Hold Still, Madame

Wartime Gender and the Photography of Women in France during the Great War

Nicole Hudgins

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by

NICOLE HUDGINS

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**Editor’s note on viewing the illustrations**

The images presented in this book have relatively low resolution for the purposes of e-book production, but when using the e-book version readers can zoom in using the facility in Adobe to view many of the details. In the limited edition paperback version, all images are in black and white, but in the e-book version (to be found through the website of the Centre for French History and Culture) some images can be found in colour.
Notes on the author

Nicole Hudgins is an Assistant Professor at the University of Baltimore (UB) in Baltimore, Maryland, USA. She has written several articles on the history of photography, including ‘Photographic Exceptionalism during the Great War: the Invisibility of the French Photographer,’ in The French Review, 87(4) (2014); and ‘Neither Pictorialism nor Documentary Photography: the Camera’s Uses and the Struggle for Self-Expression in Industrial Cities,’ in Photography & Culture, 6(1) (2013). She is currently the director of the History program at UB, where she teaches courses on the history of Europe, art, and photography.
Acknowledgements

This project would not have been possible without the support of a number of institutions and individuals. I began my research as a new Assistant Professor at the University of Baltimore (UB), and finally saw the book’s publication five years later as I was preparing to go up for tenure. The moral and financial support coming from the Dean’s office in the Yale Gordon College of Arts and Sciences, including a yearly course release, made most of the research possible. Strategic advice and comments on early drafts from my UB colleagues Jeffrey Sawyer, Brian Etheridge and Steve Scalet helped the process tremendously. I reserve special thanks to Dr. Nicole Dombrowski-Risser of Towson University for her conversation and fine-toothed feedback on an intermediate draft. Valuable comments also came from fellow members of the Western Society for French History and the Society for French Historical Studies over the course of several panel presentations.

In Paris and Nanterre, the archivists and experts at the Bibliothèque de Documentation Internationale Contemporaine made my photographic research possible, especially Caroline Apostolopoulos and Cyril Burté at the Invalides, and the librarians who assisted me in the reading room at the University of Paris X. I am also grateful to Joëlle Beurier for her conversation in French and excellent English, and for including me among the international participants at a conference on the wartime illustrated magazine at Paris XIII. Captain Hélène Guillot of the Service Historique de la Défense, too, was always willing to pause from her busy schedule to talk about army photographers. Special thanks to Jean Sébastien Baschet for kindly authorizing the use of images from L’Illustration. And although I never met them personally, I cannot leave out the BNF personnel who fielded my questions on Gallica with cheerful expertise.

I completed preliminary research before heading to France by visiting the National Archives and Record Administration (College Park branch) and the Library of Congress, which both hold a wealth of treasures from WWI France. Staff of the European Reading Room in the Library of Congress provided hospitality to me and other scholars at all stages of their careers. Thanks also go to the helpful staff of the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library in West Branch, IA, which allowed me to
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The author and publisher wish to thank all those who gave permission to reproduce images. Every effort has been made to contact the copyright-holders for images included here, but if for any reason a request has not been received, the copyright-holders should contact the publisher.

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1 Introduction and Foundation

‘I believe that from now on, I, like you, when I am tempted to despair, shall be able to discern on the faces I see about me, on the faces of women, of mothers crushed by devotion and sacrifice, a gleam of that Divine Consciousness which I cannot always see in the sky above.’ – Maxence Van der Meersch (1937).

In those final lines of Van der Meersch’s First World War epic, Invasion, the character Patrice describes the spiritual silver lining behind the ordeal he and his neighbors endured in occupied France between 1914 and 1918.¹ Patrice’s comment touches on an important theme in modern French history and French visual culture: female suffering as symbolic of social redemption. Dating back to the early Middle Ages, the history of female suffering in French art has included altar pieces of saints and martyrs, sculpted pietàs, images of Joan of Arc, and modern female visionaries such as Thérèse de Lisieux. Despite the anti-clerical aspects of France’s revolutionary movements, artists and writers of the Third Republic nevertheless promoted ideals of feminine self-sacrifice and devotion, which were grounded in Catholic sensibilities.

During the First World War, French belief in the power of female purity and self-sacrifice, although at times contradicted by accusations of profiteering or infidelity, remained highly important. The Catholic aesthetic tradition seeped into the propaganda posters and paintings of the period, and, more surprisingly, into the photography. Rewarding a virgin’s steadfast virtue in 1917 (Figure 1.1), by the minister of munitions no less, merited the front page of Le Monde Illustré at the height of the nation’s

wartime struggle. French photographers’ wartime images of women, although varied, satisfied a masculine-cum-national, public need for female devotion, fidelity, and sympathy. Suffering was equally important, and depictions of female civilian suffering and self-sacrifice during the war strengthened perceptions of national righteousness by visualizing victimhood.

The female figure symbolized French civilians as a whole, and the miseries specific to wartime civilians, such as daily anxiety, hunger and the hardship of requisitions. Tammy Proctor has argued that while ‘civilians are both men and women, “civilian” assumes a particularly
feminine connotation’ as it became a shorthand for the phrase ‘innocent women and children.’ Like other media professionals of the period, photographers used their medium to represent women in ways that served the national cause. Images of vulnerable innocence or cheerful volunteerism became powerful signs of national rectitude, and consensus, between 1914 and 1918. Wartime photographs of women demonstrated a wide spectrum of representation: helpless refugees in flight, diligent women at work, and women in mourning figured as some of the most popular. But a common theme united this variety of female images: photographers took care to show the voluntary subordination of women’s concerns to the totalizing national war project – a project that French women had had no hand in designing or implementing.

To be sure, French men experienced subordination to the war project as well, but in more active ways as voters, men of state, officers, diplomats, manufacturers, and (one might even add) foot soldiers, despite soldiers’ submission to the will of the high command and military discipline. But despite the total absence of female participation in the design of French policy, they were nevertheless required for this project as indispensable support at home, in the factories, on the farms and elsewhere (‘with or without consent,’ as Nicole Dombrowski phrased it). Judging from the visual culture of the war, French women were also needed as symbolic, spiritual support, and to provide a rationalization for the war and its continuation, despite international and activist calls for peace. Traditional artists as well as photographers generated female images to fulfill this spiritual and political need (Figures 1.2 and 1.3).

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3 Men were privileged with more active wartime roles, but with that ‘privilege’ came the mandatory performance of bravery and self-assurance, whether in front of their commanding officers, each other, family members or the photographer. Despite the miseries of the front, though, the male sex’s opportunity to fight was a right and a duty unavailable to French women.
4 From the subtitle to Nicole Dombrowski, *Women and War in the Twentieth Century: Enlisted With or Without Consent* (New York, 1999).
Fig. 1.2: French wartime postcard whose caption translates, ‘Never forget, Marianne, this is all for you!’ MHC/BDIC.

Fig. 1.3: Photo halftone in Le Miroir magazine (1918). The caption explains that these sisters of Saint Vincent de Paul were condemned to death when the Germans suspected them of hiding French soldiers in Belgium. Luckily, says the author, they were able to re-enter France via Switzerland.
In the second, photographic, example here, the magazine *Le Miroir* showed Catholic nuns imprisoned at Holzminden internment camp in Germany. The image of sisters of Saint Vincent de Paul as war prisoners had propaganda value by appearing to show Germany’s violation of supposed female innocence. Photographs could thus help demonize the enemy, and provoke indignation, as effectively as any imaginative artwork could. The grouping of sisters in their habits, knitting, next to what appears to be a German man on the left, may have outraged readers even more than the fantastical images of Germanic beasts created by lithographic artists during the period. Such photographs helped convince readers that, even after nearly four years, it remained France’s duty to continue fighting.

Visual representations of women in photography and graphic art between 1914 and 1918 displayed both Catholic and pre-Christian notions of femininity. The Catholic values of chastity, devotion, mourning and self-sacrifice appeared in photographs of women performing a variety of roles. The revival of religious paintings in the nineteenth century, featuring the Virgin Mary, the saints and women of the Old Testament, had led to an abundance of such work becoming present in churches, town halls and museums in France, despite the republican anti-clericalism of the Belle Epoque. Photographers would have been familiar with sacred and popular religious art, as well as the classical and neo-classical pieces displayed in France’s large museums. At the same time, they were duty-bound to record modern French women in the wartime environment: as obedient workers, full of stamina, or as volunteers devoting their time to humanitarian causes. First World War photographs of female laborers in France and throughout Europe, especially of women working in armament factories, foreshadowed the well-known American ‘Rosie the Riveter’, an icon of World War II. Important to understand, however, is that the photographers’ images did not represent the emancipation of the French woman, but rather her virtuous self-sacrifice.

By contextualizing and analyzing wartime photographs of French women, the present work will shed light on French expectations and fantasies about femininity across social classes during the First World War.

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Perhaps most importantly, this book aims to show that despite the ‘indexical’ nature of photographic images, operators and editors used the medium, with all the other graphic arts, to produce propaganda that had both patriotic and gender normative work to perform. Traditionally, historical accounts of the First World War have featured photographs in order to point to ‘how it really was’ in Paris or on the Western Front, or to illustrate an event described by the author. The present work will instead interpret and assess the messages encoded in wartime photographs. Official propagandists, journalists, photographers, politicians and media industrialists carefully composed and promoted messages about appropriate women’s roles and the French war cause through image composition, layout, captions and repetition. Carefully processed by multiple organizations, wartime photographs nevertheless appeared as unmediated facts captured sur le vif (i.e., spontaneously). Visual analysis opens the possibility of reexamining Great War photography,


9 For official army photographers, candid snapshots were impossible, because they used gelatin-coated glass plates and often required tripods and box (rather than hand-held) cameras. Cellulose film, while available at the time, was rejected by the Section Photographique de l’Armée owing to its expense, flammability and short shelf life.
problematizing its truth claims and asking why photographers photographed their countrywomen in the ways they did.

The present work applies the theoretical insights of photography critics such as John Tagg, Val Williams and Alan Trachtenberg to a body of archival evidence that has been neglected by World War I scholars: female images. Tagg et al. have encouraged historians to search for the political and social circumstances surrounding photography’s production, and to recognize that photography almost always performs ideological work for the benefit of public or private organizations. Adopting that critical stance, I apply a visual focus on an already robust body of work on war and gender, which began in the 1980s with the work of Margaret Higonnet and Steven C. Hause, and has continued to the present day with such scholars as Christine Bard, Susan Grayzel, Margaret Darrow and Françoise Thébaud. This generation of scholars has shown us not only how warfare has been gendered, but also how the wartime environment became both a laboratory and a battlefield where gender norms were reconstructed and reaffirmed. For example, when the magazine *Le Monde Illustré* resumed publication in 1915 after the chaos of the war’s early

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months, its first editorial did not comment upon battle-related events that had occurred since the last issue. Nor did it make accusations of German war crimes or atrocities in Belgium, or catalogue them. Instead, the author (academician Marcel Prévost) exhorted French women to pray and meditate ‘like Joan of Arc,’ in order to know what they could do to aid la patrie (the homeland). If French women did not get personal instructions from Saints Catherine and Margaret, not to worry, Prévost himself would tell them what to do.

Prévost by no means meant to suggest that French women ought to take up arms, but rather that they should imitate Joan of Arc’s purity and patriotism. Mainly, he said, their duty would be to encourage their men to fight, and to save their men from ‘inertia, libertinage and pessimism,’ which he said had been ‘the sad qualities of recent generations.’ These duties, he continued, would not end with the war, but would continue after the war in the ongoing battle against France’s internal enemies: depopulation and alcoholism. In the mass-produced pages of Le Monde Illustré, editorialists like Prévost not only sought to mobilize French women (psychologically), but also to mobilize a certain idea of feminine purity and maternity. Fittingly, the cover illustration for this return-to-press issue was a print by Cappiello entitled ‘L’Aube Nouvelle’ (The New Dawn), which featured an allegorical female figure draped in the tricolor flag, trampling upon an evil-looking bird which symbolized Germany.

A handful of scholars have begun the critical reevaluation of World War I photos. Marie-Monique Huss’ book, Histoires de famille: cartes postales et culture de guerre, argued that images might ‘help us to understand the psychological climate that the French lived in during these four years, in what emotional landscape they can be seen.’ Elsewhere, historian Yannick Ripa’s photo-tribute to French women included a chapter on World War I and the gendering of wartime labor. Ripa noted that photographs of the period ‘forges several types of women, born of the conflict: the white angel, the philanthropist, the social aide, the marraine de guerre (sponsor). These posed photos, often featuring actresses, had to transmit messages to the battlefront from a feminine home front that was

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13 Ibid.
entirely devoted to its well-being.’ This female ideal – by no means unique to France – was ‘sweet, submissive, finding her happiness in giving of herself [le don de soi].’ Photographers and media production professionals, then, were trafficking in (mainly desirable) types, rather than recording the wide spectrum of female attitudes and responses to the war in France. Not only were ambivalent or negative responses left invisible in the visual landscape, the activities of women of color or colonized women during the war were almost completely ignored by photographers, French or otherwise.

Joëlle Beurier’s research on French WWI magazines, especially *Le Miroir*, provides a benchmark for war-era image analysis. A striking fact about the wartime run of *Le Miroir* was the paucity of images of French women, lending credence to Bruno de Perthuis’ argument that the outbreak of hostilities in 1914 ‘overdetermined the masculine to the detriment of the feminine in a process of militarization.’ Photos in *Le Miroir* understandably were dominated by images of soldiers, officers and politicians. However, there were a number of images of women in the magazine, just not French women. In particular, the Queens of Romania and Belgium were perennial favorites, in addition to plentiful images of

\[\text{\textsuperscript{15}}\text{Yannick Ripa, }\textit{Les femmes en France de 1880 à nos jours} (Paris, 2007), p. 115.\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{16}}\text{Ibid. There are similarities in the British case, as discussed by Gail Braybon and Penny Summerfield in }\textit{Out of the Cage: Women’s Experiences in Two World Wars} (New York, 1987).\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{17}}\text{Gail Braybon pointed out the tendency to generalize based on one group, and the appalling lack of attention to non-white subjects, in decades-worth of First World War literature. See her introduction in Braybon, ed., }\textit{Evidence, History and the Great War}. \text{And see Deborah Thom’s chapter in the same volume, ‘Making Spectaculars: Museums and How We Remember Gender in Wartime’ (pp. 48-66), which analyzes the ideological work performed by the Women at War Collection in the early Imperial War Museum in London.}\]


\[\text{\textsuperscript{19}}\text{Bruno de Perthuis, ‘Les photomontages de la Grande Guerre,’ }\textit{Gavroche}, 160 (2009), 25.\]
British female war workers and even female Bolsheviks. Why would *Le Miroir*’s editor lavish attention on British, American and other women, all but ignoring French women’s many contributions? One possible interpretation is that the magazine’s director, Paul Dupuy, feared that the new activities of French women might overshadow those of the French men in uniform. Other French magazines and newspapers, though, did not exhibit such qualms and showed French women workers and volunteers more often.

Rather than focus on one type of publication as Huss, Beurier and others have expertly done, the present work investigates one subject category, photographic images of women, across a variety of different media. Photographic illustration in French newspapers, magazines, postcards, official army photography, commercial photographs, published and unpublished photographic imagery will all serve as primary source evidence. By focusing only on the images that contained women – a criterion that obviously filtered out the bulk of French wartime photographs – a tour through multiple photo sources becomes manageable. The images discussed are also limited to those taken on and behind the Western Front, from Belgium to Paris. Likewise, images of foreign women, except for Belgians, are excluded. In order to focus on the French story, I have left out images of British, American and other Allied volunteers, which merit their own treatment. Images of Belgian refugees are included, because they often appeared with French women in photographic images, and because many of them came to live in France during the war to escape German occupation.

The focus on French photography in this work, to the exclusion of other nations’ output, raises the question of whether French photographs were unique in the way they showed female self-sacrifice during the war. A tentative answer is… yes and no. Yes, French photographers emerged from a unique environment combining Catholicism with republicanism; a suffrage movement at its height in 1914 (similar to the British in that respect, although the French women’s

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20 The Soviets’ new ambassador to London, a woman, merited no less than the cover of *Le Miroir*’s 27 Jan. 1918 edition. The photo shows her with a small baby in her new English home.

21 The infamous Netherlands-born Mata Hari (Margaretha Geertruida Zelle) does not appear in this book. Although an important figure in the French imagination after her arrest in 1917, most of the photographic imagery of Mata Hari was produced before 1914, when she worked as an exotic dancer.
movement was never militant in the same way as the British); and a military regime in which French women could neither form auxiliary corps as in Britain, nor take part in combat, as a few women did in Russia and Serbia. On the other hand, photography in each of the Allied and Axis powers did represent women in a variety of devotional roles, and in that sense the French images illustrated sentiments that were shared throughout much of Europe and the United States. Unlike Britain, the United States or Germany (east of the Rhine), though, French photographers were working in the context of a home invasion, intensifying the feeling that women in France were in danger of violation by the enemy.

The photographs for this book come from a variety of different wartime sources, assembled from a cross-section of examples from the French Army, the Parisian press, individual photographers and photographic agencies operating at the time. Beginning in 1915, the French Army established an official Photographic Section (SPA), whose members were often the only photographers licensed to take pictures in the regions of military operations. These official army photographers also worked in Paris. The SPA produced a large number of paper prints that, fortunately, contain names, dates and locations. While the bulk of SPA photographs depict army operations, there are many images of civilians and women interspersed with those of soldiers and officials, organized as they are in bound albums by region within the Bibliothèque de Documentation Internationale Contemporaine (BDIC).


23 The BDIC’s collection of SPA photographs is housed in the Musée de l’Histoire Contemporaine within the Musée de l’Armée, Paris. For information on the
The SPA collection is important not only because of the vast and comprehensive coverage of the albums, but also because the SPA distributed its pictures widely. Book publishers, newspapers, magazines and government propagandists all used official images, and the SPA also published its own photographs, sold them and mounted exhibitions throughout France. Thus, SPA images would have been seen by large sections of the French military and civilian population, in addition to foreign audiences in the form of official propaganda. But while these photographs reveal the motifs that preoccupied the government and the military, they are silent about the public reception of or reaction to the images. My analysis, therefore, focuses on the supply side of the image marketplace, rather than the demand.

Another large cache of well-preserved photographs was produced by the Paris police investigation office, the Service d'identité judiciaire.\textsuperscript{24} This police service, which began in the 1890s by making photo-records of arrested individuals within the Paris Préfecture de Police, expanded its field of operations more widely during the war.\textsuperscript{25} The collection is extremely useful for researching images of civilians, though it is limited mainly to the Île-de-France region. The police photographers recorded a wide variety of activities on the home front during the war, from local mob attacks on German shops in August 1914 to the victory celebrations on 14 July 1919. The subject matter in this collection shows an evolutionary development. When the war first broke out, the Parisian police were perhaps most concerned with maintaining order in the capital. A good number of early photographs show the size of crowds and the effects of mob violence. Gradually, police photographers assumed the role of historical record-keepers, especially when it came to the impact of the war on Paris and the Parisians. The collection includes many interesting images of the effects of German bombardments on Paris. Dozens of people were killed in such incidents – hundreds if we also add accidental explosions in armament factories – and many homes were damaged or even destroyed within the city. Over the course of the war, many images

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{24} The identité judiciaire photo collection is also housed at the Musée d’Histoire Contemporaine in Paris (BDIC).
\end{footnotesize}
produced by the *identité judiciaire* police photographers were used in French newspapers, magazines and exhibitions.

