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978-1-108-42576-6 — Women as Veterans in Britain and France after the First World War
Alison S. Fell
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More Information

Introduction

In a veterans' congress that took place in Vichy in May 1926, former Red Cross nurse Germaine Malaterre Sellier, who had since the Armistice become an active campaigner for pacifist and feminist organisations, addressed the ex-servicemen gathered before her with the following words:

> I am one of you, not only because like you I lived through the war, and like you shed my blood for France, but also because I sense that what unites you are not only concerns for your personal interests, but for the superior interests of France, and this distinguishes you from many other citizens.[1]

Malaterre Sellier, despite her non-combatant status as a nurse, is expressing a sentiment of shared experience and a shared social identity with French veterans.[2] A similar sense of generational and experiential solidarity in relation to the war years is evident six years later in the preface to British former volunteer nurse Vera Brittain's autobiography *Testament of Youth*, in which she explains her decision to publish her memoirs:

> For nearly a decade I have wanted, with a growing sense of urgency, to write something which would show what the whole War and the post-war period . . . has

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[1] 'Discours de Mme Mallaterre-Sellier [*sic*]', *Journal des mutilés, réformés et blessés de guerre*, 22 May 1926, p. 6. This and all future translations are my own. For a discussion of Malaterre Sellier's case, see Alison S. Fell, 'Germaine Malaterre-Sellier, la Grande Guerre et le féminisme pacifiste de l'entre-deux-guerres', in Christine Bard (ed.), *Les Féministes de la première vague* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2015), pp. 207–16.

[2] 'Social identity' is of course a loaded term. The women whose lives I evoke in this book were bearers of multiple identities. They were members of an occupation, a class and a nation. They were women, sisters, wives, daughters and parents. Several had a strong political, regional or faith identity. Drawing on the work of Charles Tilly, I understand these women as social actors who publicly identified with, and constructed through their writings and speeches, the shared social identity of the 'war veteran' or 'war generation' using 'the cultural means at their disposal and drawing on collective memory, adopting or adapting available models.' Charles Tilly, *Stories, Identities and Political Change* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 49.

> meant to the men and women of my generation, the generation of those boys and girls who grew up just before the war broke out.[3]

In these declarations, the two former volunteer war nurses do not position themselves in the way that women were often positioned in relation to the war in the interwar period: as representatives of 'the civilian' and 'the home' in the oppositional pairings combatant/civilian and front/home that, at least to some extent, continued to structure popular understandings of the war and its legacies.[4] Rather, they place themselves on the other side of the dividing line, as members of what French and British societies were culturally constructing as the 'war generation'.

Women and the 'War Generation'

The concept of a 'Generation of 1914' in the post-war years, as Robert Wohl argues in his influential 1979 study, was not so much a demographic reality as a 'device by which people conceptualize[d] society and [sought] to transform it'.[5] In France, the majority of the 'males from the middle layers of society whose main activity was writing'[6] evoked by Wohl did not see women as part of this 'génération du feu'. Rather, and crucially, these male writers and commentators saw women as a group *against* which men who identified with a war generation defined themselves. Wohl's focus on elite male journalists and writers means that women like Germaine Malaterre Sellier, who had a different take on women's relationship to the war generation, are ignored. In the case of Britain, however, Wohl cites Vera Brittain's autobiography as a key text in the construction of the myth of the British version of the 'Generation of 1914', the 'Lost Generation', arguing that her memoir

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[3] Vera Brittain, *Testament of Youth: An Autobiographical Study of the Years 1900–1925* (London: Virago, 1978 [1933]), p. 11. Brittain was a Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD) nurse.

[4] For discussions of the complexity of the relationship of women to evolving definitions of combatant/civilian during the First World War in France and Britain, see Margaret Darrow, 'French Volunteer Nursing and the Myth of War Experience in World War 1', *The American Historical Review* 101: 1 (1996): 80–106; Susan R. Grayzel, *Women's Identities at War: Gender, Motherhood and Politics during the First World War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); Nicoletta Gullace, *'The Blood of Our Sons': Men, Women and the Renegotiation of British Citizenship during the Great War* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Trudi Tate, *Modernism, History and the First World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998); Janet Watson, *Fighting Different Wars: Experience, Memory and the First World War in Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

[5] Robert Wohl, *The Generation of 1914* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), p. 5.

[6] Wohl, *The Generation of 1914*, p. 4.

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More Information

'made explicit, as no other war book had, the narrative sequence within which many English survivors of the war had come to perceive their past'.[7] What is unusual about Brittain's case, of course, although Wohl does not explicitly discuss this, is that unlike the male-authored war memoirs she was using as her literary models, she was telling what was to become a culturally dominant British narrative of the First World War from the point of view of a non-combatant woman. No other woman's war memoir has had such an impact on British cultural memories of the First World War.[8] Yet Brittain's dual self-presentation in *Testament of Youth* as both a grieving female relative and an active participant in the war – as a bereaved sister and lover, but also as a female veteran who had both the right and the moral duty to speak on behalf of the dead about the war and its consequences – was by no means unique.

