emphasize women’s heroic and emancipatory actions in wartime, Novivor focuses on the need of survivors to recall and hence inscribe in collective memory the vicious atrocities committed against women during the genocide of 1994. Stories of women raped and then intentionally not murdered, so that they would later succumb to AIDS; of mothers forced to witness their children being murdered; of a woman watching her sister forcibly drowned in a vat of excrement; these are stories that sear the memory.

Fortunately, most of the other accounts of women in wartime are less horrific, primarily because they dwell on how bravely, honorably, or conscientiously French and francophone women have acquitted themselves in wartime. Of the two essays that focus on women during the Revolution, only Mary Ellen Ross really looks at how women experienced the Revolutionary wars and although her analysis of the political uses of counter-revolutionary memoir is insightful, one might wish for sources that would have allowed her to extend her analysis beyond the truly exceptional experiences of Renée Bordereau dite Langevin and Françoise Després, who challenged gender norms by serving as soldiers in the counter-revolutionary army of the Vendée, and the equally intrepid but politically more progressive de Fernig sisters, memorialized by Olympe de Gouges in *L’Entrée de Dumouriez à Bruxelles ou les vivandiers* (1793).

Whereas the women of the Vendée (and those who wrote about them in the nineteenth century) felt compelled to justify their military vocations as expressions of familial honor and filial piety, by women determined to avenge their dead male kinfolk, de Gouges (not surprisingly) celebrated the actions of Théophile and Félicité de Fernig as the inspired and admirable patriotic acts of fully autonomous women.

Edited collections that emerge from conference presentations, as this one does, rarely cover every relevant instance of the topic under review, but it is curious that this volume pays no attention to how women experienced, whether in life or in literature, the Franco-Prussian War, the siege of Paris, and the Paris Commune. Rather it jumps rather abruptly from the heroic, militarized female patriots of 1793 (and their equally militarized counter-revolutionary counterparts) to the female patriots and pacifists of the Great War. Nancy Sloan Goldberg offers a fascinating analysis of the “double-life” of Marguerite Borel, who as the daughter of Paul Appell (Dean of the Faculty of Sciences at the University of Paris) and wife of the distinguished mathematician, Emile Borel, found herself at the very center of patriotic engagement during World War I; and as the successful novelist who wrote under the nom de plume, Camille Marbo, also found time to write celebrated novels. Starting in 1916, she ran a government office charged with coordinating women’s war work and took pride “in the recruitment of more than 20,000 women for defence [sic] work who were part of what she termed the 20 million ‘armée féminine française’” (p. 73). The distinctive contributions of these women workers constituted the core of her substantial study, published in 1919, *La Mobilisation féminine en France, 1914 – 1919*. At the same time, she completed her novel, *Le Survivant*, which tells the complicated story of a wounded soldier who cannot come to terms with his wife’s newfound independence. But unlike male authors of the time, Marbo blamed Jacques for his failure (or refusal) to adjust to the new gendered reality created by the war. Isabelle Vahe examines another truly exceptional woman: Jeanne Mélin, whose experiences during the war years – including evacuation from her home in the north-east and nursing service to severely wounded soldiers – only intensified her pre-existing aversion to war, her commitment to integral pacifism, and her essentialist conviction that women were by nature disposed to pacifism. But how or, indeed, if she reconciled these convictions with the reality that most Frenchwomen (including Marguerite Borel) were committed to the righteousness of their nation’s cause remains unexplored.

A full one third of this volume concentrates on women’s experiences of World War II, and such careful attention would be merited, perhaps, if the collective portrait thus drawn had captured the richly varied actions (including the not always honorable responses) of women confronting the challenges of life in occupied and defeated France. But there are no “corbeaux” here and no horizontal collaborators either. Rather, these essays focus almost exclusively on the patriotic, often valiant actions of women committed to the liberation of France. Only the story of Alice Beugras, whose husband was an ardent supporter of Jacques Doriot’s Parti Populaire Français and an unrepentant collaborator sentenced after the war to life in prison, hints at the dark side of life in occupied France and Nicole Thatcher offsets her analysis of Beugras’s post-war testimony by paying more attention to the *résistantes*, Charlotte Delbos and Madeleine Riffaud. Angela O’Flaherty examines the literature of Edith Thomas and Elsa Triolet, both of whom urged the women of France to engage directly or indirectly in acts of resistance: as members of Resistance cells, as mothers and wives willing to urge their menfolk to take up arms against the occupier, or as women brave enough to swear at passing German soldiers. Helen Vassallo offers a revisionist reading of Simone de Beauvoir’s *Le Sang des autres*, proposing that Hélène is much more of a traditional romantic heroine—flighty, self-absorbed, and politically engaged only because she hoped thereby to win the heart of the man she loved—than most literary scholars have recognized.