The third largest source of French photographs of women and civilians comes from the pages of the period newspapers and magazines. I studied the 1914-1919 weekly issues of *L’Illustration, Le Monde Illustré, Excelsior* and *Le Miroir*. That list does not exhaust the variety of illustrated periodicals in France during the war, but they seemed to make the most use of the amateur and official photographs produced during the period. One gap in source consultation comes from the fact that these periodicals were nearly all Paris-based. Therefore, they do not show how regional photographers represented French women during the period. Northern newspapers or magazines of the period are rare, except for publications produced under the supervision of German personnel. Even so, the photographs of southern and western French periodicals are left out of my account – an omission that other researchers will hopefully correct in future work.

A fourth source of wartime photographs, which overlaps with the published newspapers mentioned above, comes from commercial photo agencies of the period. These were firms, founded by photographers like Maurice Branger, Louis Meurisse, Marcel Rol and Georges Devred, that employed multiple photographers to cover newsworthy events, in order to sell images to the press. Although we know very little about those individual founders or their staff photographers, their firms amassed enormous archives of images, from the first decade of the century into the interwar years. Maurice Branger, who began as a photo-reporter for Pierre Lafitte’s magazines, *L’Echo du Paris, Je sais tout* and *Excelsior*, established his own photo agency (Photopresse) around 1905. The Belgian photographer Louis Meurisse worked for Branger’s agency for a few years before establishing his own in 1909. The third French agency, Agence Rol, began by specializing in aerial photography. Agence Rol expanded its

26 The primary sources are the German-supervised newspapers *La Gazette des Ardennes* and the *Liller Kriegszeitung*. Both had illustrated supplements. The former enjoyed quite a wide local readership owing to the fact that it listed the names and locations of French prisoners. The latter was a German magazine whose main audience was the German personnel stationed in France.

27 Strangely, these photo agencies seem to have attracted the attention of neither French nor English-speaking media scholars and historians. However, Agence Meurisse was the subject of a blog entry on Gallica, available online here: [http://blog.bnf.fr/gallica/?p=2790#comment-81822](http://blog.bnf.fr/gallica/?p=2790#comment-81822).
subject matter vastly between 1914 and 1918, becoming even richer than the SPA for images of wartime Paris. For projects focusing on the trenches and the battlefields, these commercial agencies would not be very useful to the researcher, as they were barred from the fighting zones; but in the search for images of women, they provided thousands of images of civilian life in Paris, hospitals, children’s charities and the war industries – the sites of the occupations allotted to women during the war.28

The activity of the Branger, Meurisse and Rol agencies, in addition to several studios and prolific postcard companies during the period, shows us that the visual record of the war – propagandistic as well as archival – was a partnership between government officials, private entrepreneurs and the army. French women during the war took on many new jobs, and although wives managed studios in the absence of mobilized husbands, they did not become photo-reporters for the government, the military or the agencies as far as I can tell.29 The army, of course, would never have allowed female photographers near areas of operation; though it is notable that neither were any French women invited to photograph the home front, whether in Paris or further south.30 This absence, caused in part by the masculine and totalizing nature of war culture itself, meant that the present study by necessity deals with male representations of French females.31 Although French women were

28 After the war, the Rol and Meurisse agencies, along with Mondial Photo Presse, formed SAFARA (Service des Agences Françaises d’Actualité et de Reportage Associés), which existed until 1946.
29 The Section Photographique de l’Armée did hire at least thirty-seven women to serve in clerical posts. See the ‘Rapport sur la création, le fonctionnement, les résultats, de la Section Photographique et Cinématographique de l’Armée’ (1917), manuscript copy at the BDIC, 104-5.
30 Occasionally, a British or American female volunteer (for example, members of the American Fund for French Wounded who served on the Western Front) was able to take photographs within a zone of operations and in rear areas. French women photographers in the provinces surely recorded their surroundings during the period, or photographed the Allied soldiers who stayed on their property. To my knowledge, though, no systematic attempt has been made to bring such women to light.
31 In terms of posters, Mark Levitch noted that of the hundreds of examples produced during the war, the only ones showcasing female creativity came from a special series using the work of schoolgirls aged 13 to 16. See Levitch, ‘Young Blood: Parisian Schoolgirls’ Transformation of France’s Great War Poster
complicit in their representation by posing for and consuming images, the themes in wartime photographs were determined by a male media establishment. This absence was in extreme contrast to the dozens, if not hundreds, of female writers who produced novels, non-fiction works and short stories during the war in France, who will be referred to throughout this work.

The coming chapters in this book use a thematic structure based on the patterns of imagery I found across the variety of sources described above. Chapter Two, ‘Distress’, looks at images of refugees at various stages of their flight from home, as well as women living in the Île-de-France region during the war. Photographers represented women’s displacement from their homes as the result of German aggression, rather than as the result of mutual bombardment between the French and German armies. That chapter will discuss several different female representations that connoted helplessness, distress, desperation, or exhaustion, including images of women scavenging for necessities, of evacuation, of liberation, and of homecoming.

Chapter Three, ‘Devotion’, looks at the many different ways that French photographers represented women and girls, of all classes, devoting themselves to the national cause in general and local soldiers in particular. Nurses, sponsors, widows and volunteers were a few of the female types that the periodical and postcard press promoted, showing, or prescribing, French women’s willingness to give their time, money and affection. Chapter Four, ‘Toil’, deals with images that recorded women working, whether in the war-related industries, agriculture or other services. These photographs included the ‘munitionettes’ who staffed the ammunition factories of the period, as well as the remplaçantes who filled the municipal posts in transportation and communications left vacant by their husbands, brothers or fathers.

Instead of a chronicle of war photos, therefore, the book is organized around those dominant pictorial themes. Images from several or all of the years of war appear in each chapter. Where female imagery was concerned, photographers returned to the same themes again and again between 1914 and 1918, in contrast, perhaps, to their pictures of male participants. True, the types of jobs consigned to women by industry, the

Aesthetic,’ in Pearl James, ed., *Picture This: World War I Posters and Visual Culture* (Lincoln, 2009), p. 162.
military and the state evolved over the course of the war, and photographers captured those vocational changes (see Chapter Four). Within novel situations, though, the main message in the images remained the same: France’s women were physically endangered by a pitiless enemy; what was needed above all else was their unwavering devotion to the men fighting the war, given in whatever suitable capacity was available to them. Photographers not only represented the different ways that women devoted themselves to the national cause; their pictures reinforced these desirable traits (devotion, but also dependence) as natural, feminine and ubiquitous. The same motifs of feminine distress, devotion and industry were produced by official and commercial photographers throughout the period.

One more word is needed about the sources. For the sake of design and consistency, I often cropped out the mounts of archival photographs for the present publication. I did this with some hesitation, since scholars have shown us the importance of material context in the history and meaning of photographs.32 My decision in this regard concerns mostly photographs from the albums Valois at the BDIC (i.e., official French Army photographs), and the identité judiciaire (police) photographs in the same library (Figures 1.4 and 1.5). In Figure 1.4, the reader can here see almost the entire cardboard mount of an army photograph, which I use (cropped) in Chapter Four (Figure 4.10). The inscriptions on this cardboard mount, as with all album Valois photographs, were hand-written in pencil by army staff. The viewer can see an archival number (upper right), an alphanumeric code signifying the photographer and the picture’s number (M.3686, upper left), the location (Paris), the date (27.3.17, which translates to 27 March 1917), and the official caption (lower right). Similarly, Figure 1.5 shows a photograph I made of a police photograph in the BDIC collection, including the distortion caused by my camera’s lens. At the time I was conducting research for this project in summer 2011, the BDIC had no safe way to flatten photographic images that had curved over time owing to atmospheric conditions. Readers will therefore see some distortion in all the photographs that I made of these cards.

32 See, for example, the second half of Elizabeth Edwards, The Camera as Historian (Durham, NC, 2012); and Allan Sekula, ‘Reading an Archive’ in Brian Wallis, ed., Blasted Allegories (Cambridge, 1987), pp. 115-28, which critiques the curatorial tendency to elevate photographs from business archives into works of art, at the expense of the images’ original contexts.
Fig. 1.4: Photographic Section of the French Army photograph. Compare to Figure 4.10 in Chapter Four. MHC/BDIC.
Fig. 1.5: Paris Police photograph. Compare to Figure 2.21 in Chapter Two.
MHC/BDIC.

Identité judicaire photographic prints, like this one, were all mounted on white cardboard by staff, and contain hand-written captions in ink. The number in the upper-right hand corner corresponds to the bureau of police’s original archival system. For both the army and police photographs, my captions translate the official captions into English, not in order to affirm their ‘truth’, but in order to show how images, captions and other texts worked together to (pre)determine meaning. In the case of newspaper and magazine illustrations, I had to crop some halftones from the full pages so that reproductions would be legible. The frame, album and archive were (and remain) technologies of state power, which helped establish regimes of truth during World War I. Although some of the evidence of those technologies is invisible here, my aim, nevertheless, is to expose and deconstruct those regimes.
2 Distress

‘All wars are waged against women and children.’ – Corra Harris (1914)

Within the variety of photo representations of women during World War I, there were themes that persisted throughout the war. The present chapter will deal with the portion of wartime images that depicted female refugees and, more generally, French-speaking women dispossessed by war. French and Belgian women suffered unprecedented trials as battle ebbed and flowed around their homes, and photographers’ pictures showed their distress. The purpose of this chapter is not to deny that women in the region encountered serious dangers during the war, but rather to show how editorial selection and framing, emphases, captions, and, just as importantly, absences in the illustrated media deliberately created a gendered dichotomy between masculine command and feminine helplessness. Whether photographed in refugee caravans, small family groups, or as individuals, women in French wartime photography were often lumped into the general category of distressed, in need of state-sponsored assistance, rescue or liberation by the military. Next to the figures of dispossessed or desperate women, such photographs frequently depicted well-equipped, armed or managerial male staff, creating a contrast between the men in charge and the women under their supervision as vulnerable civilians. Notably absent from the wartime visual landscape was the small group of female activists who fought against the war and what it stood for throughout the period.¹

Certainly, as the war progressed, photographs of French women as competent and confident figures did appear, and those images will be dealt with in subsequent chapters. Here, though, we will focus on the

category of wartime imagery that worked to help justify the length and scope of the war in France. Tammy Proctor has observed that civilians, and women in particular, had a ‘psychological role as justification for battle,’ since war propaganda positioned them as the targets of enemy crimes. Official and commercial photographers were thus motivated to show French and Belgian women in constant danger, whether as refugees, victims of bombardments, or as urban scavengers searching for food, fuel or shelter. Such pictures also helped transform French women’s visual presence from a pre-war image of strength and confidence – *la nouvelle femme* (New Woman) of the Belle Epoque – to a wartime image of distress and vulnerability.

Especially notable about wartime images of women was how starkly they contrasted to pre-war images of French women in the press. Historians have shown that the twenty years before the war were a golden age for French feminism. Right up to August 1914, educated, urban women were on the march, being photographed demonstrating for suffrage, demanding educational opportunities and achieving feats of athleticism (Figure 2.1). Madeleine Pelletier, Hubertine Auclert and


Fig. 2.1: Agence Meurisse photograph captioned, ‘Mlle Warner, boxeur’ (1914). BNF/Gallica.

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3 See the works cited in footnote 11 in Chapter One.
Hélène Brion, to name just a few, were all active in pursuit of educational, voting and labor rights for women. Dr. Pelletier went so far as to demand women’s sexual liberation and the legalization of birth control and abortion. Another figure, Hélène Miropolsky, wrote a regular feminist column in Fémina magazine, which offered a global report on rights newly won by women. This trend of female progress reached its climax in late July 1914, when Caroline Rémy and Marguerite Durand led a procession of five thousand French suffragists through the Tuileries gardens to place flowers at the statue of the marquis de Condorcet, the 1789 revolutionary who had advocated for women’s rights. Le Monde Illustré and other illustrated newspapers and magazines covered the event (Figure 2.2). The war would not merely delay voting and other rights for these women, but thwarted them entirely until after the Second World War.⁴

Fig. 2.2: Photo layout of the July 1914 French suffragist demonstration in Le Monde Illustré magazine. The title translates, ‘We, too, have Suffragettes!’

⁴ The argument that WWI reversed the French women’s movement was asserted by James F. McMillan in several works, including, ‘World War I and Women in France’ in Arthur Marwick, ed., Total War and Social Change (New York, 1988), pp. 1-15.
Conservatives hoped World War I ‘would right all disruptions to the Third Republic’s gendered foundations,’ Bonnie Smith has concluded.\(^5\) Returning French women to their ‘proper place’ in 1914 meant that news and photographs of extraordinary (i.e., unfeminine) women had to disappear during the war. In sharp contrast to the first half of 1914, the last five months of the year would generate photographs of women fleeing the bombardments of the Western Front. The era of publicizing France’s women of action was now over, substituted for images of powerless women caught within a man-made tornado. Feminists had thought that 1914 would bring them victory; instead, the war would reinforce the gendering of action and emotion: ‘aux hommes les armes, aux femmes les larmes,’ as the saying went.\(^6\)

From the beginning of the war, the image of French or Belgian women in flight became a dominant symbol of ‘German barbarism’ in the visual media of the day, including but not limited to photography. Such images were also used in the United States to garner support for humanitarian efforts and later entry to the war (Figure 2.3). According to Lynn Abrams, what is important to recognize about female victim imagery during the period is that any actual concern for those depicted was secondary to the imagery’s purpose as a recruitment tool.\(^7\) The French propaganda apparatus used the refugee’s plight to persuade men of their duty as protectors, as well as to interest the United States in the war.


The women in these images came from one of several regional groups over the course of the war. First, we see photographs of Belgian families fleeing the German invasion. Shortly after, photos appeared of French women fleeing the German invasion of the north-eastern regions. A few photographs also exist of Parisian civilians preparing to flee the city during the Battle of the Marne, although not many of these pictures were publicized during the war (Figure 2.4). From 1917 to mid-1918, we see photographs of refugee caravans once more headed toward hoped-for safety as French and Allied troops recaptured territory from the Germans.
This last group of refugees on the Western Front were mostly women, children and elderly men who had lived under German occupation, and who were now being evacuated from what remained of their homes after months or years of Allied bombardments. Refugees were also composed of families whose heretofore peaceful villages now stood in the way of military advance and retreats. More often than not, women and children appeared together in these pictures. The frequency of the women-and-children-in-distress theme in wartime visual culture, and its repetition over the entire course of the war, helped to suggest that the adult woman was just as helpless as her children in the face of wartime conditions (Figures 2.5 and 2.6). Placement of the image-message in multiple formats, and employing repetition over time proved to be propaganda techniques that endured. These images of women and children also reaffirmed the indispensable idea that the ‘humanitarian crisis’, and the material destruction that accompanied it, was the result solely of German aggression, and that for the French nation this was purely a defensive war.
Fig. 2.5: Agence Rol photograph captioned, ‘Ostende, tragedy of an old woman and her granddaughter who were unable to find a place to stay’ (1914). BNF/Gallica.

Fig. 2.6: Agence Rol photograph captioned, ‘A widow and her daughter leave town before the arrival of the barbarians’ (1914). BNF/Gallica.
Photographers and reporters did not record the stories of resourceful women who calmly traveled to friends and relatives in safety and good time, but instead focused on the desperate flight of people caught unprepared at the outbreak of war. Moreover, the French censors did not permit stories of evacuations that were carried out too late or incompetently to appear in the press.\(^8\)

When war began, residents of Belgian and northern French towns had to decide whether to stay in their homes and businesses – protecting them as best they could from damage or German, or even local, looting – or else to flee to safety behind the lines of invasion. The unhappy reality for the residents of Lille, Roubaix, Valenciennes and other French towns was that the high command had sent most of their young men elsewhere in August 1914, then ordered the few still in the region to retreat in October.\(^9\) Women and children in the North, then, were left without defenders – an ironic fate, given the national rhetoric about the Sacred Union and this being a defensive war.\(^10\) Although there were activist groups in several belligerent countries that called for the cessation of violence, the flow of images worked to justify warfare rather than question it.

In one police photograph of August 1914 (Figure 2.7), we see an example of those early northern French and Belgian refugees. The female figures, foregrounded on the left, exhibit the archtypical traits of the genre:

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\(^9\) The army had decided to focus resources on the defense of Paris and the invasion of Alsace-Lorraine. Some northern French men in uniform then ended up as prisoners in Germany, while others fought, and sometimes died, during the war without any news from family members who remained in occupied territory, and vice versa.

\(^10\) The Sacred Union (in French, *union sacrée*) was President Poincaré’s call for political rapprochement between left and right, Catholic and anti-clerical factions in what had been a bitterly divided France, following the onset of war in August 1914. Following Prime Minister Viviani’s delivery of Poincaré’s written words to the two chambers, a broader wartime mandate of cooperation was widely adopted. Some scholars have argued, however, that this mandate was, rather, a temporary capitulation of the left (syndicalists, feminists, pacifists, etc.) to the right in France.
exhausted faces, layered clothing and baby carriages, used both to transport infants and hold belongings. Also typical were photos of soldiers managing the evacuation of battlefront towns, such as Soissons in this photograph by a Meurisse agency photographer (Figure 2.8), or this photograph from the 1916 evacuation of Verdun (Figure 2.9). In Figure 2.8, a family of women, adolescents and young children have been loaded onto a Red Cross truck for departure to safer territory. For the next four years, those women in the truck would probably be responsible for the survival and disciplining of the children, often without a male partner.

11 More research needs to be done on the men in these pictures of fleeing refugees. Owing to deep restructuring that began shortly before the war, the Belgian military could not undertake mass mobilization upon the German invasion. Therefore, the bulk of Belgian men had either to stay in occupied Belgium or flee as refugees. In that sense, men pushing a baby carriage, as in Figure 2.7, like their male compatriots more generally, were feminized as ‘helpless civilians’.
Fig. 2.8: Agence Meurisse photograph captioned, ‘The evacuation of inhabitants by the army, near Soissons’ (1914). BNF/Gallica.

Fig. 2.9: Agence Rol photograph of the evacuation of Verdun (1916). BNF/Gallica.
Later in the war, unfortunately, commentators would blame women for the truancy and delinquency of their adolescents.\textsuperscript{12} Some indigent women would find themselves forced to place their young children in wartime orphanages. The photographers, though, rarely if ever followed up on the fate of individual refugees, instructed as they were to focus on the army’s management of an orderly evacuation process and the immediate plight of those in flight.

The French state, in cooperation with Parisian social services and businesses, hurriedly organized a blanket reception for the refugees who flowed into Paris in 1914 – the product of an exodus that Gabriel Perreux reported was larger than the one of 1940.\textsuperscript{13} Those who reached Paris were directed by police to the Cirque d’Hiver or the Saint-Sulpice seminary in the 6th arrondissement. The numbers added up to several hundred thousand individuals, some alone, some with family members. Then, the process of absorbing the exiles into the uninvaded towns and cities of France began, something that became socially problematic.\textsuperscript{14}

From those initial processing centers, municipal and social workers endeavored to place refugees with friends or relatives, either in Paris or the provinces. Philippe Nivet has explained that in a society ‘attached to property and to fixity, to be a refugee is to have lost one’s home, the memories of the family, the line of ancestors. It is to live uprooted in a strange milieu in which it is difficult to integrate oneself.’\textsuperscript{15} Whereas new soldiers together established a battlefront community, refugees struggled to insert themselves into new homes, sometimes in the face of a less-than-friendly host population that suspected them of profiting from the state allocation system.

Many women, separated from their fathers, brothers, or husbands, became dependent on the kindness of strangers and state charity. In Figure 2.10, women, children and adolescents study a public message board full of forwarding addresses and messages from separated family members.