This book explores the different ways in which the cultural identity of the 'female veteran' was used by women in France and Britain from 1915 to 1933.[9] The First World War female veteran is a social and cultural identity that has not to date been considered in depth by other scholars.[10] In this book, I focus on women in the interwar period who either defined themselves or were defined by others primarily in relation to their war service or war work, and I use the term 'female veteran' to refer to them. The reason I have chosen to use the term 'veteran' to refer to this diverse set of French and British women is because I argue that they appropriate, in different ways and to different ends, certain aspects of the social and cultural identity of the male war veteran in the post-war years. And, importantly, they do so in order to have greater access to public life, to have a voice in a political climate in which women were rarely heard on the public stage. The most straightforward definition of a veteran – a former member of the armed services – does not of course apply to the majority of French and British women who carried out a form of active service during the war. While British female members of the auxiliary services of the armed forces can legitimately be labelled as veterans or ex-servicewomen, there is no French equivalent.[11] My definition of 'female veteran' is a broad one, and covers former nurses, journalists, charity workers, secret service agents and members of resistance networks in occupied territory, as well as members of the British women's auxiliary corps. However, I also consider in my final chapter the limits of the identity of female veteran, considering as an example the wartime and post-war experiences of female industrial workers who led episodes of industrial action. For these women, and particularly for French strikers, their war experiences had a more dubious status in relation to post-war claims to service and sacrifice. While women could present factory work as a form of war service, and contrasted it positively with the post-war bogeymen of shirkers and war profiteers, those who had participated in industrial action were met with widespread accusations of selfishness, defeatism and treachery. Wartime experience was therefore a narrow and fragile platform for women wishing to claim veteran status in the interwar years.

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[7] Wohl, *The Generation of 1914*, p. 111.

[8] For more on the influence of Brittain's narrative on public perceptions of the First World War in Britain, both on its publication in 1933, and as a result of its renewed popularity in the 1970s and 1980s, see Dan Todman, *The Great War: Myth and Memory* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2005); Watson, *Fighting Different Wars*; Alison S. Fell, 'Myth, Countermyth and the Politics of Memory: Vera Brittain and Madeleine Clemenceau Jacquemaire's Interwar Nurse Memoirs', *Synergies Royaume Uni et Irlande*, 4 (2011): 11–24.

[9] My period begins in the second year of the war as women who were invalided out of the war after having served in its early months presented themselves as 'war veterans' or as part of the 'war generation'. It ends in the year of the publication of Brittain's memoirs, a year that also marks the rise of fascism in Germany and an increasing awareness in France and Britain of the prospect of another war, a political context that marked both men's and women's war writings published in the later 1930s.

[10] See individual chapters for secondary literature on the selected case studies. For a discussion of the experience of demobilisation for British ex-servicewomen, see Lucy Noakes, 'Demobilising the Military Woman: Constructions of Class and Gender after the First World War', *Gender and History* 19 (2007): 143–72. Denise Poynter also refers to former First World War nurses and VADs as 'female veterans' in her discussion of pensions, psychological trauma and homecoming. See in particular chapter 4 in 'The Report on the Transfer Was Shell-Shock': A Study of the Psychological Disorders of Nurses and Female VADs Who Served alongside the British and Allied Expeditionary Forces during the First World War, 1914–1918', Unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Northampton, 2008. Available online at http://nectar.northampton.ac.uk/2682/1/Poynter20082682.pdf

The case studies highlighted in this study demonstrate the wide range of activities, different socio-economic backgrounds and political allegiances of women who were identified (or who self-identified) as veterans, as well as significant divergences between the two national contexts. What unites them is the concept of 'active service': all of these women were operating beyond the domestic sphere. Some of these roles, such as nurses or factory workers, were 'top-down' initiatives led by the state. Others, such as journalists or charity workers, were instigated and funded privately. Although some women combined a wartime role with working within the home, or caring for relatives or children, they therefore all engaged in activities that constituted 'war work' or 'war service'. Janet Watson has argued that British men and women's understanding of their wartime activities as ‘work’ or ‘service’, an understanding largely based on social class, led to divergent experiences and memories of the war.[12] In contrast, in this study I argue that, while social class remained an important factor in an individual’s ability to access public life, self-identifying with a ‘war generation’ who had ‘served’ could minimise differences between individuals – such as whether war work was waged or unwaged – in favour of a collective, generational identity that brought with it a degree of visibility and social benefit. This public identification or self-identification as ‘war veteran’ could of course be contested, and frequently was. Many of the women whose lives I explore in my chapters encountered others – both men and women – who challenged their claims to membership of the veteran community or the ‘war generation’. But what interests me in this study is women’s *attempts*, particularly in their writings, speeches, diaries and letters, to present themselves as having been on a form of ‘active service’ during the war and therefore as ‘female veterans’.

