
H-France Review Vol. 18 (February 2018), No. 32

Andrew Orr, *Women and the French Army during the World Wars, 1914-1940*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017. xxvi + 192 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$75.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-253-02630-9; \$30.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-253-02677-4.

Review by Margaret H. Darrow, Dartmouth College.

Andrew Orr's new book, *Women and the French Army during the World Wars, 1914-1940*, brings to light women's role in the French army in the interwar years. An excellent illustration of the principle that to focus on the history of women sheds new light in other directions as well, this study also illuminates French military policy and political history in this turbulent period. Orr argues convincingly that French women gained, almost accidentally, from the struggles between France's political and military leaders to define the army's future in the aftermath of the First World War. The French army had begun to hire women as an emergency measure in 1915 with the expectation that they would be fired when the war was over. Instead, the economic and political circumstances of 1920s and 1930s meant that women worked on. In the process, the French army gradually incorporated women into what Orr calls the 'military community' even while officially they remained temporary civilian employees. In the spring of 1940, when the French nation was once again in extremis, the army finally granted permanent status to civilian women employees and opened the military's ranks to women.

Impelled by the crisis of the First World War, in 1915 the French Army reluctantly started to hire women to fill clerical and other non-combat jobs. Commanders objected that women did not have the discretion, discipline, and loyalty that defined military service, nor the requisite knowledge and skills to do the work. Never comfortable with female employees, many commanders fired women almost before the ink was dry on the November 1918 armistice. However, by the spring of 1919, the army was hiring women once more. Demobilization entailed a mountain of clerical work, especially typing, that had become a feminized occupation. At the same time, as the army demobilized, its conscripted labor force dwindled. In subsequent years the number of recruits continued to fall as the legislature repeatedly reduced the length of military service from three years to two, then to eighteen months, and finally to only one year. To compensate, the army came to rely more heavily upon civilian employees. And as the military budgets were also cut, women were attractive as employees because they were cheaper than men. Although the number of women who worked for the French military did not return to wartime levels, throughout the 1920s employment opportunities for women in the army gradually increased.

While the Left's antimilitarism led to cuts in military spending, in the length of universal male military service, and ultimately in the size of the army, the professional army's entrenched distrust of democracy reached paranoid proportions. Orr identifies three incidents that reinforced commanders' distrust of common soldiers: the 1917 army mutinies, the 1919 naval mutiny in the Black Sea, and the agitation against the Rif War in Morocco in the mid 1920s. The French Communist Party claimed responsibility in each case, trumpeting its successful infiltration of the army that would prevent any future war. Despite the army's internal reports that pointed to other causes of soldiers' and sailors' discontent and cast doubt on conscripts' radicalism, military commanders tended to believe the Communists' claims. In their minds, conscripts were not only inexperienced and undisciplined due to the short terms of duty,

but also likely to be disloyal. Meanwhile, women employees had proven to be dedicated, skilled and, because they were still denied voting rights, apolitical. Orr appreciates the irony that precisely the terms that commanders had used to try to disqualify women from military employment in 1915 by the mid 1920s seemed to qualify them, at least in comparison to conscripts.

In the Army Laws of 1927 and 1928, the army's leadership traded troop strength for political protection. With the example of the Commune in their minds, the new French Republic in 1872 had denied the vote to members of the armed forces. In the 1920s, pressure mounted from the Left to restore soldiers' voting rights. The Conseil Supérieur de la Guerre finally agreed to a reduction of military service to one year in return for a guarantee that soldiers would not be enfranchised. One result of this bargain, Orr shows, was a secret army plan to do an end run around the limitations on troop strength by hiring civilians, especially women (pp. 92-6). Modeling their proposal on Weimar Germany's evasion of the Versailles Treaty's restrictions, the planners proposed hiring more women employees since they would be discounted in any calculation of military strength.

The Ministry of War imagined that women workers, like the *cantinières* of the past, deserved employment due to their relationship to soldiers killed in the war. Initial directives prioritized the hiring of war widows and orphans, a preference that continued in the army's employment policy throughout the period, including the new wave of hiring that followed the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939. But Orr shows that gradually another kind of connection developed. Even though classed as temporary employees, many women worked for the same military units for a decade and more. They viewed themselves, and came to be viewed by their supervisors, as part of the army due to their own competence and dedication. An example is the case of Mme Hélias, an administrator who fought for the right to keep her job with the battalion in which her husband had died. Hélias's boss petitioned the Ministry of War on her behalf, arguing the justice of her claim both in terms of the army's debt to her due to her husband's sacrifice but also in terms of her own work history (pp. 66-9).