\textsuperscript{14} On the arc of civilian acceptance of refugees in their midst, see Pierre Purseigle, ‘“A Wave On To Our Shores”: the Exile and Resettlement of Refugees from the Western Front, 1914-1918,’ \textit{Contemporary European History}, 16 (2007), 427-44.
Living relatively normal family lives just a few weeks earlier, thousands of women now found themselves dispossessed of home, husband and his

Fig. 2.10: Photo halftone illustration in Laurence Stallings, ed., *The First World War: a Photographic History* (New York, 1933). The photograph shows refugees from occupied French territory reading messages left on window shutters by those who came before them. They were searching for messages from friends and family members.

income. In another photograph by a Meurisse agency photographer, a group of women and children sleep on a thin layer of straw inside the Gare du Nord in Paris (Figure 2.11). The image epitomized the massive disruption caused by the war, and the pitiful state of the northeastern refugees who reached the capital.
Similar images were shaped by propagandists to project a more symbolic meaning. A patriotic magazine entitled Lectures Pour Tous, for example, featured a cover photo of a refugee woman and child, again reclining in a layer of straw within the ruins of a bombarded church (Figure 2.12). This was the publication’s Christmas 1914 issue, and so the caption writer made a religious parallel:

In the church of a small Belgian village, in front of the altar damaged by German shells. A poor woman, exhausted by anguish and fatigue, curls up with her infant for some sleep. Does not this scene remind us, at a distance of twenty centuries, the halts for rest in Egypt, when the Holy Family fled the horrible massacre ordered by Herod?\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{16} Lectures Pour Tous. Noël 1914, cover.
Using engraved decoration surrounding the image and the evocative caption, the magazine transformed the woman and her baby into a Madonna and Child, and by implication, innocent martyrs of the war (Herod in this case being Kaiser Wilhelm II). The molding of female images into feminine martyrs remained a popular theme throughout the war, whether the martyrdom was at the hands of the Germans, or whether the women ‘chose’ to sacrifice themselves for the national cause.
We see the refugee-in-flight theme repeated every year of the war, in 1914 (Figure 2.13), 1915 (Figure 2.14), 1916 (Figure 2.15), 1917 (Figure 2.16), and 1918 (Figure 2.17), by French army photographers, police, press reporters, Allied photographers, as well as poster artists.
Fig. 2.14: Photo halftone illustration in *L’Illustration* magazine (1915), entitled, ‘The passage to Geneva by evacuees from the invaded departments.’ The caption went on to describe these refugees as ‘poor people ripped from their homes, contrary to the laws of war,’ so that the Germans would have fewer mouths to feed in the occupied territory. © *L’Illustration*.

Fig. 2.15: Photo halftone illustration in *L’Illustration* magazine (1916), entitled, ‘[Refugees] from Northern France Repatriated at Annemasse (Haute-Savoie).’ The caption described the group as ‘a family that has piled everything that it possesses into a wheelbarrow.’ © *L’Illustration*.
Fig. 2.16: British official photograph in the collection of the Photographic Section of the French Army, captioned, ‘Masnières: In the liberated village. British automobile evacuating the inhabitants’ (Nov. 1917). British, French, and American photographic services exchanged prints throughout the war for archival and publication purposes. MHC/BDIC.

Fig. 2.17: U.S. Army Signal Corps photograph, captioned, ‘In the captured Salient of St. Mihiel. Refugees liberated from German hands by the American capture of the St. Mihiel salient gathered in Fliery the day after the drive’ (1918). NARA.
The 1917 photograph above (Figure 2.16) was taken during the reconquest of Masnières (Nord) by the British. These were women and children who had survived the occupation and wartime scarcities, but were now forced to evacuate their stripped homes or else face further bombardments. The positions, gestures and expressions of the mostly British soldiers in the photograph convey command and control, whereas the women exhibit a difficult-to-decipher mixture of fear, worry, relief or anger. Female refugees appear disheveled, dependent on the actions and technologies of military or civilian officials. Photographers represented the officers and enlisted men as in control of the situation – ‘in the driver’s seat’, literally here, or else figuratively – while the women are dependent on the men, and, more broadly speaking, on the wartime regime.

So, in stark contrast to the defiant newsmakers before 1914, women were now at the mercy of violent events outside their control. But, when we look at the memoirs, testimony and literature of the period, we see that this was a false dichotomy. As former soldiers like Henri Barbusse, Robert Graves, Erich Maria Remarque, Paul Fussel and others have shown us, the last thing a soldier in the trenches had was control over his situation. Many soldiers’ memoirs described the debilitating fear, disorientation or dumb luck that characterized their lives at the front, indicating a lack of control over the lives and deaths of those around them. Nevertheless, official and press photographers in France created a visual contrast between well-equipped soldiers in control and dispossessed, desperate women.

Since French propagandists required damsels in distress, images of women managing their own movements, defending their homes, or simply getting out of the way by leaving France did not appear, whether in print or in military albums. Nevertheless, there were many French women who did not flee as refugees, and whose pre-war, defiant

17 Two French women of letters who left France at the outbreak of war were Sidonie Gabrielle Colette, who went to Italy as a correspondent for Le Matin, and writer-artist Valentine de Saint-Point, who went to Spain, the United States and Morocco before returning to France in 1918. Arria Ly (pseudonym of Joséphine Gondon) also went to Italy. We might also mention Louise Saumoneau, the only French woman to appear at the 1915 International Conference of Socialist Women in Berne. On Saumoneau, see James F. McMillan, Housewife or Harlot: the Place of Women in French Society, 1870-1940 (New York, 1981), p. 113. On French feminist responses to the outbreak of war, see Christine Bard, Les filles de Marianne, ch. 2.
personalities served them well after 1914. Such was the case for Louise de Bettignies of Lille, who served as a spy for the Allies, for Antoinette Tierce, who sheltered British soldiers behind occupied lines, or Marcelle Capy, who, under police surveillance, spent the war publishing books and articles critical of the war. So, although images of French women of action were swamped by images of damsels in distress, take-charge women did exist and, to a greater or lesser degree, were recognized after the war.\textsuperscript{18} But ‘courage’, as Tammy Proctor has explained, became gendered ‘to reflect the fundamental assumption that men fought wars to save women’ from victimization.\textsuperscript{19}

Refugees were not the only category of French women in distress during the war. Daily civilian humiliation, a less well-explored theme, was also captured by photographers. I refer not to the forced labor or sexual violence experienced by women in German-held territory, but the daily humiliations caused by social disruption, scarcity and wartime destruction. Humanitarian volunteers in Paris and elsewhere were sensitive to the material insecurity and indignities experienced by displaced women, going so far as to create an agency called \textit{l’Assistance Discrète}, which targeted ‘gentlewomen’ who might be too proud to ask for food, clothing or shelter.\textsuperscript{20} The American journalist Corra Harris was struck by Parisian women’s rapid impoverishment in 1914, reinforcing the gendered dichotomy in her description:

When one writes of the women’s side of the war one cannot tell of battles won, or of the glories that crown the heads of victorious men. It must be a story of sorrows; of despair; of poverty and privations patiently endured.\textsuperscript{21}

\textsuperscript{18} For an early source on Louise de Bettignies, see Antoine Redier, \textit{Louise de Bettignies: héroïne de guerre} (Paris, 1926). On Tierce see Antoinette Tierce, \textit{Between Two Fires: Being a true account of how the Author sheltered four escaped British Prisoners of War in her house in Lille during the German occupation of that city}, trans. by J. Lewis May (London, 1931). And see Marcelle Capy’s wartime critique, \textit{Une voix de femme dans la mêlée} (Paris, 1916).

\textsuperscript{19} Tammy M. Proctor, \textit{Female Intelligence: Women and Espionage in the First World War} (New York, 2003), p. 120.

\textsuperscript{20} Commission for Relief of Belgium and Northern France pledge card, Herbert Hoover Presidential Library and Museum.

Harris noted that the material privations of such necessities as food, clothing and fuel came on top of the absence of sons, husbands or fiancés. In wartime literature there was a broader trend that sought to represent French women as humbled by wartime conditions, a function that, as Catherine O’Bien and others have asserted, was one of the goals of the war. In the literature as well as the images of the period, French women were nudged back into their proper place below men in social status. On the day of general mobilization in Paris, Maurice, the protagonist in Paul Géraldy’s popular 1916 novel, *La Guerre, Madame...*, observes with pleasure how a woman in the street showed:

the timid and sad resignation of those whose fortunes have collapsed, having the feeling of one disgraced with every moment. And this contrasted terribly, this pathetic look of an abandoned animal, with the glitz and provocation of her [pre-war] toilette. I turned toward my friend and read my thoughts in his eyes: ‘So now women have finally lost their self-importance!’

Maurice’s comment is not one of compassion, but triumph. There was in Géraldy’s work and other media of the day a certain sense of satisfaction at the French woman’s reversal of fortune now that the war restored French manhood to its dominant cultural position. A survey of the wartime fiction shows that both male and female writers created plots involving female humiliation. As the war went on longer than the state had planned, what emerged was a strange coexistence of masculine satisfaction alongside official pity for the women who had been humiliated by the losses wrought by the war. The French photographs and films

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24 See for example Jack de Bussy (pseudonym of Jacqueline Liscoät), *Réfugiée et infirmière de guerre* (Paris, 1915), a novel about a female author whose life as an independent author crumbles with the onset of war. Often the humiliations suffered by the women in period fiction and anecdotes are tinged with class-based pride. See also Dorothy Canfield’s story about ‘La Pharmacienne’ in *Home Fires in France* (1918), excerpted in Agnès Cardinal, Dorothy Goldman and Judith Hattaway, eds., *Women’s Writing on the First World War*, trans. by Agnès Cardinal (Oxford, 1999), pp. 65-91.
showing women humbled by wartime conditions, though, were created exclusively by men.

An individual did not have to be a refugee between 1914 and 1918 to find herself scavenging now for food and supplies (Figure 2.18). Whereas before the war the women in the photographs below may have enjoyed a relatively comfortable retirement or married life, perhaps employing a servant, they were now obliged to elbow their way through crowds to get bits of scrap wood for fuel, line up for milk or coal rations, or pick over the ruins of exploded homes for useful objects. Individually, the photographs capturing these activities do not necessarily indicate a sadistic impulse toward women; for, all civilians, whether men, women or children, as well as the soldiers at the front, had to do without many material comforts during the war. The photographs of women, though, when looked at in their ensemble, exposed the stark contrast between pre-war French women’s proud march toward greater independence, and wartime women’s dependence on the male-designed and controlled
wartime welfare state. In many of these images, women are either bent over, picking through debris for a chance at finding coal, as in this army

Fig. 2.19: Photographic Section of the French Army photograph (Roger Grenier) captioned, ‘Port de la Rapée. In front of the Metropolitan works. Women[,] children search through the coke debris in the slag, which has to be loaded onto the barges’ (March 1917). MHC/BDIC.

photograph (Figure 2.19), or racing to the shops to find supplies before prices rose once again, well ahead of their wage rates and allocations.25 A French cartoon used in lantern lectures by the American Commission for Relief of Belgium and Northern France (Figure 2.20) shows two caricatured women racing to buy coffee before the already expensive price rises again right before their very eyes.

25 On the reputation of women workers’ high wartime wages versus the reality of low wages compared to their male counterparts and skyrocketing food prices, see Thébaud, La femme au temps de la guerre de 14, p. 177. See also Carolyn Wilson’s wartime reporting for the Chicago Tribune in Robert J. Young, ed., Under Siege: Portraits of Civilian Life in France during World War I (New York, 2000), pp. 47 and 113.
Fig. 2.20: Glass lantern slide used by the American Commission for Relief of Belgium and Northern France in their wartime presentations. Top caption translates, ‘The sport in 1916: Match-speed for coffee.’ Bottom caption translates, ‘The more they hurry up, the more we raise the price.’ Hoover Institution.

Even here, within a slide show used to solicit assistance for civilians, the cartoon poked fun at women’s struggle against the rising cost of living. For this particular lantern lecture, the cartoon was paired with a photograph showing the size of the bacon ration allotted to civilians under the German occupation. A postage stamp placed on the piece of meat indicated to the audience the actual size of the ration, which we know frequently never even reached civilian mouths, owing to the British blockade, German obstructionism, icy transport conditions, or theft in the black market.

In another police photograph, the camera has recorded a long queue of women and children, the young and old together, waiting in the freezing conditions of January 1917 for their allotment of coal from the municipal depot (Figure 2.21). Ironically, the Journal du Peuple is
advertised in a poster behind the line of women and children, a periodical that featured articles by the radical feminist Séverine (named prominently on the poster), pen name of Caroline Rémy. Rémy spent her career demanding the emancipation of French women, and as a socialist had denounced the Sacred Union in 1914. Nevertheless, the propaganda message in the press was that French women were patriotically resigned to inevitable wartime shortages. One may wonder, though, if the photographer’s inclusion of the poster was intentional or not. Françoise Thébaud has pointed out that the wartime coal famine was not without some protest from French women, who used slogans such as ‘du charbon ou nos hommes’ (give us coal or give us our men) and ‘du charbon ou la paix’ (coal or peace) during demonstrations at their local town halls in 1917. Unsurprisingly, such protests were not recorded by the mainstream illustrated press, which was subject to strict censorship. And most French women did wait patiently in line at the coal merchant’s, perhaps thinking silently of how, not long ago, he had delivered coal to them.

Another photograph, obtained by the Commission for Relief of Belgium and Northern France, shows a soup line in a German-occupied region (Figure 2.22). Characteristic of these wartime photographs of

![Image of a soup line in a German-occupied region]

queuing women is the gender division between the people waiting in line, mainly women and children, and the people who held the storage keys and controlled the distribution of goods, almost always men. Although French women were now often the temporary heads of their households, helped run the public transportation networks, and provided health care as nurses, they were rarely placed in charge of food or fuel supplies. The exception to this gendered labor was the handful of noblewomen who founded their own charities behind the lines.

The American Commission for Relief of Belgium and Northern France produced many photographs of women and children awaiting their soupe communale (soup kitchen meal) made possible by international charity. Herbert Hoover, who headed the Commission, took great pride in being able to feed some two million French civilians trapped under German occupation. Nevertheless, we should not forget that this region (the département du Nord) had been France’s pre-war industrial heartland, proud of its cultural and material well-being and self-sufficiency. From
independence and prosperity, the women of the Nord, of all classes, were now reduced to hungry supplicants. The local councils that worked with the Commission were headed, staffed and controlled by the remaining men of the region, rather than the women who formed the majority of the occupied population. Figure 2.22 appears to show the male managers overseeing the distribution of rations. Despite Hoover’s herculean efforts, all precious food supplies were subject to illegal skimming and sale by unscrupulous staff throughout the war, staff who happened to be entirely male. Some women characters in Maxence Van der Meersch’s tale of the era simply resorted to offering their bodies to German staff members in order to ensure enough food for themselves and their children—a different form of degradation, which resulted in the even further humiliation of receiving abuse from the community, even though it was through this sexual exchange that family, neighbors and friends obtained administrative or alimentary necessities.

Certain humiliations, then, were unique to women and children. In occupied Lille, for example, the widow Delahaye-Théry observed fellow mothers’ helplessness, as their children died from malnutrition or even injuries sustained from intermittent shellfire. In Loos, the teenaged Emilienne Moreau watched German invaders bully and humiliate her father, before looting his shop. Worse still was the story of Fannie Sennevilliers, the ill-fated character in the novel Invasion, who, having born a baby with a German soldier, is cast out of her family home, and, in the winter of 1918, throws herself into a quarry pool in despair and freezes to death. Even if such an event was fictional, it allowed the author, who was a youngster at the time of the German occupation, to show the wartime humiliations particular to women. If the French man’s fate was to

27 The male French officials who assisted American aid workers are listed in the printed reports of the Comité d’Alimentation du Nord de la France, preserved in the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library.

28 In Invasion (New York, 1937), Maxence Van der Meersch details how the corrupt mayor of Roubaix (named Lacombe in the novel) and his cronies continually stole and sold from the ration stores. See pp. 28-9, 33, 165 and 440.


31 Van der Meersch, Invasion, pp. 387-8.
suffer and fight, the French woman’s fate, it seems, was to wait and endure various degrees of degradation which she may or may not survive. Photographs of women in distress, then, could project two different messages. Some photographers sought to capture evidence of German criminality, while others represented French women as humbled by the war.

In many cases, photographers and layout editors used images of feminine distress in order to set up the ‘rescue’ that followed. We have already seen this simple visual narrative in the photographs of evacuation operations above. The rescued damsel was an important theme in the imagery of France’s final reconquest of Alsace and Lorraine, too. Photographic representations in 1918 supplemented the posters, postcards and other art work that depicted Alsatian women in traditional dress falling into the arms of French soldiers, relieved that they had at last been rescued from the German ‘usurper’ (Figures 2.23 and 2.24). Visual and literary propaganda obscured the fact that most Alsatians spoke German as

![Image of a postcard reproduction of Georges Scott’s picture in L'Illustration magazine, captioned, 'En Alsace! The real Plebiscite.' © L'Illustration.](image)

Fig. 2.23: Postcard reproduction of Georges Scott’s picture in *L'Illustration* magazine, captioned, ‘En Alsace! The real Plebiscite.’ © *L'Illustration*.

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32 Even under the German occupation, many of the male characters in *Invasion* actively fight in some way, albeit not always heroically. The manufacturer Barthélemy David fights for local justice, Alain Laubigier escapes from prison, and Isidore Duydt commits murder, to name just three examples.
their first language, and many French-speakers there had married Germans since 1871. Instead, the Alsatian or Lorrainer woman was represented as ‘a loving wife, brutally torn away from the man she loved and had chosen to be her husband,’ i.e., France. In the French imagination, she was a Penelope figure, carefully preserving French culture in the domestic sphere, and faithfully awaiting the return of her ‘husband’.

Wearing her traditional skirt and black headdress, the Alsacienne was the perfect image of the rescued damsel. She had the look of a life-sized doll, or overgrown fillette (little girl). Photographs of the ‘liberation’ of Alsace are full of these female figures in traditional costume. A native observer wrote that in 1918 the women of Strasbourg ‘began frantically

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34 Ibid., p. 208.
sewing traditional dresses that they had never previously owned,’ something that struck him as odd since the traditional costume had heretofore only been worn in rural areas.\textsuperscript{35} However excited the natives of Alsace and Lorraine were at the arrival of French troops, several sources nevertheless revealed ambiguous feelings, and even fear, at the prospect of a post-war French occupation. Theodore Zeldin admitted it was ‘true that in 1914 there was little enthusiasm amongst them for reunion with France,’ in part because of the efficient local government enjoyed since the 1870s, and the generous social benefits that the Empire had made available to the region.\textsuperscript{36}

On the other hand, as Elizabeth Vlossak and others have shown, the rather brutal military rule of Alsace by the Germans during the war had not strengthened loyalty to the Empire, either. As in the Nord, the war had been cruel to Alsace-Lorraine, where civilian women suffered from starvation and martial law. Of greater concern in 1918 was what would become of those women who had married German men, or men of some other Central Powers nationality. A non-violent but thorough French campaign of ethnic purification followed the ‘liberation’ and continued into the 1920s.\textsuperscript{37}

French photographers, though, attempted to capture an idealized version of the France-loving, Alsatian woman and her gratitude. But in contrast to the hand-drawn compositions of Scott and others, the camera did not allow photographers as much control over their subjects’ comportment (Figure 2.25). Gushing captions sometimes had to make up for cool facial expressions. Although most women and girls of the region were surely thankful the war was finally over, it is possible that four years of hunger, violence and indigence made them less likely to smile in the face of a fresh occupation by what amounted to strangers. Yet, in the French posters, plays, children’s books and toys of the period, the figure of the traditional Alsatian girl had become the quintessential symbol of a mythic province that had been waiting for its French father/brother/husband to return. Photographers tried to produce images of

\begin{itemize}
\item[Ibid.]
\item For a full treatment of the \textit{épuration} of Alsace and Lorraine after its 1918 liberation, see Laird Boswell, ‘From Liberation to Purge Trials in the “Mythic Provinces”: Recasting French Identities in Alsace and Lorraine, 1918-1920,’ \textit{French Historical Studies}, 23 (2000), 129-62.
\end{itemize}
national (re-)union and rejoicing, even though the local population’s loyalties had been deeply divided.