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[11] For a discussion of attitudes towards the possible militarisation of French women during the war, see Margaret Darrow, *French Women and the First World War* (Oxford: Berg, 2000). For a study of the civilian women who worked for the French army during the war, see Andrew Orr, *Women and the French Army during the World Wars* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017).

However, the pool of women from which my case studies are drawn constituted a minority in relation to the female populations of the two nations as a whole. The women who were able to appropriate their war service as a key factor in their identities in the 1920s were predominantly – although by no means exclusively – single or childless. The ages of the case studies of women whose stories and voices appear in the chapters that follow vary, but they were all born between 1865 and 1900. The significance of focusing on this particular cohort is, I argue, that an exploration of the ways they viewed and presented the war years in the 1920s gives us a new understanding of the impact of the First World War on French and British women’s lives. In particular, it shows us that in this period claiming to be a ‘war veteran’, or to be part of a ‘war generation’, allowed certain groups of women to make inroads into different fields of public life in the post-war years.

So why and in what ways did women adopt the identity of veteran in the decade following the Armistice? And what was at stake – culturally, socially and politically – when they did so? Jay Winter and Bruno Cabanes, amongst others, have disproved the notion of a clear-cut ‘war generation’ as a demographical reality, in Britain and France, respectively.[13] Yet historians of veteran cultures in both nations tend to agree on the extent to which the *idea* of a war generation gained currency in the interwar years. Further, claiming membership of this generation could bring with it not only a shared sense of identity but equally an amount of social prestige. This relates to the broader sense in which post-war memories and cultural evocations of war have tended to prioritise and sacralise a war story in which the male combatant plays the central role. As Lucy Noakes points out: '[W]omen's memories of wartime are less likely to appear in official discourse. . . . When women write, or speak about these experiences, their voices often sound less confident, and quieter, than men's.'[14] Aligning themselves to the identity of 'war veteran', then, was one way in which women could find a way for their voices, and their stories, to have greater resonance.

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[12] Watson, *Fighting Different Wars*.

[13] Jay Winter, *The Great War and the British People* (London: Macmillan, 1986); Bruno Cabanes, ‘Génération du Feu: aux origines d’une notion’, *Revue Historique*, 641 (2007): 139–50.

In relation to France, Antoine Prost and Chris Millington argue that the strength of the interwar veterans' movement in France pays testament to the widespread appeal of the equation of combatants' war service with social and moral authority. This was true on both sides of the political spectrum. As Millington summarises:

> [T]he victorious Great War veteran, whether perceived as living incarnation of order, moral authority and the nation, or a hero of the working class opposed to capitalist warmongers, was said to understand better than anyone the interests of a nation for whom he had shed his blood. This 'veteran mystique' provided a convenient mobilising myth for an array of veteran and non-veteran groups. . . . It made the veterans a potentially powerful political force.[15]

Although the British Legion was less of a political force than its French counterparts, the 'veteran mystique' was also evident in Britain. Niall Barr notes that social attitudes towards ex-servicemen moved after the Great War from a position of 'suspicion and hostility' to one of 'a certain amount of national respect'.[16] As in France, the British Legion espoused high-minded ideals, seeking to create a 'brighter Britain' through the collective action of ex-servicemen, and believing that as a group they had the right, founded on their war service, to be heard on the public and political stage.[17] In many cases, the rhetoric was not matched by concrete achievements in terms of the influence of veterans' associations on national and political life. Yet for the purposes of my study, the emergence of the First World War veteran as a significant social and

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[14] Lucy Noakes, 'Gender, War and Memory: Discourse and Experience in History', *Journal of Contemporary History* 36: 4 (2001): 663–72 (p. 664). See also Miriam Cooke, *Women and the War Story* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

[15] Antoine Prost, *Les Anciens Combattants et la société française 1914–1939*, 3 vols. (Paris: Presses de la fondation nationale des sciences politiques, 1977); Chris Millington, *From Victory to Vichy: Veterans in Interwar France* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), p. 3.

[16] Niall Barr, *The Lion and the Poppy: British Veterans, Politics and Society, 1921–1939* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2005), p. 9.

[17] Barr, *The Lion and the Poppy*, p. 192.

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Excerpt
More Information

cultural collective identity – despite its limitations in terms of effecting real social or political change – offered a blueprint that certain women in both nations were able to adopt and adapt.

