Gender, Nationalism, and War

Virginia Woolf famously wrote “as a woman I have no country,” suggesting that women had little stake in defending countries where they are considered second-class citizens, and should instead be forces for peace. Yet women have been perpetrators as well as victims of violence in nationalist conflicts. This unique book generates insights into the role of gender in nationalist violence by examining feature films from a range of conflict zones. In *The Battle of Algiers*, female bombers destroy civilians while men dress in women’s clothes to prevent the French army from capturing and torturing them. *Prisoner of the Mountains* shows a Chechen girl falling in love with her Russian captive as his mother tries to rescue him. Providing historical and political context to these and other films, Matthew Evangelista identifies the key role that economic decline plays in threatening masculine identity and provoking the misogynistic violence that often accompanies nationalist wars.

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Gender, Nationalism, and War

Conflict on the Movie Screen

Matthew Evangelista
To Robert Hennessy, a devoted teacher who encouraged my pursuit of the joys of language and literature, and to the students of my course on Gender, Nationalism, and War who inspired this book.
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Women make up more than 15 percent of the US armed forces, on active duty and in the reserves and National Guard. They have occupied the office of secretary of state and national security adviser in Democratic and Republican administrations. They have served in Iraq and Afghanistan as heroes and victims, sometimes at the same time, as in the case of Jessica Lynch. At Abu Ghraib prison women held positions ranging from prison commandant, General Janis Karpinski, to rank-and-file torturer, Lynndie England, and as prominent scapegoats for the crimes committed there and by their superiors. From the Tailhook scandal to “don’t ask, don’t tell,” one can hardly avoid the issue of gender and war, and that is only in the US military. Outside the United States, women have played key roles as guerrilla fighters, as peace activists, peacekeepers, mediators, and judges presiding over international tribunals for bringing war criminals to justice. As I put the finishing touches to this book, the headlines report on the situation in the Russian North Caucasus, where human rights abuses connected to the violence in Chechnya have given rise to the phenomenon of female suicide bombers. It is no wonder that the topic of gender and war has increasingly attracted the attention of not only feminist scholars, who have long been interested in it, but a broad range of academics and journalists.

The first course I taught on gender was an undergraduate seminar at the University of Michigan in the early 1990s called “Women under Socialism.” Although I offered it in a political science department, the students and I did not read any political science articles. Instead we relied entirely on fiction, biography, and journalistic essays as the raw material for doing what political scientists do – formulate hypotheses and make generalizations based on comparison. The course dealt mainly with comparisons across generations of women, between countries, and between political systems – before, during, and after “socialism.” Violence and nationalism received some attention in our discussions of Vietnam and China and our examination of the ongoing disintegration of Yugoslavia. In the intervening fifteen years since I taught that course (only once), ethnic
and nationalist violence came to dominate much of the news in our post-
Cold War world. When I joined the faculty at Cornell in 1996, I began
teaching a seminar on “Gender, Nationalism, and War,” and I showed a
few feature films relevant to the topic, including Gillo Pontecorvo’s 1966
masterpiece, *The Battle of Algiers*. I found the students eager to explore
the insights offered in the cinematic treatment of gender and violence in
the context of nationalist struggles, and with each iteration of the course,
the role of the films grew. The result is this book, an unusual combination
of visual and political analysis that draws on conventional historical and
social-science sources, as well as the movies.

This project has given me the opportunity to return to one of my
first loves, Russian and comparative literature – among the only things I
enjoyed about high school and the focus of much of my undergraduate
study – and an abiding interest in the cinema that dates from about the
same time. I dedicate it to Robert Hennessy, who taught me Russian lan-
guage and Russian and European literature in high school, and who has
continued over the decades to garner rave reviews from his students (as I
was able to find out from a certain internet site); and to my own students,
who inspired me to bring the tools of literary and visual analysis to the
study of politics.

I owe a great debt to many colleagues who helped with this project,
including (and I apologize if I have left anyone out): Heidi Arsenault,
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framing the study, others read individual case chapters carefully and
saved me from numerous embarrassing mistakes, still others offered sug-
gestions and information, including about reproducing the images cap-
tured from the films.

I received excellent comments on some of the chapters and related
papers from participants in the workshop on Violence, Gender, and
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derful experience of co-teaching an undergraduate seminar with my
colleague Mary Katzenstein. I am especially grateful to John Haslam of Cambridge University Press for his willingness to consider this project and to Carrie Parkinson, Josephine Lane, Joanna Breeze, and Carol Fellingham Webb for their help.

A word on the book's use of images from the films. All of the images I “captured” myself from DVDs; they are not production or publicity stills from the studios. I am grateful to Michael Tolomeo for enhancing the resolution so that they could be reproduced. My use of these images for a scholarly publication falls well within the bounds of the doctrine of “fair use,” under US copyright law. I agree with the view of the US Society for Cinema and Media Studies that reproducing an image is the equivalent of quoting a word or phrase from a novel and that acknowledgment of the source, rather than permission, is required for such use. For this book, I have notified the copyright owners of my intended use, but not requested permission, with two exceptions. Given my extensive use of images from *The Battle of Algiers*, including for the book’s cover, I requested and received permission to use them all without charge. I am grateful to Zaphira Yacef and Kevin Durst of Casbah Entertainment for their cooperation. I also appreciate the interest in my project from the representatives of Robert Lepage, the director of *Nô*, and his team at La Caserne and In Extremis Images, and, in particular, Vincent Masson.

The book is the product of work over an extended period, interrupted by various administrative duties at Cornell. I completed first drafts of several chapters while on a Fulbright scholarship in Italy in 2005–2006. Our apartment in Milan was located near the intersection of Via Leone Tolstoi – a fitting location, given the extent to which Tolstoi’s writing inspired some of the films at the center of my chapter on Chechnya, and inspired my own interest in language, literature, and culture when I was still a teenager. The project received a big boost from a relaxing and productive week at the home of my mother, Irene Tibert, and her husband, Bill, in Florida. I spent the two hundred thirty-second anniversary of US independence and the forty-sixth anniversary of Algerian independence (the next day) there, revising my chapter on Algeria. I am grateful to the Tiberts and to my in-laws, Maurice and Myril Filler, for their continued interest in and support of my work. I thank Joanie for, among many things, watching movies with me.