Fig. 2.25: Photo illustration in Le Monde Illustré magazine (1918). The caption translates, ‘The Daughters of Alsace Welcome with Enthusiastic Affection Our Triumphant Soldiers.’

As in the photographs of evacuation, military management was an important theme in the images of reconquest. The prevalence of visualized male management extended to images of the home front and in the ruins, as in this photograph from Le Miroir (Figure 2.26) or another photograph from Le Monde Illustré (Figure 2.27). The caption for the first, Le Miroir photograph explained that the soldiers in the area were doing their best to help the women pick through the ruins of their homes and businesses. The soldiers and civilians, said the caption, ‘live as comrades
Fig. 2.26: Photo halftone illustration in *Le Miroir* magazine (1915), entitled ‘Those who have lived in the ruins for a year.’ The subtitle translates: ‘While the women work, the children share the soldiers’ mess kit meal.’
nearly a family, among the ruins and under bombardment, without fear, with a tranquil confidence.'\textsuperscript{38} The photographer showed the soldiers sharing their food with contented children. And yet, Tammy Proctor has reported that Allied soldiers who expected to be greeted with open arms by local civilians often ‘were surprised when they were treated with disdain, fear, or rudeness’ by people who ‘resented the loss of privacy, the drain on their resources, and the presence of sometimes inconsiderate men.’\textsuperscript{39} The language choices in the \textit{Miroir} caption merit further comment. The writer suggested both an inevitability to the unfortunate course of events, and a cooperative mood between the male soldiers and the female civilians. The caption thus presented the soldiers and civilians as partners in a kind of marriage, to which French women, barred from politics and the military as they were, never had the opportunity to consent.

The other photograph (Fig. 2.27), of a rural family in \textit{Le Monde Illustré}, shows a soldier, having lost part of a leg, reunited with his family in 1917. Despite his previous absence and his grave injury, the veteran holds the dominant position in the photograph, while the women sit with lowered gazes, their mouths partially covered with their hands. The magazine used this two-page spread not to comment on the shared sacrifices within the French family, as one might expect, but to announce explicitly the nation’s war goals (‘Nos Buts de Guerre’, reads the subtitle). The main thing, according to the writer, was to obtain reparations for damages, and this goal was gendered: ‘This farmer, for example, who, having been mutilated, has recovered his half-destroyed farm from invaded territory. Doesn’t he have the right to expect the reestablishment of his former prosperity?’ The writer’s question summarized one of the dominant concerns of the approaching post-war government, which was to restore the French man to his position of prosperity and authority. In the next chapter, we will see how photographers created a panorama of national consensus wherein male authority remained visible, even as women became their own breadwinners.

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{38} Anon., ‘Ceux Qui Vivent dans les Ruines Depuis un An,’ \textit{Le Miroir} (19 Sep. 1915), 13.}
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{39} Proctor, \textit{Civilians in a World at War}, p. 129.}
Fig. 2.27: Photo halftone illustration in *Le Monde Illustré* magazine (double-page spread), captioned, ‘Our War Aims: “The sanctioning of crimes, reparations for damages, obtaining guarantees against a return of offensive German militarism”: such are the conditions, announced by the Chamber and the Senate, of a durable peace. This farmer, for example, who, having been mutilated, has [now] recovered his half-destroyed farm from invaded territory. Doesn’t he have the right to expect the reestablishment of his former prosperity?’ (1917).
It’s during this tragic period, when all factions [in France] put down their arms in order to take them up again with enthusiasm against a common enemy, that feminism perished... the women, at one time haunted by ideas of emancipation, understood immediately the role that they were now called upon to play, the role that conforms to their natural mission, wherein only their two innate virtues can shine: devotion and charity.’ – François Peyrey (1914)

This chapter deals with a large category of French wartime images that I refer to as ‘devotional’, meaning, generally, images of feminine devotion to the soldiers and the national cause. This genre encompassed at least four categories of women: 1) female family members or girlfriends; 2) nurses, who might have either erotic or angelic incarnations; 3) the ‘godmother’ (marraine in French, i.e., the female sponsor); and 4) mourners in black, whether the widow or mother of the fallen. Images of these female types fed a craving, originating with state officials, soldiers and anxious civilians, for images of feminine adoration, approval and consent. Some images were also ‘devotional’ in the spiritual sense, evoking or prescribing the prayerfulness required for the maintenance of the union sacrée during the war.

The use of the word sacrée itself evokes religious significance. Annette Becker has argued that the war intensified the spiritual needs of the French, whether Catholic, non-believing, republican or monarchist. The quantity and popularity of images of female devotion shows us that the media industries of the day were responding to, not merely generating, a need or a social desire, which had Catholic and even pre-Christian roots. Images of women washing, tending to wounds or feeding soldiers evoked Marian associations and gratified deeply embedded notions of femininity

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1 François Peyrey, ‘La Femme française pendant la guerre,’ Excelsior, Sunday supplement (1 Nov. 1914), 7.
2 See Annette Becker, La guerre et la foi: de la mort à la mémoire 1914-1930 (Paris, 1994).
Image makers infused their work with traditional notions of women’s nature, as well as Catholic aesthetics.

(Figure 3.1). Image makers infused their work with traditional notions of women’s nature, as well as Catholic aesthetics.

Fig. 3.1: Agence Rol photograph captioned, ‘French woman offering milk to a wounded French soldier’ (1914). BNF/Gallica.

Within a spectrum ranging from the flirtatious (Figure 3.2) to the grandmotherly (Figure 3.3), the press flooded the print landscape with thousands of images reassuring soldiers, civilians and foreigners of French women’s affection for Allied soldiers and dedication to the national war effort. In one propaganda text, the author Gaston Rageot explained that women’s special genius was her love for others: ‘the devotion that burns in all of them… from the blushing virgin to the venerable grandmother,’ gave all women, according to Rageot, ‘the same zeal, the same tenderness – maternal tenderness.’ Whether maternal, virginal, or sexual, Rageot’s

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3 The Old Testament, too, depicts righteous women providing succor to men, such as Rebecca at the well and Hagar with Ishmael in the wilderness. Both subjects inspired artists from the Renaissance to the nineteenth century.

ideal of the devoted woman, preoccupied only with service to others, was perhaps an even more dominant theme in wartime photography than the woman-in-distress discussed in the previous chapter. Images of feminine devotion in French wartime photography occurred so frequently because they accomplished at least three important tasks: they appealed to bourgeois republican gender values, they reflected a deep-rooted, Catholic aesthetic/moral tradition, and they encouraged women to devote themselves to the war effort without expecting anything in return except, perhaps, reverence.

Fig. 3.2: Agence Meurisse photograph captioned, ‘May Day in Paris: a lucky lily [le muguet porte-bonheur]’ (1915). The French custom on May Day is to exchange lily-of-the-valley cuttings. BNF/Gallica.
Not every devotional image fell neatly into one of the four categories listed above (family members, nurses, godmothers or mourners). One recurring motif, for example, was women knitting socks and scarves to send to male relatives or to unknown soldiers at the front, or refugees knitting or sewing in their new wartime homes (Figure 3.4). There were many female knitting ‘circles’ during the war whose goal was to produce gloves, stockings and other warm accessories for a large population of soldiers unprepared for the first winter of the war. Knitting, whether in a private parlor or a public ouvroir (wartime workshop), was universally smiled upon as an appropriate female wartime activity, as well as a use of time that would supposedly keep newly alone or refugee women out of trouble.5

5 Although volunteer knitting was a popular image, Léon Abensour admitted that this wave of volunteerism had the effect of depriving some working-class women of paid employment in the manufacture of such garments. Léon Abensour, Les vaillantes: héroïnes, martyres et remplaçantes (Paris, 1917), p. 110.
Fig. 3.4: Photo halftone illustration in Le Monde Illustré magazine (1916), captioned, ‘A Lace Academy: these lace-makers – true artists of their delicate specialty – are refugees. They came fleeing from torment and the German hordes, to install themselves in this corner of Sèvres, where, peacefully, they maintain their delicate bobbins.’
Fig. 3.5: Cover engraving by J. Simont for *L’Illustration* magazine, captioned, ‘Knitting for the Combatants: in every French family, grandmothers, young daughters [and] little girls knit wool all day long while thinking of their valiant [soldiers], among whom they have a son, a brother or a father, who will soon feel the cold in their trenches!’ (1914). © *L’Illustration*.

Images of women knitting also evoked familiar historical associations of the first French Republic, artistic depictions of the expectant Virgin Mary, and the Homeric image of faithful Penelope at her loom. In the interests of preserving a precarious Sacred Union, almost everyone could agree on the desirability of women knitting. Wartime depictions included photographic and non-photographic representations, as in the popular magazines *L’Illustration* (here, Figure 3.5, as an engraving on the cover) and *Le Miroir* (Figure 3.6).
Fig. 3.6: Photo halftone illustrations in *Le Miroir* magazine entitled, ‘They Knit Everything for the Soldiers’ (1914). Top left-hand photo subtitled, ‘The Schoolgirls Doing Crochet in the Street;’ top right-hand photo subtitled, ‘The Daughters of the Grand-Duc Michel at Work’ (these were members of the Russian royal family); bottom-left hand photo subtitled, ‘[Female] Ambulance Drivers Knit in the Encampment;’ and bottom-right hand photo subtitled, ‘Nurses at Work in a Hospital’. The caption to the top-left hand photo begins, ‘From the humble little girl who frequents the “communale” [municipal primary school] to the elegant lady who was only yesterday idle, all the women of France have affirmed their patriotism by working for the soldiers.’
In order to offer a coherent account of wartime representations of devotion, we will focus on the four main categories mentioned, beginning with the soldier’s female family members. Innumerable images of wives, fiancées and mothers ‘keeping the home fires burning’ surely comforted many an infantryman far away from his own bed. Postcard publishers, in particular, thought it important to represent every family member, including fathers and grandfathers, as equally preoccupied with thoughts of their absent men (Figure 3.7). Although fathers and boys certainly appear in lots of these images, artists and photographers preferred to use female family members in images expressing personal devotion and

Fig. 3.7: French wartime postcard captioned, ‘Frenchmen, here is what you are defending!’ (n.d.). MHC/BDIC.
fidelity. Wives and sweethearts were perhaps most frequently represented, but sisters, daughters, aunts and grandmothers also appeared in a variety of media, writing letters, knitting, or simply dreaming of a reunion with the absent man. The image of prayer, especially little girls (one might say virgins) praying, became a popular motif (Figure 3.8).  

Fig. 3.8: French wartime postcard captioned, ‘What sadness is brought by war / Please protect my dear brother, O Lord’ (n.d.). MHC/BDIC.

These mass-produced cards had two main aims: to represent French women as having strong patriotic feelings and acting on them in condoned ways, and to transform the absent man into an object of worship within the family. Just as importantly, they showed women being sexually faithful to their husbands and boyfriends. Having studied a wide variety of French wartime postcards, Marie-Monique Huss concluded that many cards ‘offered to the husband who received them a reassuring vision of a faithful wife,’ collectively adding up to a critical ‘sentimental front’ of the war.7

Several scholars have shown that anxiety about the possibility of female infidelity during the war was a major concern.8 Image makers, then, had to show the woman being faithful (in other words, not cheating). To do that, photographers and artists came up with a number of techniques, including the use of models dressed and coiffed for make-believe tableaux. Studio photographers responded to soldiers’ anxiety by producing reassuring images of domestic women patiently waiting for a word or sign of their absent man. The Museum of Contemporary History in Paris holds several series of photographic postcards depicting pretty young women writing letters, reading letters, or dreaming of a reunion, all set in domestic interiors (Figures 3.9, 3.10, and 3.11).

7 Ibid., p. 222.
Fig. 3.9: French wartime postcard captioned (in idiomatic translation), ‘Hope Springs Eternal’ (n.d.). MHC/BDIC.

Fig. 3.10: French wartime postcard captioned, ‘Thoughts bring us closer’ (n.d.). MHC/BDIC.

Fig. 3.11: French wartime postcard captioned, ‘My daydreams carry me away’ (n.d.). MHC/BDIC.
We can see that these three cards are from the same series (they all carry the number ‘1099’), possibly from the same day of shooting in the studio. Two important components to the series were the insertion of a second negative into the composition (the male model in uniform), and the absence of any other objects that would indicate her involvement in any activity outside of daydreaming about her fiancé. She rests enraptured by the thought of his homecoming, a twentieth-century odalisque for respectable bourgeois tastes. We could imagine the series transformed into a piece of cinema of the era, where the damsel’s letter-reading is interrupted by exclamatory intertitles as in a silent film.

Postcards in this genre almost always included a ‘thought cloud’ above the female’s head with an image of the absent husband, son or brother, as in the following examples conveying the same tunnel-vision-like devotion by the female models (Figures 3.12 and 3.13). The latter card adds the image of the young child in military uniform, an image that was equally pervasive in French visual propaganda of the period. In this way, the soldier who received such a postcard from home could ‘see’ that it was he who was in the mind of the wife, girlfriend or fiancée who sent it. One senses some aesthetic tension between such sweet images of fidelity on the one hand, and saucier wartime images representing more scantily-clad, sexually loose females, as for example in the pages of *La Vie Parisienne*. But we can see from the various company logos in these examples, and Huss has affirmed this, that such images of home were not just the specialty of a few card publishers, but dozens if not hundreds of regional, national and international firms and distributors.
Fig. 3.12: French wartime postcard captioned, ‘At the hour that night falls, it is sweet to think of he who my heart cannot replace’ (n.d.). MHC/BDIC.

Fig. 3.13: French wartime postcard captioned, ‘Let’s pass our evenings working for the French and Allied Soldiers’ (n.d.). MHC/BDIC.
Another type of image in our ‘family’ category encouraged French women to marry returning soldiers, even (or especially) the unfortunates who were mutilated in the war (Figure 3.14). A postcard in the BDIC implies this social encouragement, without showing the deep wounds of war (Figure 3.15). Images of female family members or girlfriends during the period reinforced the widespread notion that the role of women in war time was to await the heroes’ return; to ‘subordinate their own needs and desires to those of their men;’ and to worship ‘at the foot

Fig. 3.14: Agence Meurisse photograph, captioned, ‘Wedding in the St. Jacques-du-Haut-Pas church of Lieutenant Pepelin, decorated with the Legion of Honor [after being] wounded during a reconnaissance [mission]’ (n.d.). BNF/Gallica.

of altars erected to honor male heroes.’ The image of women kneeling at altars was an important undercurrent in wartime visual culture, since in creating images of female devotion artists and photographers were

![Image](image.jpg)

Fig. 3.15: French wartime postcard captioned ‘Among so many heroes, make your choice’ (n.d.). Original card has curled owing to atmospheric conditions over time. MHC/BDIC.

stressing the need for supplication, as in the following image of women and children praying for food during the war (Figure 3.16). Is it going too far to suggest an implied demand that women repent for what had been

their ‘sins’ of the pre-war period? Susan Grayzel and others have argued that not only did French women have to atone for their pre-war frivolity and pride, but also assume ‘an unredeemable debt to the soldiers who had

![Image](image_url)

**Fig. 3.16: Unattributed photograph in the collection of the U.S. Food Administration captioned, ‘French women and children pray for food’ (1917-1919). NARA.**

saved them and the nation.’11 A French war bond poster illustrated by Alcide Robaudi depicts a variety of civilians making offerings to the altar of the nation, represented, ironically, by two female figures, La Marseillaise and Marianne (Figure 3.17). The poster shows that women were not necessarily ‘singled out’ as the only ones owing tribute or repentance. But if all French civilians were somehow guilty of sinful behavior, as soldiers and the clergy occasionally pronounced them to be,12 then French women were, following this logic, the guiltiest of all. Their pre-war sin of pride, and accusations of wartime profiteering and infidelity, made it especially important that women demonstrate their

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Fig. 3.17: French wartime poster illustrated by Alcide Robaudi, entitled, ‘Second Bond Campaign for National Defense’ (1916). U.S. Library of Congress.

virtue and their patriotism. Unable to pay the terrible debt to the men who ‘died en masse defending their women and children,’ French women would, by and large, not press their pre-war political agenda after the war, acquiescing instead to the veteran-focused ‘Blue Horizon Chamber.’

Léon Abensour devoted an entire chapter as apologia for French feminists, to show his readers the extent of their patriotic devotion, and their abandonment of ‘selfish’ aims. Abensour, Les vaillantes, pp. 95-119 (‘L’Action féministe’).

During the war, tens of thousands of French women chose to service this debt by becoming volunteer nurses. The image of the uniformed nurse was perhaps the most common, and most popular, feminine image during the war. So quintessential was the nurse to the meaning of wartime femininity (we might add: on an international basis) that Darrow has asserted that the image of ‘the begrimed, bloody, unshaven poilu, paired with the clean, solicitous nurse, white-robed with a red cross on her veil’ were the symbols of masculine and the feminine in wartime guise.\(^\text{15}\) Although unnecessary for hygiene, French nurses wore long white headdresses and robes and were sometimes depicted in quasi-mater dolorosa poses (Figure 3.18).

Fig. 3.18: French wartime postcard with artwork entitled, ‘The sweetheart’s photo’ (in English and French). The ‘photo’ refers to the dying soldier’s photograph of his fiancée, held in his right hand. By including the ‘photo’ in addition to the figures of the nurse and the nun, the artist reminded female viewers that soldiers were dying for them. MHC/BDIC.

In lithographic posters, nurses often appeared rouged and pretty, whereas photographed nurses appeared more plain, proper and chaste, whether virginal or matronly. Joining artists and fiction writers, photographers embraced the nurse as a comforting, devoted figure (Figure 3.19). Léon

Fig. 3.19: Photo halftone illustration in *Le Monde Illustré* magazine (1916), captioned, ‘HÔPITAL LUTETIA – Mme Ed. Desfossés, president of the French Ladies’ Committee of l’Isle-Adam, who came to install her ambulance at the Hotel Lutetia, assisting a convalescent making his first steps.’

Abensour, himself a feminist, described how the presence of nurses gave to the soldiers:

the momentary illusion of a family [member], finding *in her image*, their mothers, their sisters, their fiancées. And often these *cherished images* symbolize for them the
entire nation for which one is fighting and with which you console yourself when they have died.\textsuperscript{16}

Abensour was referring to the nursing volunteers, but perhaps the images of these women, whether photographic, artistic, or in the mind’s eye, were even more important as symbols. His book, \textit{Les vaillantes: héroïnes, martyres et remplaçantes} (1917) itself featured several photo illustrations of volunteer nurses, including the frontispiece.