Such a charge could surely not have been leveled against the two women Leigh Whaley analyzes in her contribution to this collection: Odette Sansom and Andrée Borrel were two of at least two thousand women who volunteered for service in Britain’s SOE and risked life and limb in their Resistance efforts. Because their British commanders believed that women were almost inevitably less capable than men,

especially in leadership positions, these women's valiant efforts were undervalued during the war and insufficiently recognized afterwards.

The Quebecois women who read, but were not persuaded by, Odette Oligny's weekly columns in Montreal's *Le Petit Journal* were much less likely than Sansom and Borrel to sacrifice their comfort, much less their lives, for either the Free French or the British Empire, but Oligny's efforts to change their minds are the central focus of Beatrice Richard's fascinating essay. Oligny was a French divorcée and journalist recently relocated to Montreal; an ardent defender of French resistance; and an advocate of female military service. Convinced that Quebecois opposition to the war was tantamount to a fifth column that indirectly advanced the cause of Nazi Germany, she urged her much more conservative and Anglophobic readers to enlist in the newly created women's branches of the Canadian armed forces. These imprecations fell on deaf ears. Quebecois women had no interest in compromising their virtue by serving in the reputedly libertine ranks of uniformed service and if they were willing to advance the political interests of the British Empire, then they would do so close to home in the well-paid positions available in war manufacturing plants.

Henry Rousso's now seminal analysis of the "Vichy syndrome" seems not to have made much of a mark on the essays that analyze French women's literary and lived experiences of World War II: there are no suppressed memories of ignominy and indignity to disrupt and disturb these tales of multifaceted female heroism. But the concept of the Vichy syndrome permeates the essays on the Algerian war which analyze how women writers in France and Algeria have contributed to an emergent literature that focuses on recovering the lost and suppressed memories of the Algerian war, in particular by stressing the brutality of torture inflicted by French forces and the inhumanity of France's actions on 17 October 1961. Desiree Schyns' essay, "Explorer les limites du représentable," examines the literary evolution of Assia Djebar who since the publication of her first novel in 1962, *Les Enfants du nouveau monde*, has grappled with the literary challenge of representing the horror of torture. But it is only in her most recent fiction, published in 2001 and 2003 that she has striven to understand and to represent the visceral and almost unrepresentable trauma of the torture victim.

Both Jimia Boutouba, who analyzes Tassidir Imache's novel *Une Fille sans histoire* (1989), and Kathryn N. Jones, who focuses on the novels of Nancy Huston and Leïla Sebbar published a decade later, are interested in the important role fiction has assumed in exposing the use of torture by French troops in Algeria and the massacre of Algerian demonstrators in Paris on 17 October 1961. These essays thus deal with how contemporary literature has contributed to the emergence in recent years of what is now an identifiable "Algerian syndrome." Kamila Aitsiselmi, by contrast, asks how, and in what ways, Algerian women's aspirations for emancipation – made manifest in their participation in the war for independence and memorialized so powerfully in Gillo Pontecorvo's *Battle of Algiers* – have been realized in the post-colonial state. And although there have been real gains, especially in rates of female literacy, her conclusion is as sobering as it is unsurprising: "L'indépendance n'a pas produit les effets attendus par les femmes en ce qui concerne leur condition sociale, en dépit de la phraséologie officielle et de l'élan progressiste de l'Algérie nouvelle" (p. 257).

The heroic narrative implicit in *French and Francophone Women Facing War/Les femmes face à la guerre* casts women primarily as agents of progress: whether bearing arms in defense of Revolutionary liberty, risking social opprobrium in the name of international peace, courting death in the fight against Nazi aggression, or exposing wartime atrocities in a campaign against willful amnesia, they find themselves invariably on the side of the angels. It would be nice to think that this collective portrait of heroic, progressive femininity captures the complexity of women's relationship to, and commemoration of, war. But it seems less than plausible to think this is the case. Most women were and are, one suspects, neither more (nor less) heroic than men; neither more (nor less) willing to pull the scab off national wounds to expose the brutal pain that lay beneath the surface. Most women probably suffered the anxiety, the economic deprivation, and the anguish that accompanies all wars, but that very ordinary (but by no means insignificant) experience of war is not recounted in these essays or conveyed in the

sources that ground them. Some women, regrettably, might even have profited from war, just as their husbands, brothers, and sons did on occasion, too. This more complicated and less morally compelling story of women's experience of war is captured, for example, in Constance Graeffe's wartime diary, recently translated and edited by Sophie de Schaepdrijver.^[1] Connie was a British-born, Francophone Belgian citizen married to an affluent businessman of German background; their decision during the Great War to align themselves with the German occupying forces profoundly antagonized their in-laws, enraged their adolescent son, and alienated their neighbors. Their experience was not that of all (or, indeed, most) Belgians, but it suggests that women's narratives of war are not always as edifying and heroic, or as dreadful and traumatic, as the essays compiled in this collection suggest.

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NOTES

[1] Sophie de Schaepdrijver, *“We who are so cosmopolitan”: The War Diary of Constance Graeffé, 1914 – 1915*, (Brussels: Algemeen Rijksarchief – Archives generales du Royaume, 2008).

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