While officers came to accept, value, and even defend the women they employed, official policy continued to place women outside the fence of the military community. A 1924 law, for example, that regularized the employment of civilian men deliberately excluded women who remained for the most part in limbo as temporary workers (p. 71). Although the army could not function without experienced typists, stenographers, and bookkeepers, the Ministry of War repeatedly tried to purge female staff. Each wave of firing, even though followed by rehiring, signaled the army's disdain for its female employees. Unlike the *cantinières* of the nineteenth century, celebrated in popular culture, the women the French army employed in the interwar period were unsung, and by deliberate policy, invisible.

Although the title of the book indicates that Orr concludes his study prior to the Second World War, in fact a final brief chapter brings the story of women's relationship to the French army through to Liberation. Faced with the prospect of a German invasion, in April 1940 the French government authorized "female auxiliaries of military formations" (p. 152). Before the corps could be organized, however, France was defeated and the Vichy regime rescinded this decree. Nonetheless, the gender barrier had been breached. The Free French Forces under General de Gaulle established a women's auxiliary and despite Vichy's policies, so did the French army in North Africa. The French army that emerged from the Second World War, although still employing many civilian women, had finally officially incorporated women into its ranks.

Orr bases his study on extensive use of military archives including records recently repatriated from Russia that have not previously been available to scholars. As he acknowledges, these records are nearly entirely from the perspective of the men in charge; women's point of view emerges rarely and only partially from petitions appealing administrative decisions. In these documents, the petitioners couched their arguments in terms designed to accord with the views of their superiors, for example by stressing the sacrifice of their male relatives rather than their own work histories. Unfortunately, no first-person accounts from women employees appear to exist. Ignored by the press, invisible to the

public, and marginalized by the army itself, it is not surprising that the thousands of women who worked for the French military did not see their experiences as significant enough to record. Despite the silence of the sources, Orr uses women's career records, petitions and complaints effectively to sketch a group portrait of the dedicated women who identified themselves with the army for which they worked.

In an influential article, "The Double Helix," published in 1987, Margaret and Patrice Higonnet posited the theory that masculine always relates to feminine as superior to inferior so that when, in wartime, women step up into previously masculine roles, it does not change their gender status because at the same time, men have stepped up into a super-masculine role as soldiers.^[1] With the return of peace, they claimed, both men and women step back. Orr argues that the history of women's employment by the French army after the First World War breaks this pattern. Once peace returned, some women retained the jobs that the wartime crisis had opened to them and the army came to view them as superior workers to male conscripts.

While this study blurs the edges of the double-helix metaphor, I do not think that it undermines the theory's essential usefulness. First, most of the jobs that women retained after the war were in occupations that had become feminized—clerical work and nursing. Women working in "masculine" jobs, like driving, were fired. At the same time, the circumstances that made women seem more loyal and disciplined than male conscripts, i.e., the army's fear of Communist infiltration and women's lack of the vote—were temporary. Women did not gain access to the military on anything like an equal footing to men. Throughout the period under discussion, most military jobs, including, of course, combat and command, were closed to women. Most women employees were officially temporary, their opportunities for promotion very limited, and their jobs always at risk. Even after the Second World War, when women workers became officially permanent and women were admitted to the army as soldiers, their status remained secondary and subordinate.

Throughout, Orr tellingly compares the status and experience of the army's women employees to male employees and especially to conscripts in ways that explore the attitudes of the military command toward gender, class, race, the army itself, and the Republic. It would be revealing to compare the army's treatment of its female employees to the government's policies toward women civil servants studied, for example, by Linda Clark.^[2] The similarities but especially the differences in the experiences of these two groups of women, both employed by the French government, often in very similar jobs, would help to highlight the gender issues specific to the military.

In *Women and the French Army during the World Wars, 1914-1940*, Andrew Orr introduces us to a significant group of French women workers we barely knew existed. But he does much more than this. He shows how the debates and anxieties of the interwar years shaped the French army's attitudes toward gender and, in turn, how attitudes toward gender shaped military policy and practices. It was women's civilian identity, temporary status, cheapness, but especially their disenfranchisement, that made them attractive as army employees, and which allowed them gradually to be accepted into the military community. Gender and politics collided and colluded; the interwar political struggles came together to allow women to infiltrate the military community much more successfully than the Communist Party ever did. This is a fascinating study of intended and unintended consequences, well-researched, well-written, and a pleasure to read.

NOTES

[1] Margaret R. and Patrice L.-R. Higonnet, "The Double Helix" in *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars*, ed. Margaret Randolph Higonnet, Jane Jenson, Sonya Michel, and Margaret Collins Weitz, 31-47 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987).

[2] Linda L. Clark, *The Rise of Professional Women in France: Gender and Public Administration since 1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

Margaret H. Darrow
Dartmouth College
margaret.h.darrow@dartmouth.edu

Copyright © 2018 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Review* nor republication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on *H-France Review* are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172