As a fantasy figure of clean, soft, caring femininity, what made the nurse-character so popular with moralizing writers was that she offered total devotion without demanding the salary, recognition or position that she was reasonably owed.\textsuperscript{17} The International Red Cross required ‘spirituality, self-abnegation and perfect submission to authority’ in its (female) applicants.\textsuperscript{18} Competent but entirely unthreatening, the nurse or nurse-like personnel was singled out for praise by the state and the military, and photographers attended decoration ceremonies to capture the official commendations.\textsuperscript{19} The theater, too, was full of war nurse characters who acted out the devotional ideal for Parisian audiences. In 1915, a photo-spread in \textit{La Vie Parisienne} featured portraits of actresses donning their nurse costumes for their roles on stage (Figure 3.20).

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{16} Abensour, \textit{Les vaillantes}, p. 94 (italics are mine).
\item \textsuperscript{17} Françoise Thébaud reported that during the war military health services employed 70,000 volunteer nurses, and 30,000 paid nurses. Thus it would seem that the army relied on unpaid female labor. Thébaud, ‘Work, Gender, and Identity in Peace and War: France, 1890-1930’ in Billie Melman, ed., \textit{Borderlines: Genders and Identities in War and Peace, 1870-1930} (New York, 1998), p. 405. Jean-Yves Le Naour reported that of the 100,000 French women, in total, employed as nurses during the war, 30,000 alone received a salary: Le Naour, \textit{Misères}, p. 75.
\item \textsuperscript{19} See, for example, ‘Les Premières Françaises Décorées sur le Front des Troupes’ in \textit{Fémina} (1 Apr. 1914), 19; the Red Cross delegation pictured in ‘Les Obsèques Nationale des Victimes du Zeppelin’ in \textit{Le Monde Illustré} (12 Feb. 1916), 101; ‘Une Héroïque Infirmière: Mlle Yolande de Baye’ in \textit{Le Miroir} (9 Sep. 1917), 14; and also ‘Quelques-Undes de Nos Vaillantes Infirmières’ in \textit{Le Miroir} (21 Mar. 1915), 15.
\end{itemize}
And yet, Darrow has also shown that the French public (specifically, male critics and writers of both sexes) held ambivalent feelings about women’s rush to volunteer as nurses. The ‘false nurse’ or ‘fashion-plate nurse’, it was said, arrived at the hospital ‘in a limousine, dripping with jewelry and self-importance.’

20 Male journalists described a

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female type who volunteered in order to ‘serve her own ambitions, to increase her social capital and political clout, to fill her empty hours, and to pursue sexual pleasure.’ \(^{21}\) Gabriel Perreux remembered the term ‘snobinettes’, used to describe the girls who volunteered because they liked the uniforms (Figure 3.21). \(^{22}\) In wartime fiction and non-fiction, women were accused of wanting to join the Red Cross as a status symbol.

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\(^{21}\) Ibid.  
or to find romance, rather than taking this tough job seriously. Whereas the ‘true nurse’ was characterized by ‘selflessness, devotion and asexuality’, the ‘false nurse’ was frivolous and undependable.  

But although opinion on female nurses varied, photographers never tired of recording nurses near the front and around Paris. Cloaked in their long white garments, wartime nurses harkened back to religious images of female saints, which had been mass-produced throughout France during the period. In the decades preceding the war, books and images of modern holy women, such as Bernadette of Lourdes and Thérèse of Lisieux, had reaffirmed the Catholic ideal of feminine self-abnegation. In that context, the Virgin Mary provided, as always, the ideal example of ‘women’s designated role of care, domesticity and resignation’. Professor Abensour compared women’s resignation to the needs of war to ‘the desolation of the Virgin of the Calvary.’ It is reasonable to imagine that French photographers, too, may have had Mary, Bernadette, Thérèse or other popular female saints in mind when photographing wartime nurses.

One Agence Meurisse image (Figure 3.22) shows a nurse tending dutifully to the foot of a wounded soldier, reminding us, perhaps, of Mary of Bethany or Mary Magdalene in the New Testament. In pre-war religious painting, all three Marys provided models of devotion and, more importantly, humility. We can make a comparison between the Meurisse agency photograph and, for example, a seventeenth-century French painting by Vignon, depicting Mary anointing Christ’s feet (Figure 3.23). The purpose of the comparison is not to suggest that the photographer (whose identity is unknown) was mimicking that particular painting; but rather to emphasize the fact that centuries of Christian, academic and local art had surrounded the men who became wartime photographers in

23 Darrow, ‘French Volunteer Nursing,’ 90.
26 Thomson, Troubled Republic, p. 123.
27 Abensour, Les vaillantes, p. 23.
Fig. 3.22: Agence Meurisse photograph captioned, ‘Gare du Nord: Belgian and English wounded being cared for by nurses’ (1914). BNF/Gallica.

Fig. 3.23: Claude Vignon, ‘Christ in the House of Simon the Pharisee’ (c. 1635). Musée des Beaux-Arts, Dunkirk. Digital image available at Wikigallery.org for non-commercial use.
France, via illustrated books, churches, permanent and traveling exhibitions, or in the context of their pre-war training. Some nurses died while performing their duties, either by contracting illnesses or getting caught in deadly bombardments, and occasionally these women received high praise in the newspapers as modern-day martyrs (Figure 3.24). Mademoiselle Lère, a midwife who

Fig. 3.24: Photo halftone illustrations in *Le Monde Illustré* magazine (1916). The five portraits are of nurses who died of communicable diseases or, in one case, ‘overwork’, while serving their patients near the front lines. The center image shows ‘Mme B’ (full name not given), being awarded the Croix de Guerre.

28 See also Georges de La Tour’s painting, ‘Saint Sebastian Attended by Saint Irene’ (c.1649), hanging in the Louvre. The Roman widow Irene cared for the soldier Sebastian after he was shot with arrows for his Christian activities. She healed him, but later he would finally die as a martyr.
was mortally wounded during the bombardment of a Parisian maternity ward in 1918, received the Croix de Guerre after her death. A photo of her lying in state appeared in *Le Miroir*, one of the few wartime photographs of a French woman in that magazine.\(^{29}\)

In light of such images, which appeared across French media during the period, one may wonder which was more important to the French war effort: the idealized images of female self-sacrifice, or the actual female volunteers? In writing about the deaths and illnesses of nurses in the field, Professor Abensour asserted that these women justified Michelet’s description of France as the ‘Christ of nations.’\(^{30}\) While the opportunities for participation were certainly important to the women who took them, for the nation’s photographers, artists and other propagandists the idealized image of female self-sacrifice seems to have been even more important.

There was a sub-category of nurse images in France that showed female volunteers attending to French African soldiers, though such images were most often non-photographic, and could court controversy (Figures 3.25-3.27).\(^{31}\) Despite the racial anxiety that such images could provoke, they nevertheless enhanced the nurse’s reputation for selfless devotion (the assumption being that lavishing affection on a black man was a charitable act). They also fulfilled the propagandists’ need to present African troops as loyal, enthusiastic French soldiers. The image of the black soldier and the white nurse complemented many prints and photographs of the period that featured the imperial panoply of colonial troops supporting the French war effort.


\(^{31}\) On French racial anxiety during WWI, see Richard S. Fogarty, ‘Race and Sex, Fear and Loathing in France during the Great War,’ *Historical Reflections*, 34 (2008), 50-72.
Fig. 3.25: Illustrated advertisement in *Le Monde Illustré* magazine for the remedy Urodonal (1916).

Fig. 3.26: Photo halftone illustration in Henry P. Davison, *The American Red Cross in the Great War* (1919), captioned, ‘A Senegalese soldier who has lost both arms, writing to thank the American Red Cross for his new pair of artificial arms.’
Our third category of devoted women was composed of soldiers’ sponsors, called marraines in French. Based on the Catholic tradition of godparents, the role of the marraine de guerre arrived in the spring of 1915, in order to pair women with soldiers who lacked family with whom to correspond. This idea was picked up by several charity organizations and papers (most infamously in the saucy classified advertisements of La Vie Parisienne). But although a minority of cases resulted in what we might today call ‘hook-ups’, the purpose of marrainage was to ensure that the soldier at the front had a source of morale-boosting letters, parcels and even a home to visit while on leave. A female sponsor was especially
appreciated when the soldier was without relations, or temporarily cut off from his family in the occupied Nord. Like nursing, *marrainage* provided French women with a way to express their patriotism. But unlike nursing, anyone could become a sponsor with no training whatsoever.

There was not one idealized *marraine* figure but multiple ones. She could be rich or humble, maternal, grandmotherly, sexy, or a little girl. Gabriel Perreux noted that they came from every class of society, and often *marraine* and *filleul* (godson) never saw each other face-to-face. As noted above, they might exchange portraits of each other, and sometimes they were lucky enough to meet when the soldier was invited to dine during his *permission* (leave). Images of *marraines* were rare in the periodical press or in official collections of wartime photographs, but they were a popular subject in wartime postcards, both photographic and artistic. Their favor among postcard designers was in part owing to the fantasias they stoked. They provided desirable images for soldiers at the front who were starved of feminine company.

Publishers employed a mishmash of hand-drawn and photo-based images to depict *marraines* and their soldiers. A series of postcards might represent different species of *marraines*, as for example in cartoons featuring the opposite extremes of young girl and old woman for comedic effect (Figures 3.28 and 3.29), or an image that combined traits of a young girl and an old lady (Figure 3.30).

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32 Perreux, *La vie quotidienne*, p. 35.
33 The first meeting between *marraine* and *filleul* was occasionally a subject for the caricaturists, who depicted the soldier dreaming of a pretty young woman, then encountering, to his shock, an ancient matron.
Fig. 3.28: Postcard illustration by Geo. Desain captioned, ‘Your grrrande marraine, it’s me!’ (n.d.). The French word *grande* can imply big, great or tall, the joke being that when the girl described herself as tall in a letter, she may have neglected to mention her age. MHC/BDIC.

Fig. 3.29: Postcard illustration from a series entitled, ‘Marraines et Poilus’ by Leroy (n.d.). MHC/BDIC.
Fig. 3.30: Illustrated postcard by Croissant entitled, ‘The Poilu’s little Marraine’ (n.d.) with the caption, ‘And I too will go “Until the very end!”’ The phrase ‘Jusqu’au bout!’ became a slogan for the French war effort, and here the little girl applies it to her knitting project. MHC/BDIC.

Alternatively, a designer might place an image of a well-off, attractive marraine among several women that the soldier is fantasizing about, as in the postcard entitled ‘Le Rêve du Poilu’ (Figure 3.31). Next to his dream of a lusty lover who ‘flees the camp during reveille’ (center), and a plump, apron-wearing matron ready to cook and clean for him, the ‘Article de Paris’ (left-hand figure) referred both to the sophisticated marraine and the present she is holding for him. Such a card also illustrated the fact that some sly poilus ‘collected’ sponsors, in order to receive care packages more frequently.
Fig. 3.31: Illustrated postcard entitled, ‘The Dream of the Poilu’ (n.d.). The first female figure on the left is captioned, ‘The Marraine: Article de Paris’, meaning a sophisticated product of Paris; the center figure in lingerie is captioned, ‘The Adored! The one who flees camp when it’s time to wake up!’ And the third figure is captioned, ‘The Bourgeoise: Household Article’, implying the woman who will cook and clean for him. MHC/BDIC.

When *marraine* images were photographic rather than ink-based, the photographer had usually hired models to play the parts of the attractive *marraine* and the appreciative soldier, as in postcards like this one held at the BDIC (Figure 3.32), or this one from the municipal archives in Mussy-sous-Dun (Bourgogne) (Figure 3.33). These photomontages, though, have been so transformed by retouching and coloration as to negate almost any photorealism. As with so many wartime images of women, photographers sought to capture the fantasy rather than the reality.

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34 Digitized postcards from Mussy-sous-Dun are available at [http://www.decouvrezmussy.org/rubrique%20histoire/cartespostales.html](http://www.decouvrezmussy.org/rubrique%20histoire/cartespostales.html)
Fig. 3.32: Postcard illustrated with colorized photographic images by Cecil (n.d.). ‘La Marraine’ on the left says in the caption, ‘My dear Godson, I hope that my little package will give you pleasure…’ To which the ‘Godson’ replies on the right, ‘Oh! My dear Marraine, how you spoil me!’ MHC/BDIC.

Fig. 3.33: Photo-illustrated postcard by ‘J. K.’ entitled, ‘The dream of the Chasseur’ (postmark is 1916). Municipal Archives of Mussy-sous-Dun (Bourgogne).
Regardless of whether marraine images were photographic or sketched, or whether they featured domestic or sensual female figures, they all responded to a craving for female devotion. ‘Emma Bovary herself has become a godmother to the soldiers,’ asserted Léon Abensour in 1917, insisting that the most frivolous, self-centered women of the pre-war years saw the light when the war arrived, and now ‘fulfill [their] very high and very feminine mission.’ The marraine was not only devoted to the comfort and morale of ‘her’ soldier, she was by implication devoted to ‘the cause’. Just as they depicted the fiancée or nurse, artists and photographers represented the marraine not as a woman with her own life and concerns, but as someone thinking only about the soldiers – morning, noon or night. And although some voices in the military feared that seductive marraines could act as spies for the enemy, the female sponsor remained ‘the soul of the union sacrée,’ as important for her symbolic power as for the packages that she sent to the soldiers or prisoners of war in her care.

If the proper activities of French women during war were ‘waiting, praying, and grieving,’ then it comes as no surprise that images of mourning became a major category of female representation during the First World War, our last category in this chapter. As with the image of nursing, the depiction of the mourning widow or mother preoccupied traditional artists as well as photographers. Both nursing and mourning imagery reflected a long and deep French aesthetic tradition of depicting la vierge de pitié (Virgin of Compassion) and a variety of female saints. Likewise, widows were frequently recorded in their long, black mourning gowns, their faces or figures obscured by dark veils (Figures 3.34-3.35). Richard Thomson has observed that even before the war, in the midst of a rapidly secularizing republic, ‘the Virgin provided the perfect example’ of the feminine resignation demanded of women’s lives.

35 Abensour, Les vaillantes, p. 28.
36 Darrow, French Women and the First World War, p. 273.
37 Thébaud, La femme au temps de la guerre de 14, p. 143.
38 Darrow, ‘French Volunteer Nursing,’ 82.
Fig. 3.34: Colored photo halftone illustration in the Catholic magazine *Le Pèlerin* (1917). The caption translates, ‘Don’t cry, darling, we’ll see them again in heaven!’

Fig. 3.35: Poster illustration by Louis Rémy Sabattier entitled ‘Merci!’ (1919). Here the sketched widow is a Marianne figure wearing both the Phrygian cap and mourning. U.S. Library of Congress.
Although the Third Republic had taken decisive actions against the clergy,⁴⁰ large portions of the population remained faithful, and even freethinkers had grown up surrounded by images of female piety. Reverence for Mary the *mater dolorosa*, then, had never left France, and the casualties of war elevated her to new heights of popularity. Mary-as-model-of-deportment remained visible in both visual and literary media during the war, and women who were believers found some comfort in her example. Some artists made explicit connections between female mourners and the Mother of God, as in the postcard illustration here by de Caunes (Figure 3.36). The popular artist George Scott, too, created a

![Illustrated postcard](image)

**Fig. 3.36:** Illustrated postcard from a series entitled ‘La Guerre’ (n.d.). This card’s subtitle is ‘Mater Dolorosa’. MHC/BDIC.

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⁴⁰ For example, legislation like the French law of 1901, which closed the establishments of non-authorized religious congregations; the law of 1904, which stripped religious congregations of the right to teach school; and the law of 1905, which formally separated Church and State. Accompanying this last law was the decree of 29 Dec. 1905, which ordered a national inventory of Church property.
picture for *L'Illustration* featuring an old mother being guided by a Marianne figure to the body of her dead son. Photographers made their own connections between feminine mourning and patriotism, as in this 1916 photograph from the daily *Excelsior*, showing army representatives awarding medals to the widows and mothers of the dead (Figure 3.37); and another photograph showing a widow giving a bouquet to President Poincaré just after the war (Figures 3.38). Such images illustrated growing opinion that the woman who had lost a son, husband or both had made a sacrifice as close as possible to the soldier who sacrificed his own life on the field of battle.

![Image](image.jpg)

Fig. 3.37: Photo halftone illustration in *Excelsior* magazine entitled, ‘The Croix de Morts’ (1916). The caption read, ‘At the Invalides on Thursday, as we reported, an imposing display of arms where glorious citations were on the agenda and several Croix de Guerre awarded to the families of soldiers fallen for the fatherland.’
In a psychological analysis of wartime grieving, Stéphanie Petit asserted that the mortality rate of the First World War produced a cult of perpetual mourning in France, lasting throughout the interwar years. Grieving women becoming pseudo-priestesses, chained (virtually) to the shrines for the deceased ‘heroes’, rather than moving on with their own lives.\footnote{Stéphanie Petit, ‘Le deuil des veuves de la Grande Guerre: un deuil spécifique?’, \textit{Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporains}, 198 (2000), 63-4.} This ‘secular religion of justification’ for the soldiers’ deaths necessitated female devotion rather than, Petit pointed out, a complete and healthy grieving process.\footnote{Ibid., 64. Daniel J. Sherman added that visible mourning, whether in the dress/behavior of women or as elements of war monuments, represented ‘a tribute paid by women to men.’ See Sherman, ‘Monuments, Mourning and Masculinity in France after World War I,’ \textit{Gender \& History}, 8 (1996), 98.} Widows then became objects of anxious public management: should women honor the memory of the fallen hero by
foregoing remarriage? Or, was it their duty to remarry in order to contribute to the country’s repopulation after the war, or simply to provide spousal comfort to a veteran of the trenches? Official organizations were formed after the war to encourage each of those different paths for widows.43

With a total of six hundred thousand widows by the war’s end, the sheer number of mourners likely produced a spectrum of behaviors, from the perpetually pious to the suddenly emancipated.44 Regardless of the inevitable variety of women’s responses to the death of intimates, photographers and filmmakers insisted on representing them as uniformly selfless. In 1917, for example, Sarah Bernhardt starred in the silent film, Mothers of France, in which the celebrated stage actress played a well-to-do woman who loses both her husband and her only son in the war. Dressed in black mourning, the last scene of the movie shows her having shifted her devotion to the village school teacher, who has returned from the war permanently blind and requiring an assistant.

As with marraines de guerre, mourning women could be any age. The case of Mademoiselle Emilienne Moreau deserves special attention here, owing to the large amount of space devoted to her and her image in the periodical press of the day. Moreau, who was a pretty teenager during the war, gained fame in 1915 when the army awarded her the Croix de Guerre for defending the wounded at Loos. The combination of her bold resistance to German invasion, her youth, her nursing role and her black mourning made her irresistible to the French press. Le Monde Illustré, Le Petit Parisien, Fémina, J’ai vu, and other publications all featured photos of her (Figures 3.39 and 3.40).

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Fig. 3.39: Photo halftone illustration in *Le Miroir* magazine entitled, ‘Mlle Emilienne Moreau, the Heroine of Loos, cited for the Order of the Army’ (1916).

The caption explained that for a year, ‘in invaded Loos, the young Emilienne Moreau, aged 17, earned, by her determination, the respect even of our enemies.

Her father, a metal works overseer, died of grief. In September, during the English attack, she hid in her attic, assisting with the assault and rushed ahead of the English in order to guide them. Menaced by the Germans, she killed five of them with grenade hits and a revolver.’

Fig. 3.40: Photo halftone illustration in *Le Monde Illustré* magazine (1916). Artists were sketching and painting Moreau in preparation for the composition of ‘Le Panthéon de la Guerre’, a panoramic French mural depicting personages of the war, now displayed in the U.S. National World War I Museum in Kansas City, MO.
Le Miroir made Emilienne Moreau its cover girl for the 28 November 1915 edition of the magazine, the only time a French woman was depicted by herself on that magazine’s wartime covers. Besides the military decoration, Moreau was chosen to be included in the ‘Panthéon de la Guerre’, an enormous panorama of Allied war figures painted by twenty-eight French artists over the course of the entire war. Moreau was one of the very few identifiable women in the painting, along with Edith Cavell, the British nurse-martyr. Moreau became a national celebrity. The image of the virgin in black – mourning her father and her elder brother, their home in Loos destroyed by bombardment – captivated a media industry addicted to images of female self-sacrifice. Le Miroir and Le Petit Parisien shared the publication of her ‘memoirs’, which were illustrated with photographs of her home and the heroine seated at a desk as an accidental author.

Hitting all the right notes in her testimony (i.e., explicit hatred for the Germans, reference to avenging the defeat of 1870, a brother sacrificed, etc.), Moreau’s story and images were used to boost national morale at a time when the war was supposed to have been over already. Yet her celebrity showed that although French propagandists adored token figures whose gallantry reminded the public of Joan of Arc, that same public could not imagine granting French women systemic opportunities to assist the military, as were granted in Britain. Marie de la Hire, a feminist artist of the day, wrote approvingly that military recruitment prevented ‘the intrusion of women in the ranks: we can’t envisage the reality of a woman infantryman or cavalry soldier: impossibility of mores, of character, of relations.’ Moreau’s story, and perhaps one or two other tales of exceptional feminine valor during the period, was publicized as an example of naïve dedication, not women’s untapped ability, and willingness, to fight.

The painters combined the use of photographic portraits and live models for the project. On the design, painting and tour of the Panthéon de la Guerre, see Anon., Panthéon de la Guerre: Cyclorama of the World War and its Heroes (Chicago: A Century of Progress Exhibition, 1933); and Mark Levitch, Panthéon de la Guerre: Reconfiguring a Panorama of the Great War (Columbia, MO, 2006).


Each of the figures discussed in this chapter – fiancée, nurse, godmother, or widow – combined maternal and virginal traits, pleasing to devout or latent Catholic tastes in a nation defending itself against ‘barbarian’ invaders whose first targets appeared to be Catholic monuments. Feminine devotion appealed equally to secular, republican sensibilities; and the wartime photography of women shows us how both the religious revival during the war and republican nationalism framed the visual culture. A common ingredient in the popularity of all these devoted female types was their apparent willingness to make enormous sacrifices while expecting little in return. This quality also appeared in photographs of female laborers, the subject of the next chapter. As with women’s devotion, this ‘willingness’ of female laborers to endure difficult working conditions, highlighted so often by photographers, concealed unease and discontent below the surface.

48 The Germans’ burning of the Catholic University of Louvain’s library occurred on 25 Aug. 1914, and the first bombardment of Reims Cathedral occurred on 20 Sep. French photographers produced hundreds of images of ruined Catholic statues of Jesus, Mary and assorted saints throughout the war, frequently noting the ‘miraculous’ survival of a crucifix or Virgin Mary statue.

49 When the French Senate refused to grant women the vote after the war, one senator commented in a 1919 speech, ‘In any case, if we are divided over the question of votes for women, this is a point on which we are unanimous... that’s to give homage to the great qualities of heart, intelligence and devotion of the French woman.’ Quoted in Susan Grayzel, *Women’s Identities at War: Gender, Motherhood, and Politics in Britain and France during the First World War* (Chapel Hill, 1999), p. 221 (italics added).
Toil

‘Vivent les Françaises! Their husbands are at the front, and they all want to work, and it’s really heroic, how they give their sweat at the cheapest price. That’s really sublime.’ – Marcelle Capy (1916)

By 1916, the French state had realized that more female labor would be required if the army was to have the quantity of matériel that could, ultimately, wear the Germans down. Therefore, ‘it had become official government policy to substitute women workers for absent men wherever possible,’ including chemical industries, transport and, most famously, munitions factories. Rural women, having always been ‘crucial to the running of a peasant farm,’ replaced their absent men in the fields just as they had always done in the event of their husbands’ temporary absences, illnesses or deaths. Within the operational zones, military resistance to the presence of female health workers gradually had to be abandoned. Professor Gaston Rageot proudly proclaimed in 1918 that the war had brought women (‘la Femme,’ as he put it) into national life, and looked forward to women earning wages equal to their male counterparts. Unfortunately, Rageot’s theory that ‘in serving France women serve their own cause’ was to prove illusory. Most of the professional gains made by women during the war were strictly temporary. Although the bulk of working-class women continued working for pay after the war, high-skill, prestige jobs in industry, and the civic powers of authority that had been

3 Ibid.
granted to middle-class women, would revert to being masculine entitlements after 1918.\footnote{6} As temporary remplaçantes during the war, though, women filled a broad spectrum of positions, from the new childcare workers employed in war production plants, to, in one case, a government advisor (Jeanne Tardy, attaché in the Ministry of Finance). Since the 1980s, scholars such as Françoise Thébaud, Laura Lee Downs and Susan Grayzel have done much to bring French female workers’ wartime contributions to light.\footnote{7} ‘This war differed from previous wars,’ wrote Margaret Higonnet, ‘in the roles that were publicly accepted for women,’ sometimes unprecedented in France.\footnote{8} Accepted, but not without ambivalence. Male journalists wrote nervously about the temporary necessity of women in heavy industry, and some soldiers on leave complained of the new, boyish appearance of women.\footnote{9} French men of all classes expressed anxiety about the greater public visibility and independence of middle-class women. They worried that women’s activities outside the home would lead to immorality and infidelity. Nicole Dombrowski has described ‘an obsession of sorts (a form of male hysteria) over women’s real or perceived sexual promiscuity’ during the war.\footnote{10} So although the war was meant to reaffirm traditional gender identities, women’s mobilization led to fears of their ‘masculinization’ and, as Mary Louise Roberts pointed out, a blurring of sex roles and identities.

\footnote{8}{Margaret Higonnet, ed., \textit{Lines of Fire: Women Writers of World War I} (New York, 1999), p. 225.}
\footnote{9}{Colette captured the male discomfort with the wartime appearance of women in the sketch ‘Modes,’ in her wartime collection, \textit{Les heures longues} (Paris, 1917), pp. 69-75.}
\footnote{10}{Nicole Dombrowski, ed., \textit{Women and War in the Twentieth Century: Enlisted With or Without Consent} (New York, 1999), p. 19.}
Soldiers also worried that women’s competence and independence would render them (men) redundant once they returned home – a concern that resulted in the polite but firm request in 1918 that women workers give up their posts to the returning men, go back to the home, and make babies.¹¹ A poster produced by the Cinematic Section of the French Army in 1917 used the art of George Capon to show that while the French woman might assist in heavy industry and agriculture, maternity remained her central duty to the nation (Figure 4.1). Whether

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Fig. 4.1: Poster created by the Section Cinématographique de l’Armée Française and artist Georges Capon, with an English title (1917). U.S. Library of Congress.

¹¹ In large part, the envisioned retreat from paid work did not occur and women continued working outside the home, albeit shifting to light industries in the 1920s. Laura Lee Downs explained the trend in *Manufacturing Inequality*. On the ‘demobilization’ of women workers, see Mathilde Dubesset, Françoise Thébaud and Catherine Vincent, ‘The Female Munitions Workers of the Seine’ in Patrick Fridenson, ed., *The French Home Front, 1914-1918* (Providence, 1992), p. 208. Often employers dismissed them first: see Daniel J. Sherman, ‘Monuments, Mourning and Masculinity in France after World War I,’ *Gender & History*, 8 (1996), 85.
Catholic or republican, the French image-maker ‘particularly applauded the self-sacrificing woman who managed to be both a wage-earner and a good mother,’ Judith Coffin pointed out. Just as language embedded in text has gendered the domain of work, so too did images, embedded in France’s periodicals, archival records and public visual culture, prescribe gender ideals. During World War I, the work performed by photographs, arguably even more than the traditional arts, was to provide uncomplicated models, and evidence, of French women’s patriotic work ethic in the factory and in the fields. But, as we know from feminist leaders of the period like Jeanne Alexandre, Marcelle Capy and Madeleine Pelletier, there were thousands of women dissatisfied with both their working conditions and their inability to control their reproductive function. Prescriptive images, therefore, remained contested throughout the war by individuals, mainly women, who were marginalized by the state or the military.

In taking on the project of visualizing the home front, how did photographers know how to represent mobilized female labor? Coming from a variety of walks of life before the war, French photographers had been exposed to multiple aesthetic traditions. Their visual-cultural experiences may have included the Realist masterpieces of Edouard Manet and Gustave Courbet, and/or more conventional academic painting, nineteenth century photographic portraiture and the sacred art of France’s churches. In large part, photographs of female mobilization complemented the other images of devotion described in Chapter Three (e.g., my discussion of nurses therein). Newspapers, magazines and other illustrated outlets depicted female workers as content, diligent patriots, cheerful protégés working under their male superiors. Feminist activists had pointed out before the war that the extreme disparity between men’s and women’s wages was due to the ‘belief that feminine virtue consisted of

13 The socialist-feminist Jeanne Alexandre (1890-1980) lent her name to the BDIC’s collection of papers on activist women of World War I (F delta réz 334 Dossier Jeanne Alexandre, at Nanterre). The papers and documents relating to the trial of the socialist-pacifist Hélène Brion are included in that collection. On Madeleine Pelletier, see Felicia Gordon, *The Integral Feminist – Madeleine Pelletier, 1874-1939: Feminism, Socialism, and Medicine* (Minneapolis, 1990). And on labor conditions at the time, see Marcelle Capy, ‘La femme à l’usine’ in *La Voix des femmes*, 28 Nov. and 5, 12, 19 Dec. 1917, and 2 Jan. 1918.
resignation and martyred self-sacrifice.' This same idea of ‘natural’ feminine self-abnegation characterized much of the wartime photography showing the mobilization of women.

There was another dynamic at work, first observed by Margaret Higonnet in her edited volume *Lines of Fire: Women Writers of World War I* (New York, 1999). Higonnet pointed out that the circumstances of the war threatened to replace the dominant male gaze (with its object traditionally being the female body) with a new *female* gaze, arising with the spectacle of men’s mobilization in 1914, the clinical experiences of wartime nurses, and civilian women’s consumption of media behind the lines. Suddenly, men’s bodies became the new focus of attention, and as the war went on, these were often damaged bodies. For commercial and official photographers, all of whom were male in France, their photographic representations of female workers and volunteers worked to counter, if not reverse, that uncomfortable, new female gaze. This male counter-gaze was especially apparent in photographic images of actresses and other female performers (Figures 4.2 and 4.3), where the eroticized *poilue* became the prototypical pinup. As we will see below, the photographic inventory of new female jobs in public space reestablished the male prerogative to look.

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14 Coffin, *Politics of Women’s Work*, p. 238. Coffin was paraphrasing the argument of French feminist Marie Bonnevial, who argued for greater wage parity before the war. Incidentally, according to the French Federation of Human Rights, Bonnevial ended her days in 1918 when she was run over by a military ambulance.

15 Whereas *poilu* was the nickname given to French soldiers during the period, the feminized *poilue* refers to a sexy female figure in military drag (also, I believe, specific to the period).
Fig. 4.2: Photo halftone illustrations of Parisian actresses in *La Vie Parisienne* magazine (1915). The subtitle, ‘Les Soldats Alliés au Feu... de la Rampe,’ is a pun combining the sense of Allied soldiers being under fire (on the battlefield) and the actresses dressed as soldiers being under the flame of the stage lights.
Photographic images of women at work, then, had themselves much work to perform. They had to convince Allied and neutral countries of France’s total commitment to victory,¹⁶ allay fears that large numbers of women in the workplace would result in public immorality or ‘gender trouble’, and reassure soldiers and civilians that female labor was simply patriotic, untainted by professional ambition.

At the same time, wartime photographs of female munitions workers reflected a generally (though not unanimously) positive public reaction to seeing women in novel positions: a mixture of avuncular

¹⁶ The Ministry of War and Office of the Press sent images of French women in the munitions factories and on the farms to other countries in order to show foreign audiences the ‘sense of sacrifice and devotion’ of France’s women, including images of women in newsreels and in fictional films. See Laurent Véray, La Grande Guerre au cinéma: de la gloire à la mémoire (Paris, 2008), pp. 22-3.
surprise, pride and confidence in French women’s ‘newfound’ abilities. So long as female war workers were represented as carefully supervised subordinates (their physical well-being and moral rectitude being both at stake), the novelty of women entering traditionally male-dominated jobs was largely embraced in the press and by army photographers. Nowhere was this official, albeit strictly temporary, approval of women entering new categories of employment epitomized better than in the handful of magazine photographs showing the new in-house child-care facilities set up to allow women to work lengthy shifts in the munitions factories (Figure 4.4).

Fig. 4.4: Photo halftone illustration (retouched) in *L’Illustration* magazine (1917). The caption translates, ‘In a crèche annexed to a war factory: the laborers in work clothes and their babies.’ © *L’Illustration*.

Although official and commercial photographers worked hard to make only desirable images of female labor enter the visual media, a few photographs survive to remind us that not all women workers conformed to the prescribed role. These were photographs that showed women
strikers, demonstrators, or even women engaged in activities that showed they had their own agendas separate from the war effort. A rare photograph from *Le Monde Illustré* (Figure 4.5), for example, captured couture workers on strike in October 1918, a month before the end of the war. Reflecting the generally foul mood of the French population and its war weariness, the caption writer used a sarcastic tone: ‘The Midinettes, desirous of obtaining the means to avoid dying of hunger, assembled [here] at the Bourse de Travail.’\(^{17}\) To bring the point home, the editor placed the image of the discontented Parisian seamstresses next to a photograph of young women in the United States busily cultivating vegetables ‘in order to assist with the communal work of the war.’\(^{18}\)

That lone photograph of the ‘midinettes’ suggested that these supposedly selfish females made up a small minority; but in fact this

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\(^{18}\) Ibid.
strike, which began in springtime 1917, quickly spread to other industries and included thousands of workers in Paris and the provinces. The censors allowed some coverage of the midinettes’ strike, though news of the larger movement (particularly the munitions workers’ strike) was censored. It was feared that images of dissent, like the spontaneous protests against bread shortages throughout France, could give way to general anti-war sentiment. But although images of dissenting women rarely saw the light of day, their existence is an important reminder that the illusion of cultural consensus was just that, an illusion, constructed and maintained by media workers usually without need for much official prodding.

Some of the most arresting wartime photographs of women depicted the ‘munitionnettes’ and other female workers taking on traditionally masculine jobs for the sake of the war effort. Different French magazines displayed different levels of interest in these female workers. At one extreme, the reporters of *Le Monde Illustré* seem to have been fascinated by the variety of female ‘replacements’, and featured a large supplement in 1917 on the women workers of Citroën, and the new facilities that the company offered especially to accommodate women (Figure 4.6). The photograph here shows a female war worker delivering her toddler to the staff childcare provider before heading to the factory floor. The title of this feature on the brave new world of feminine facilities in the workplace was entitled ‘L’Émancipation de la Femme,’ and ran throughout January 1917 as propaganda to counter the industrial and civilian discontent during that terrible winter. All appeared to be well, conditions appeared progressive.

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19 Urbain Gohier reported in 1915 that whereas a boy of 15 got paid 12-15 francs a week in an armaments factory, the mother of a family got paid 5-6. This type of disparity was corrected only after the strike in 1917, after three years of that pay scale. Gohier’s labor ministry report quoted in Pierre Darmon, *Vivre à Paris pendant la Grande Guerre* (Paris, 2002), p. 187.

20 The year 1917 saw the establishment of two French laws, one (1 May) to protect the pay rates of women who were pregnant or nursing, and the other (5 Aug.) mandating that industrial establishments provide facilities for nursing mothers. See Rageot, *La française*, p. 27.
Fig. 4.6: Photo halftone illustration in *Le Monde Illustré* magazine, entitled, ‘The Crèche in a War Factory’ (1917). The caption translates, ‘Before beginning work, a female worker places her infant in the factory day-care facility [garde de l’usine], and she will collect the child upon leaving.’

On the other end of the spectrum, there was *Le Miroir* magazine, which, either because of the paper’s focus on battlefront activity, or because of editorial discomfort with the female invasion of traditionally masculine occupations, contained very few images of industrial *remplaçantes*. Interestingly, the photo editors of *Le Miroir* published quite a few photographs of non-French women in new jobs throughout the war,
but largely ignored their French equivalents at home.\textsuperscript{21} Could this conspicuous absence have been a gendered, nationalist calculation, whereby the magazine sought to glorify the masculine nature of the French war effort, but had no problem with publicizing the large role of women elsewhere? Or, was it that, as discussed in Chapter Two, French photographers and press officials preferred to depict French women in positions of distress? From 1917 to 1918, several towns in north-eastern France were beginning to be liberated by British (rather than French) troops, and the editors of \textit{Le Miroir} may have wanted to keep the French public’s attention on the achievements and sacrifices of French soldiers, rather than praising civilian contributions. Perhaps that line of thinking explains the magazine keeping images of women and civilians to a minimum during the period. Nevertheless, \textit{Le Miroir} did publish one fine image of a worker finishing a torpedo in 1918 (Figure 4.7), though probably depicting an English, rather than French, woman. Either way, there is no acknowledgement of the woman in the caption accompanying the photograph. The emphasis was on the amount of damage the torpedoes could do to German targets.

Fig. 4.7: Photo halftone illustration in *Le Miroir* magazine, entitled, ‘Responding to German Aerial Raids’ (1918). Subtitled ‘Acetylene welding of a large torpedo used with Allied aircraft,’ the caption explained how for ‘several weeks Allied aviation has affirmed its superiority not only on the front, during incessant offensive expeditions, bombardments and reconnaissance, but also in the numerous raids that are executed on German cities, train stations and factories, reprisals for enemy expeditions on our open cities. British aircraft, notably, deploy daily. Here is a torpedo of which our aircraft can take a number of specimens.’

Other wartime illustrated magazines, as well as army photographers, did record and publicize the work of French female industrial workers, even featuring individual female workers on the occasional cover illustration (Figures 4.8 and 4.9). In the article accompanying the *Illustration* cover here, the anonymous writer predicted:
Later, history, in describing how France arrived at a final victory, will make a place, alongside the fighting army and the industrial army… [for] these courageous women who brought all of their energy and sacrificed all of their inclinations and habits, even their coquetries – most of them are pretty – to the needs of national defense.²²

Fig. 4.8: Photo halftone illustration on the cover of *L’Illustration* magazine, captioned, ‘A Woman Worker from the War Factory’, directing the reader to an article inside (1916). © *L’Illustration*.

Fig. 4.9: Photo halftone illustration on the cover of Excelsior, a daily newspaper (1918). The photograph shows a woman worker applying the last coat of paint on a group of torpedoes. The caption said that the ‘munitionnette is doing the “toilette” for a large torpedo,’ making the analogy to applying makeup.

Here the writer made a vague promise of reward for female laborers’ sacrifices – a reward they never obtained. Regardless, the laudatory text that accompanied mute photographs made it appear that all women workers cheerfully and voluntarily threw themselves into the industrial fray not for wages, which would be selfish, but out of patriotism.

Like several other magazine and pamphlet writers during the war, the writer in L’Illustration also appreciated the fact that these ‘dependable’ workers refused to give up their femininity, noting that they were pretty and handled only the ‘delicate’ operations for which they were suited.23 Writing about the remplaçantes, Léon Abensour, too, insisted that these

23 Ibid.
women were ‘gentle and sweet – with rare exceptions.’ Abensour echoed a common concern during the period about the perceived threat to sexual dimorphism in French society, which had begun before the war and would continue in the 1920s. Male wartime observers approved of the fact that women did not compete for the tougher jobs requiring training, but cheerfully left such tasks to the remaining men. Despite some anxiety at the thought of women workers taking on masculine traits, images and captions in the press trained the reading public to embrace the need for these women during the total war effort. What is somewhat perplexing was the fact that the chosen cover model in Figure 4.8 did not illustrate very well the point about women workers being pretty, delicate or feminine. In this case, the photographer and the writers may have had different ideas about what would have been a reassuring image of female labor.

No photographic image depicted female devotion to the war effort more effectively than a woman on the shop floor in greasy trousers – the assumption being that her ‘natural’ inclination was to wear fashionable frocks and keep her distance from grimy work (Figure 4.10). Elsewhere, a

Fig. 4.10: French Army photograph captioned, ‘Paris: Workshop of the Metropolitan [Paris subway system], rue des Maraîchers. Laborer [ouvrière] employed in the repair shop’ (1917).

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crowd of young workers cheerfully share the communal lavatory, demonstrating the patriotic woman’s willingness to sacrifice home comforts and privacy for the sake of the war effort (Figure 4.11). But as

Lynn Abrams has pointed out, ‘there is little evidence to suggest women flooded into the labour market motivated by patriotic fervor.’

Many women had found themselves abruptly unemployed when the war first broke out, and so turned to war-related industries for jobs. A good portion of women workers sought employment in wartime industries for the superior pay such positions promised, compared to domestic service or seamstress work. McMillan showed that these female workers ‘never fully replaced the absent male workers but rather were given the least skilled jobs and were obliged to work under the supervision of a male

Fig. 4.11: Photograph given to the French Army by Citroën, captioned ‘Paris: Citroën Factories. Quai de Javel. Lockers and wash basins’ (March 1915).

26 Gaston Rageot reported that bourgeoises were now unable to recruit or retain maids, who proudly announced, ‘Madame, I’m going to the munitions works!’ Rageot, La française, p. 19. See also James F. McMillan, Housewife or Harlot: the Place of Women in French Society 1870-1940 (New York, 1981), p. 134.
Women were trained quickly to perform the lower tasks, not apprenticed for a long-term career.

Many commercial and official photographers made sure to show the male supervision of female workers (Figures 4.12-4.14). A reporter in

Fig. 4.12: Photo halftone illustrations in L’Illustration magazine for an article about ‘Women in the Barracks’ (1916). Above, the photographer has provided a reassuring photograph showing the women workers leaving the barracks at the end of a day’s work. On the lower right, female clerical workers are supervised by men in uniform. © L’Illustration.

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Fig. 4.13: Photo halftone illustration in *Le Monde Illustré* magazine, showing a room for dividing arsenobenzol at a chemical works in Vitry (1916). While the female employees work, the male supervisor looks over their shoulders (background).
Fig. 4.14: Agence Rol photograph published in *Le Miroir* magazine, entitled, ‘On the Docks of Bordeaux, Women are Employed to Mark the Barrels of Wine’ (1917). The caption translates, ‘As the war prolongs itself, women who for twenty-nine months have learned so many new jobs [métiers] for them, occupy employments that were entirely unforeseen. These [women] here undertake an easy and remunerative job, which most would like to continue after the war.’ BNF/Gallica.

*L’Illustration* assured readers in 1916 that the women entering military barracks to serve as clerical workers – specified here as the ‘widows, daughters, or sisters of our brave poilus’ – did so ‘under masculine direction’ and thereby ‘fulfilled their new job to the satisfaction of their superiors.’\(^{28}\) Photographs showing close supervision, in conjunction with the accompanying captions or articles, hinted at the desired temporariness of women’s access to these positions. At the height of national crisis in 1917, Abensour insisted that female workers simply thought of themselves as temporarily mobilized, like their men. When the war was over, he said,\(^{28}\)

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\(^{28}\) Anon., ‘Des Femmes dans les Casernes’: photo spread with captions in *L’Illustration* (29 Apr. 1916), 422.
they will be content to be demobilized and ‘to re-enter their homes.’ The repeated message in these photographs was that the political-military-industrial complex had committed itself to protecting both the morality of unmarried women and the maternal needs of married women, while working at full force for the war effort.

Contrary to the propaganda images in the press depicting the shiny new facilities at Citroën and other large factories, women’s testimony after the war could reveal bitter disappointment. ‘I sweated blood and lost my youth and health,’ reported one worker in 1919. Having been made redundant in January of that year, she faced a future of ‘dire poverty.’ The thousands of injuries, lay-offs, physical exhaustion, and the inadequacy of pay rates to meet off-the-chart price increases during the war were, unsurprisingly, rarely visible in the photographs of female industrial workers. Whether featuring a clean new gathering space or pleasingly grimy women in their work-clothes, photographers presented female labor as content, enjoying an innocuous, unthreatening esprit de corps.

This propaganda mandate to represent the well-ordered regime of female wartime labor also applied to logistical, technical and laboratory jobs for women. Agence Meurisse photographers created a series featuring women in laboratory jobs, analyzing municipal water (Figure 4.15), and using a microscope (Figure 4.16).

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Fig. 4.15: Agence Meurisse photograph captioned, ‘In Paris; the municipal laboratory; woman analyzing [a sample of] water’ (1915). BNF/Gallica.

Fig. 4.16: Agence Meurisse photograph captioned, ‘In Paris; the municipal laboratory; woman looking through a microscope’ (1915). BNF/Gallica.
How many French women did it take to change a light bulb? Just one, as this Agence Rol photograph of an employee in a gas and electric supply firm showed in 1917 (Figure 4.17). Photographs of women as technical neophytes revealed a bit of cultural amnesia on the one hand – Marie

Fig. 4.17: Agence Rol photograph captioned, ‘Woman employed at Bec Auer’ (1917). Bec Auer was a gas and electric lighting manufacturer. BNF/Gallica.
Curie had won the Nobel Prize for physics, and chemistry, just a few years before – but, on the other hand, these pictures showed a cultural acceptance of women present in such industries, which in the long term would be a permanent, albeit minor, presence.\footnote{31}

Women entering municipal service positions, often donning brand-new uniforms, made for some of the most picturesque photographs during the war. French women became transit operators, postal workers and gas works employees in substantial numbers beginning only in 1916, when it became clear to the French government that early assumptions about a short war had proved to be incorrect. Cameramen who photographed women serving as postal deliverers (Figure 4.18), trolley operators (Figure 4.19), and ticket controllers in the Metro (Figure 4.20) could draw from a long tradition of \textit{petit métier} imagery in French art, as well as early street photography.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{image1}
\caption{Fig. 4.18: Agence Rol photograph captioned, ‘Woman postman [Femme facteur], Jeanne Decorne’ (1918). There is a further caption in brackets, perhaps added later as a category in the archive: ‘the postmistress [factrice] delivering the mail.’ BNF/Gallica.}
\end{figure}

\footnote{31}{Other industries that saw the gradual entry of women during and after the war included trade, banking and insurance. Patrick Fridenson, ed., \textit{The French Home Front, 1914-1918} (Providence, 1992), p. 7.}
Fig. 4.19: Agence Meurisse photograph captioned, ‘Women’s jobs [Les métiers de femme]: at the tramway: conductress hooking the point of contact to the trolley’ (1915). BNF/Gallica.

Fig. 4.20: Agence Meurisse photograph captioned, ‘Women’s jobs [Les métiers de femme]: at the Metro: ticket controller [i.e., verifier]’ (1915). BNF/Gallica.
Figures 4.18-4.20 show that photographers took some delight at capturing the new civilian uniforms made for women. Transit workers were a ‘séduisante vision parisienne’ (charming Parisian vision), according to Abensour, with their ‘big white collars adorning an otherwise austere uniform.’ But these pictures also captured a curious mood. The quote by Samuel Johnson comes to mind, wherein the Georgian lexicographer compared a woman’s preaching to a dog walking on its hind legs: ‘It is not done well; but you are surprised to find it done at all.’ In other words, we feel the photographers’ surprise, admittedly more good-natured than Dr. Johnson’s, that French women were capable of performing such male-defined tasks. One might even suspect that the photographers were less astonished by the munitionettes than these municipal employees, even though the factory work often required a great deal more physical strength and endurance. After all, French women had been employed in industrial work since at least the 1840s, whereas the idea of women working in any kind of official capacity was novel in 1914.

Laurent Gervereau and Christophe Prochasson have argued that what photographers wanted to do was to ‘expose the bizarreness’ of seeing women in official uniforms. Photographs of female postmistresses and transport employees served another function as well: they reassured the reading public that no men of military age remained in civilian jobs if women could replace them. Along with the Dalbiez Law of 1915, which demanded such replacements in order to maximize the number of French men at the front, photographs of women in service and clerical positions perhaps soothed public irritation at seeing, or suspecting, male shirkers working safely behind the lines.

Both observers during the era and recent historians have debated to what extent new paid work emancipated French (and other) women during the war. Nowadays, school textbooks may infer that American and British women’s winning the vote between 1918 and 1928 was a ‘reward’ for their civic and industrial efforts during the conflict. But historians like Harold Smith have shown that, at least in the British case, this is a myth. What was more likely, according to Smith, was that the state rewarded mothers for consenting to the blood sacrifices of their sons and husbands.

32 Abensour, Les vaillantes, p. 45.
Of course, French wives and mothers made the same sacrifices (numerically larger than the British or American), but did not receive the vote after the war, despite attempts by the lower house of the legislature to grant it to them.

Several historians, such as Gabriel Perreux, have argued that although French women were not granted political equality after the war, they did enjoy a ‘social promotion’ owing to their wartime contributions. By ‘social promotion’, Perreux meant women having greater freedom of dress and mobility, and a few new civic doors opening to them. The corset disappeared from fashion during the war never to return; and the taboo against single women being in public by themselves evaporated amidst the necessities of home front mobilization. After the war, women entered secondary and higher education in larger numbers, even if an on-going natalist campaign firmly encouraged women to devote themselves to home and reproduction.

Although magazines like *Le Monde Illustré* showed a fascination with the possibility of a social transformation in the workplace, its writers were certainly not calling for a social revolution. After the November armistice, the magazine featured a story entitled ‘La Victoire du Travail’, in which the author, Pierre Hamp (pen name of Henri Bourrillon), recognized national industry as having been a key to France’s victory. A large photograph of women seated at work preparing bullets lies between the writer’s columns of text. Below the picture, the caption reads,

> During these years of terrible trials, women have become accustomed to devoting themselves to useful tasks for the Fatherland; they have acquitted themselves with zeal, skill and intelligence for the work that was consigned to them; now they should become mothers once again.  

The implication in Hamp’s statement was that before the war, women had not devoted themselves to ‘useful tasks for the Fatherland,’ but rather to private domestic duties. Echoing pre-war fears, Hamp warned against the ‘sterilization of the race,’ asserting that the ‘greatest job for women in France is not now to aid industry, but to make strong families.’ If the Citroën facilities suggested a working woman’s utopia, the war’s end would return French women to a pro-natalist reality, in which the state, the media and returning soldiers expected women to focus on their reproductive and domestic duties.

The attention paid to women in industry or city employment during the war should not obscure the fact that the bulk of France’s women lived and worked on the land during the period. France’s agricultural areas, too, supplied multiple images of wartime female labor. On 6 August 1914, Prime Minister René Viviani issued a public placard calling upon French women to ‘keep up the activity of the countryside, finish the yearly harvest, and prepare for that of next year.’ Women’s agricultural labor would be necessary to prevent extreme food shortages for the first year and the duration of the war.

As mentioned at the start of this chapter, rural French wives had always been ‘full partners in the economic enterprise’ of managing a farm. Only after the war, when technological change and mechanization made French farming so much more efficient, were rural women channeled ‘towards a more private and domestic world.’

38 Ibid., 140.
42 Ibid.
photographers, while certainly interested in representing rural women’s sacrifices for the war effort, showed little to no interest in celebrating their long-standing managerial roles, despite the fact that the war was extending women’s experiences managing laborers, dealing with merchants and tending to the health of livestock. And while French writers and photographers were willing to record rural women’s sacrifices, this class of women was also, unfortunately, the target of accusations of hoarding produce and price gouging.

The most iconic wartime image of French rural woman – actually a Canadian propaganda poster – originated with a photograph taken on a French farm by an unknown photographer (Figures 4.21-4.23). It depicted three peasant women yoked together to drag a plow, their working animals having been requisitioned some time ago. This image was copied and reproduced in several posters in North America. Granted, one might argue

![Image](image_url)

Fig. 4.21: Canadian war bond poster (1915), adapted from a photograph. U.S. Library of Congress.

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44 In fiction, see for example chapter five (‘Sanctuary’) in Henri Barbusse, *Under Fire*, trans. by Robin Buss (New York, 2003), pp. 56-78. Here the squad does battle with a woman of Gauchin-l’Abbé to purchase wine and coffee. The narrator observes bitterly that the woman, named Palmyre, thinks ‘to herself that exploiting the national disaster is a treasure that outweighs any imaginary treasure chests’ hunted for by her father-in-law (p. 70). See also Tammy Proctor, *Civilians in a World at War* (New York, 2010), p. 96.
Fig. 4.22: Photograph in the collection of the U.S. Food Administration (no date), with American caption: ‘Heroic women of France: Of the healthy men who are not engaged in the military service in France, practically all are engaged either in transportation or in the manufactures of munitions, leaving the agriculture absolutely to the women.’ This caption was misleading in the sense that non-militarized men in France (older or adolescent men, as well as colonial laborers) did work in agriculture during the war, and of course women, too, entered those munitions and transport industries as described in this chapter. NARA.

Fig. 4.23: U.S. Food Administration poster (n.d.). The first quotation, from Alonzo Taylor, reads, ‘Does it lie within the heart of the American people to hold to every convenience of our life and thus add an additional burden to the women of France?’ The sacrifices made by French women laborers were thus used to encourage American civilians to consume less food during the war. U.S. Library of Congress.
that the image appealed more to Anglo-American propaganda officials than to the French themselves. Yet, the texts accompanying the American-owned images merely restated the sentiment manufactured by French propagandists for export: that French men and women would go to any lengths to defeat the enemy, even if this meant enduring humiliating hardships.

As it turns out, the French press did use that same image. A two-page spread in Le Monde Illustré from July 1917 shows what appear to be the same three women yoked to the plow (Figure 4.24), probably produced during the same session that included the more well-known image above. Le Monde Illustré’s caption explained how, in the absence of horses, ‘the women of the countryside’ courageously replaced the requisitioned animals. The emphasis is on showing female self-sacrifice, countering urban accusations of peasant women’s ‘indolence and self-indulgence’ causing food shortages.\textsuperscript{45} As with the industrial and civil posts,

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{fig424}
\caption{Two-page photo halftone illustration in Le Monde Illustré magazine, subtitled, ‘Our Daily Bread’ (1917). The caption explained how ‘the women of the countryside, having a shortage of horses, have courageously harnessed themselves to the plow or to the harrow.’}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{45} Hanna, Your Death Would Be Mine, p. 194.
photographers focused on showing the temporary measures necessary in total war, concealing, or at least downplaying, evidence of female land management or independence.\textsuperscript{46}

One final category of mobilized labor whose images we cannot neglect was the network of volunteers who founded and staffed the war charities of the period, or volunteered their time and talents. Of all the mobilized women depicted in this chapter, these upper-class women alone might be visualized in managerial positions, whether overseeing seamstresses’ wartime labor, or visiting the unfortunates who populated their endowed hospitals, orphanages or canteens. It could be argued that these women played as important a role in the French ability to ‘hold on’ for four years as other female workers did, since the charities that they founded and funded mitigated civilian destitution and desperation on the home front. Male observers like Léon Abensour and Marie de la Hire reserved hearty praise for those positions for which women ‘receive no compensation for their efforts.’\textsuperscript{47} Photographers, too, took pains to show the noblesse oblige practiced by aristocratic women under the union sacrée regime.

Many of the unpaid volunteers during the war acted as nurses and other caregivers, but there were dozens of other charitable tasks that French women took on, and which photographers captured for the official record and for the press. The vicomtesse de Rencougne, for example, was photographed at the canteen she founded in 1916 (Figure 4.25). Another photograph from Paris (Figure 4.26) shows two ladies collecting donations to benefit soldiers at the front. Photographers also recorded actresses and

\textsuperscript{46} American expat Margaret Aldrich remarked in 1917, ‘I often wonder if some of the [farm] women are not better off than in the days before the war. They do about the same work, only they are not bothered by their men.’ See Aldrich, ‘On the Edge of the War Zone,’ in Agnès Cardinal, Dorothy Goldman and Judith Hattaway, eds., \textit{Women’s Writing on the First World War}, trans. by Agnès Cardinal (Oxford, 1999), p. 117.

\textsuperscript{47} Abensour, \textit{Les vaillantes}, p. 59. ‘They harvest nothing but disappointments,’ he added, ‘tolerated only because of their feeling of duty and national usefulness.’ See also Marie de la Hire, \textit{La Femme française: son activité pendant la guerre} (Paris, 1917), pp. 12-14, 86.
Fig. 4.25: French Army photograph captioned, ‘Paris: Canteen to Support Artists, 19 rue Daguerre. Canteen Chicago. The director of the canteen and the vicomtesse de Rencougne’ (1916). MHC/BDIC.

Fig. 4.26: Agence Meurisse photograph captioned, “‘75” Day [La journée du ‘75’] to benefit the soldiers at the front’ (1915). Volunteers sold medals and insignia engraved with images of the renowned 75mm field gun. MHC/BDIC.
singers giving free performances for both soldiers and civilians (Figure 4.27 and Figure 4.28). In the image here from La Vie Parisienne, the caption writer assured readers that they were not looking at a suffragette giving a speech, but an actress giving her time to entertain convalescing troops.

Fig. 4.27: Photo halftone illustration in La Vie Parisienne magazine, subtitled, ‘Don’t Think You’re Seeing a Suffragette at a Meeting’ (1915). The caption explained, ‘The oratrice is Mlle J. Provost, of the Théâtre-Français, who, with Mme Eugénie Buffet, distracts convalescents at the Grand-Palais hospital.’

Fig. 4.28: French Army photograph captioned, ‘Paris: Mission of British Dominion and Colonial Members of Parliament. Scottish Hospital, rue de la Chaise. Reception for the mission. Mlle Valpreux from the Comédie Française recites some verses’ (1916). MHC/BDIC.
French women also staffed information centers, where they worked to place dispersed family members in contact with one another (Figure 4.29). Wage-and-strike-free volunteerism seemed to demonstrate the feminine virtue of nurturing self-sacrifice at its best. This desirable female quality could also be seen in photographs of women preparing parcels for prisoners of war (Figure 4.30), and in the ouvroirs of Paris, where middle-class patronesses and volunteers supervised refugees sewing for their livelihoods (see the two women standing on the right in Figure 4.31). The Republic’s dependence on women volunteering their labor for free was nothing new in 1914. The painful, uncomfortable circumstances of war, though, seemed to necessitate the constant circulation of models of desirable feminine behavior.

Fig. 4.29: Photo halftone illustration in Le Miroir magazine, entitled, ‘Each Day 1,200 Reports Given To Families’ (1915). This image is part of a one-page photo essay, which explained with six photographs and captions how personnel dealt with queries from the family members of war prisoners, both French and German. As a piece of propaganda, the images aimed to counter complaints in France and abroad from people demanding to know the location and status of their imprisoned loved ones.
Fig. 4.30: French Army photograph captioned, ‘Paris: Canteen to Support Artists. Pavillon de Flore. Book stores destined for artist-prisoners of war’ (1916). MHC/BDIC.

Fig. 4.31: Agence Meurisse photograph captioned, ‘A workshop, rue de l’Université’ (1915). BNF/Gallica.
Demoralizing military defeats, workers’ strikes and a harsh winter in the last year of the war would finally shatter the always fragile Sacred Union, although France – unlike Russia and Germany – would avoid outright revolution. France’s expansive propaganda regime, including the non-stop production of patriotic photographic images, helped to stave off full-scale revolt, even if a pacifist reaction would become prominent in the inter-war years. The fact that the French masses and other audiences ‘believed’ the photographs and absorbed them as models, even unconsciously, played some role in minimizing dissent. Photographers, more than anyone within the propaganda apparatus, commanded a great ‘power of suggestion’ with their images. The prescriptive power of these images of consensus was strengthened further by the captions that accompanied them in popular magazines and in the archives; the captions shaped the images’ meaning.

French women during World War I, then, were mobilized by the state, by industry, and on the local level in many different ways. Women’s tasks were diverse and evolving, but the visual representations were all designed to show mobilized women as diligent, subordinating themselves cheerfully to the war effort without expectation of rank or, in many cases, pay. Many of the photographs discussed in this chapter showed the possibility of gender-based changes in the workplace, but on men’s terms only. Although women did occupy supervisory positions on the farms and in volunteer organizations such as the French Red Cross, the majority of wartime photographs of working women emphasized their docility. Photographers made these choices not in order to degrade the women pictured, but to show national and international observers the extent to which the French were willing to make sacrifices in order ultimately to achieve victory. And, the images convinced viewers, and perhaps the women themselves, that they posed no threat to male professional prerogatives. Just as importantly, these photographs served the propagandistic purpose of highlighting French women’s acceptance of the war and obscuring female dissent, which certainly did exist in the industrial as well as the political context.

5 Conclusion and a Peek in the Attic

‘At bottom, these people have got what they deserved.’ – Madeleine Pelletier

Dr. Pelletier’s remark, written privately in her diary, was the sentiment of a feminist, a socialist and a pacifist who saw the medical aftermath of the Battle of the Marne.¹ Her offer of medical assistance rejected by the army owing to her sex, Pelletier nevertheless aided the wounded (on both sides) as a Red Cross volunteer, with neither rank nor pay. By ‘these people’, Pelletier may have been referring to the soldiers on the field, the combatant nations, or the French people as a whole. Her remark cut through the patriotic propaganda of the moment to place blame squarely on the shoulders of the male ministers, diplomats, generals and civilians who believed that the war would improve the health and status of the nation. Pelletier was expressing contempt for what Virginia Woolf described as the ‘preposterous masculine fiction’ that was the conflict.² Similarly, Jeanne Mélin, a feminist based in the Ardennes, saw the war as a product of one sex monopolizing public affairs.³ Thus, even within a hegemonic, total war regime, resistance was possible, whether within the confines of a personal diary or in more overt acts, rarely photographed.

As we conclude our tour of French female images, Karen Offen’s caution against focusing exclusively upon discourses on ‘woman’ rather than women’s ‘active participation in open debate’ gives me pause.⁴ It may be that while the preceding chapters brought gender, photography and

² Woolf’s phrase was used in a letter to Margaret Llewelyn Davies from 23 Jan. 1916. Quoted in Karin E. Westman, “For her generation the newspaper was a book”: Media, Mediation, and Oscillation in Virginia Woolf’s Between the Acts, Journal of Modern Literature, 29 (2006), 1.
⁴ Karen Offen, ‘French Women’s History: Retrospect (1789-1940) and Prospect,’ French Historical Studies, 26 (2003), 736.
World War I scholarship together, they did little to further women’s history. French women’s participation in wartime visual culture would certainly be difficult to uncover, possibly necessitating a shift toward artifacts from the domestic sphere and private archives. But although French women entered neither commercial nor official institutions as photographers during the war, some wartime imagery can offer us glimpses of activity that fell outside the prescriptive archetypes evaluated in the four chapters above. For although the wartime regime left scant room for female visual self-expression, or representations outside the realm of devotion or victimhood, the ‘empire of photography’ could not eliminate all deviation.

If the previous chapters lead us to the conclusion that men’s representations favored certain ideas of femininity, while keeping women’s actions and opinions, which did not conform to those ideas, invisible, we can nevertheless offer one last peek at a few nonconformist images. The final images below, then, serve as a reminder that the wartime regime of representations discussed in this book excluded alternatives that nevertheless existed. If the researcher is limited to state, military, police and commercial archives of Paris, such outlying images appear only as the rare exception to the rule.

If the image of the ‘sacrificial, silent, hardworking woman was far preferable to the independent-minded, sexually liberated woman who questioned her government or who exploited the conditions of war time for her own pleasure or self-advancement,’ this social preference did not prevent a few women from posing dissenting questions. Scholars have brought to light some women’s newspaper articles, essays, books and plays, and several of their names appeared throughout this book. Embers of resistance smoldered in the court testimony of the school teacher Hélène Brion, convicted as an anti-war propagandist and stripped of her teaching position in 1917; and in the support showed by Brion’s friends, who testified to her excellent character, including Jeanne Mélin and Marguerite Durand. They glow in Marguerite Jousselin’s wartime column in *Le Monde Illustré*, wherein she demanded the result of the war be

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6 See in particular Madeleine Vernet’s pamphlet on Brion at the BDIC (Nanterre), which called Brion’s case a new Dreyfus Affair: Vernet, *Hélène Brion: une belle conscience et une sombre affaire* (Paris, 1917). This pamphlet is part of a larger collection of pacifist women’s papers entitled Dossier Jeanne Alexandre.
women’s permanent emancipation. And again in the hundreds of articles by the better-known feminist Nelly Roussel, who demanded women’s access to contraception and abortion before, during and after the war.

Resistance, non-conformity, or at the very least ambiguity, could also slip into the male-produced pictures of the period, as an occasional image of a woman outside the wartime prescription of female patriotic duty. Just as the wartime regime could not completely suppress the voices of anti-war women like Brion, neither was it able to prevent the occasional irreverent image from appearing in print. Although La Vie Parisienne’s usual fare was cartoons of scantily clad girls, that magazine also printed more complicated cartoons like this one from 1916 (Figure 5.1). While on

![Image: Masculine Gender, Feminine Gender, Neuter Gender]

Fig. 5.1: Illustration in La Vie Parisienne magazine by Edouard Touraine (1916), entitled, ‘Masculine Gender, Feminine Gender, Neuter Gender.’

The caption translates as the man in uniform saying, ‘Look, Yvonne: since when has she adopted the male gender?’ And his companion replies, ‘Since she became a feminist!’

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8 See, for example, Nelly Roussel, Paroles de combat et d’espoir: discours choisis (Epône, 1919).
the surface it pokes fun at a female war office worker (and feminism), it could also be interpreted as portraying this new *genre neutre* figure as a modern, independent woman. Planted sturdily in the foreground with a cane clutched firmly under her arm, the woman smokes her cigarette and gazes at the scene before her, in contrast to the other young woman leaning on the soldier’s arm, hands demurely concealed inside a muff. The soldier and his girlfriend look a little put off by the figure, but the cartoonist, it seems, has drawn a strong female figure to admire rather than to mock. And although this woman in *bleu horizon* appears devoted to the war effort, like most of the women discussed in this book, she is depicted on her own rather than dependent on a male supervisor (as shown in so many photographs). Whereas the tram workers or postmistresses shown in Chapter Four were represented by photographers as sweet novelties, this woman looks like she knows what she is about.

The artist Leo Fontan made a similar point earlier in 1916 with his cover illustration of a female driver (Figure 5.2). The *nouvelle femme*

![Fig. 5.2: Cover illustration for *La Vie Parisienne* (1916).](image)

(New Woman) of the pre-war years makes her return here, taking the driver’s seat and rushing toward her own destination. With clouds and
what appear to be bits of shrapnel in the air, Fontan imagined her as an ace engaged in a dogfight, rather than a woman of fashion going for a pleasure drive. The title of the picture, ‘Le Jeu de l’Auto… et du Volant’, could even be said to be playing with the concept of independence (*auto… autonomie*), and acknowledged the excitement with which French women embraced their newfound freedoms on the home front. Like Marianne, she wears a patriotic cap, but if she is a national allegory, she is one of a different stripe than those found in the more conventional propaganda of the period – an allegory for women rather than for men. Although wartime artists tended to regress stylistically between 1914 and 1918,\(^9\) it may be here, among the illustrators rather than in the photographic domain, that we can find emancipatory or empowering images of French women. While it was highly unlikely that the artists of *La Vie Parisienne* considered themselves feminists, they certainly did use feminine imagery as ammunition to combat the gloom and grind of the war. Sensitive to the notion that independent women appeared threatening to soldiers and labor leaders alike, photographers, in contrast, carefully avoided such representations.

However, even the photographic collections can offer intriguing glimpses of female independent mindedness. These photographs, often the records of fleeting moments, departed from the dominant feminine models, instead showing women pursuing their own agendas. For example, a police photographer depicted a group of women commemorating the socialist politician Jean Jaurès (Figure 5.3), one year after his assassination by a crazed nationalist. Jaurès had been the one mainstream politician in France to advocate pacifism in 1914. Attracting some attention from onlookers on the street, this group of women and girls marched determinedly in the rain, carrying palm fronds in Jaurès’ honor.\(^{10}\)

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\(^{10}\) Jaurès’ assassin, imprisoned for the duration of the war, was acquitted of his murder in 1919.
While it would have been politically incorrect to protest openly for peace in 1915, few could object to these women’s modest and peaceful remembrance of the national deputy from Tarn.

In another police photograph, the operator has captured a group of female athletes training at Porte Brancion on the outskirts of Paris in 1915 (Figure 5.4). Are these the female athletes who would have competed in the Championnats de France d'Athlétisme, had it taken place that year? Or were these women simply amateurs doing some recreational group calisthenics? Either way, it seems somewhat peculiar that a police photographer would have traveled to the edge of the city to

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11 The Championnats, which included male and female French athletes, was founded in 1888 and survives to the present. In the early twentieth century, men competed at the Croix-Catelan stadium, women at Porte Brancion. There were no competitions in 1915 or 1916. The Fédération Française d’Athlétisme has compiled results of the competitions, since 1888, here: http://cdm.athle.com/asp.net/espaces.html/html.aspx?id=9226
Fig. 5.4: Paris police photograph captioned, ‘Porte Brancion. Club Acadimia’ (1915). MHC/BDIC.

photograph a group of exercising women. These women, it seems, were not ‘training’ for national defense or in order to form auxiliary corps as their English equivalents did. We cannot be sure, but they appear to be exercising simply as a leisure club activity. Or, they may have been athletes training in hopes that the women’s Championnat would take place, although such hopes would be dashed until 1917 when the games resumed. Rare was the wartime photograph in France, public or archival, that depicted women or girls doing something unrelated to the war.

There is one last, non-photographic, piece of evidence I want to include, because it offers us a French woman’s own point of view. Louise Ibels, half-sister of the better-know Henri-Gabriel Ibels, was a young Parisian theater set-decorator and illustrator.12 In 1916 at the age of twenty-five, Ibels published a book of lithographs entitled, A Day at the

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12 The only biographical information that I could find on Louise Catherine Ibels is in a slim dossier in the Département des Estampes et de la photographie at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (Richelieu), which includes a photo portrait (call number AA20-4). The BNF online catalogue lists several other works by Ibels (including books written by a separate author and illustrated by Ibels), though no other wartime publications or works of art.
These comical drawings illustrated the triumphs and travails of a corps of nurses working with the sick, the wounded and their visiting families at the hospital. Judging from the subject matter, one might suppose the project simply conformed to the desirable infirmière theme so popular with artists and photographers during the period. But Ibels’ book deserves special mention because she gave humor and humanity to the hospital personnel, qualities missing from the photography of nurses discussed in the preceding chapters.

Rather than the military perspective featured in the army’s photographs of female health workers, A Day at the Hospital offered the nurses’ point of view: the joy they took in performing the work, as well as the frustrations. The imagery of the convalescing soldiers, too, is very different from the wounded soldiers depicted in the official photography of the period. Here they are given individual traits and foibles (a grumpy facial expression, a fear of needles, a pair of reading glasses, and another one uses the tablecloth to wipe his nose during a meal). In the plates reproduced below, Ibels depicted the motley array of individual women working together, and the friendships that developed between them as they endured their duties, tears and fatigue, and took their restorative lunch breaks together (Figures 5.5-5.7). Ibels took care to show the women unsupervised by male superiors, and the portraits are devoid of feminine martyrdom.

An example of Ibels’ book, Une Journée à l’hôpital (Paris, 1916), is available in the BDIC library at the University of Paris X Nanterre, and also in the Département des Estampes et de la photographie at the BNF. There are a total of twenty color plates, not including the illustrated front and back covers. It is unclear whether Ibels was sketching her characters on the job as a nurse herself, or only while visiting the hospital.

A few doctors and orderlies, of course, are depicted (see in particular the operating room scene in plate VI, composed with the patient’s enormous feet and a fainting nurse for comical effect).
Fig. 5.5: Lithographic print by Louise Ibels. Caption translates, ‘8h ½ [8:30am] Arrival of the Nurses’, plate from *Une Journée à l’hôpital* (1916). BDIC.

Fig. 5.6: Lithographic print by Louise Ibels. Caption translates, ‘Sometimes the ladies fight with each other… and they go off to cry, each in a corner’, plate from *Une Journée à l’hôpital* (1916). BDIC.
Fig. 5.7: Lithographic print by Louise Ibels. Caption translates, ‘Some of them eat in town… and others at the hospital’, plate from Une Journée à l’hôpital (1916). BDIC.

She also included sketches of the crowds of hospital visitors waiting in line (Figure 5.8), depicted from the staff’s perspective. Here was a typical day of work presented not in order to condemn the German enemy, nor to glorify feminine angels or saints, but to reveal the hospital as an imperfect family of crotchety and youthful, husky and scrawny, haughty, loving, and eccentric individuals. True, the class and ideological divisions in French society are, still, nowhere to be seen here. But Ibels at least dispensed with the heroic/angelic melodrama that played out in the prints of Scott, to name one example. The self-effacing silence of the women in photographs is replaced by the rambunctiousness of characters unafraid of taking up a little space. After all of the patriotic bravado of the wartime press, A Day in the Hospital is for the researcher like a breath of fresh air.
The question arises, beyond the scope of this book, of whether Louise Ibels was a unique female voice in wartime France – or might we find other visual artists who offered a female perspective which was obscured? My discovery of Ibels’ prints was a unique one during the research for this book. Besides Ibels, I identified no French female visual artists or photographers who could offer a woman’s point of view on the war. No doubt this was because I had not the time to go down the right paths, and some do exist somewhere. With the exception of Käthe Kollwitz in Germany, however, I am unaware of any female visual artists in Europe who gained recognition for their artistic work relating to the Great War. Likewise, French women photographers before the 1920s form a practically blank page in the French and English scholarship on photography. Perhaps there will be researchers who read this book who can pick up the scent in their investigations.

Lurking even deeper is the question of why, when women were ushered into so many formerly male-dominated positions, was their
creativity with pen or camera ignored by the media-academic complex of the period? Could it be that the masculine establishment, while willing to concede clerical and even physical tasks to female hands, remained unwilling to recognize women’s capacity for artistic originality? The gendering of creativity began with the Renaissance artist-writer Giorgio Vasari or even earlier, continuing through the Enlightenment to the twentieth century, so that ‘genius’ had historically been placed on the masculine rather than feminine side of the balance sheet of human characteristics. The war, too, may have operated as a backlash against the softening of gender discrimination at the turn of the century. Be that as it may, we need not accept historical assumptions about creativity, nor simply trust that there is no female visual creativity to discover from the period just because it has been left out of public records. Furthermore, as we have seen throughout this book, the bulk of male photographers recording the war hardly qualified as artistic geniuses in anyone’s book.

Despite the lopsidedness of the picture, the fact that French producers of war-related photography were all men has provided a conveniently controlled laboratory for visual analysis. Because we know that all the official and news photographers were men (in the French context), we have the freedom to analyze their images as products of a purely male gaze, or pure male visual desire. Granted, to speak of a ‘male’ point of view is as problematic as using ‘woman’ as a historical category. After all, there were male socialists, deserters, pacifists, strikers and mutineers who were also made invisible in the official and commercial photography. That being said, wartime photography nevertheless offers an excellent vantage point for viewing dominant male desires and expectations during the period, and it is in that context of

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17 I have written about the anonymity of French male photographers during the war in ‘Photographic Exceptionalism during the Great War: the Invisibility of the French Photographer,’ *French Review 87* (2014), 69-88.
visual desire that this book may contribute to the understanding of the era’s images.

Europeans and Americans learned during World War I that photography could be more effective as propaganda than traditional art, because its images seemed more truthful than drawings. This book has tried to show how photography could strengthen the illusion of female consent, enthusiasm and docility during the war. Drawing upon aesthetic, religious and republican prescriptions for femininity, photographers performed important gendering work that, some have argued, became the most important function of the war itself. Along the way, I have contrasted photographs of women to some of the un-photographed realities that the images did not show. Photographs of refugees depicted women in need of protection, but did not admit that French women had been excluded from all of the decision-making that led to the war. Photographs showed Allied troops rescuing displaced women, but they rarely showed the many thousands of women who took care of themselves and their children during the crisis using their own resources and initiative. Wartime pictures represented women as obedient workers, happy to be supporting the national cause, but they could not show the reality of many women changing jobs simply because they had no choice, or because they saw the opportunity to earn more money. In short, photographers found women useful as symbols, but showed only very sporadic interest in their individual stories.

Readers may have noticed, too, that this book was silent in regard to public reception of the images presented. No real attempt was made to interpret how magazine and newspaper readers, purchasers of prints, postcards and books, exhibition attendees, civilians or soldiers felt about these photographs of women. Many of the army’s photographs, a major source for this book, were never even seen by civilians at all. We know that publishers sold a great deal of patriotic postcards during the war and that the magazines discussed here enjoyed a wide circulation, but we really do not know how people felt about the pictures they consumed, or even how they interpreted them. In short, I have dealt with the ‘supply’ side of the enterprise, rather than the ‘demand’, although I would caution against differentiating those two sides too deeply. The production of female images during the war, like many other aspects of the propaganda

effort, was not a top-down government-driven campaign, but a multi-layered wartime culture resulting from ‘a vast and extraordinarily diverse creative activity.’ 20 Journalists, teachers, photographers, shopkeepers, entertainers, soldiers and artists by the ‘tens of thousands’ all contributed to the prescriptive visual culture presented in the preceding chapters, at times in collaboration with government officials but most often by their own volition and design. 21 Contributors, whether military or civilian, were also consumers. The diffuse nature of France’s visual propaganda shows us that its representations of women were not simply prescriptive, but stemmed from deeply held, cross-class beliefs about feminine virtue and gender roles.

The visual tropes in this book, then, reflected the strategies, impulses, choices and desires of the photographers, army officers, magazine editors and postcard publishers who produced them. Their choices, as I have shown, did not emerge in an intellectual vacuum, but reflected pre-war influences, political discourse, and, not least, the changing status of the war effort, and the ebb and flow of national morale. The meaning of these photographs also lies at the crossroads of gender and aesthetics. Motifs that were aesthetically pleasing to a male corps of photographers and designers during World War I reflected the struggle for mastery that French manhood brought both to the battle against Germany and to its own female counterpart at home.

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21 Ibid.
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