The terminology of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu provides a useful framework for understanding the interwar attitudes towards, and social, political and cultural appropriations of, the identity of the war veteran. Bourdieu's model of social relations, which has its roots in Marxist theories of class and conflict, suggests that the goal of all groups is to gain legitimacy through the amassing of capital. Capital is extended beyond economic capital to cover any material and symbolic goods that present themselves as worthy of being sought after within a particular social formation.[18] In Bourdieu's terms, the identity of war veteran brought with it a significant degree of cultural and moral capital in both France and Britain. Male veterans referred to war service not only in order to lobby for improved pensions and other benefits but equally as a means of claiming the right to a public voice in diverse political and social debates. While an important function of veterans' groups was to provide networks of mutual support, a space in which men could find comradeship and a shared sense of belonging to a collective past, this was not their only attraction for their members.

Some French and British ex-servicemen used the cultural and moral capital with which the identity of veteran potentially endowed them to argue in favour of nationalist and right-wing political ideologies.[19] On the opposite side of the political spectrum were ex-servicemen who tried to use veterans' moral authority to militate for the causes of international demilitarisation and moral disarmament.[20] Away from the organised ex-servicemen movement, other men highlighted their veteran status in attempts to achieve a degree of social mobility, boost their chances of gaining employment, of entering public office, or, in the field of war literature, of having their writings published.[21] However, as Nicoletta

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[18] Pierre Bourdieu, 'The Forms of Capital', in John G. Richardson (ed.), *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), pp. 241–58.

[19] Influential in this respect has been George Mosse's 'brutalisation' thesis, according to which male veterans sought to extend their combatant identities by joining paramilitary, often right-wing, groupings. See George Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

[20] Julia Eichenberg and John Paul Newman (eds.), *The Great War and Veterans' Internationalism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013). On veterans who turned to the radical left see Millington, *From Victory to Vichy*; David Englander, 'The National Union of Ex-Servicemen and the Labour Movement', *History* 76 (1991): 24–42.

[21] See for example Simon Ball, *The Guardsmen: Harold Macmillan, Three Friends, and the World They Made* (London: HarperCollins, 2004); Graham Wootton, *The Politics of Influence: British Ex-Servicemen, Cabinet Decisions and Cultural Change* (London: Routledge, 1963).

Gullace has shown in relation to Britain, the nature of the First World War allowed women as well as men to claim service and sacrifice in relation to their wartime activities. As Gullace notes, ‘a host of commentators [in Britain] began to cast patriotism, rather than manhood, as the fundamental qualification for citizenship.’[22] Charles Ridel makes a similar point in his work on the powerful cultural figure of the *embusqué* (slacker or shirker) in France, which functioned as the negative ‘other’ to positive representations of war service and sacrifice: ‘On the home front, non-mobilised men and women, as well as non-combatants, were subjected to the full force of combatant representations of the *embusqué*, which exerted enormous social pressure.’[23] This book demonstrates the ways in which appropriating the identity of war veteran in both nations allowed certain women to draw upon the positive connotations of active war service in order to attempt to intervene in public debates and participate in public life in ways that may otherwise have been closed off to them.

As I noted earlier, the war veteran was a jealously guarded and highly contested social identity in the interwar years. Many male veterans saw it as inherently incompatible with female non-combatants, however worthy their war service. In France, women were commonly classified as ‘war victims’, alongside orphans and other civilian casualties, and rarely as any kind of equivalent to ‘combatant’. Margaret Darrow and Susan Grayzel have both concluded that this relates to a broader reluctance in France to associate women with military service because historically that had brought with it the rights and responsibilities of Republican citizenship.[24] It was front-line combat experience that was most often presented as worthy of veteran status in post-war France. As Prost concludes in his study of French veterans: ‘To have the right to speak, it was necessary to have experienced the dirt, lice, rats and mud, and above all the suffering and fear, the never-ending waiting, fraternity, pity and sacrifice. It was this privileged experience that had no equivalent that gave combatants, at least according to them, the right to intervene in national life.’[25] Despite their experiences of fear and of the physical risks of being near the front as nurses or as civilians under bombardment, women could never claim to have shared in front-line combatant experience as, with a handful of exceptions, they did not bear arms.

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[22] Gullace, *‘The Blood of Our Sons’*, p. 4.

[23] Charles Ridel, *Les Embusqués* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2007), p. 296.

[24] Darrow, ‘French Volunteer Nursing’; Susan R. Grayzel, ‘“The Souls of Soldiers”: Civilians under Fire in First World War France’, *The Journal of Modern History* 78: 3 (2006): 588–622.

[25] Prost, *Les Anciens Combattants*, 1, pp. 111–12.

Echoing Prost, Janet Watson notes that the focus on 'gruesome bloodshed' in the trenches in the post-war years meant that 'valid voices' about the war in Britain were also generally seen to belong 'only . . . to those men who had shared this "experience."'[26] What is more, a concentration on the 'combatant spirit' and 'trench experience' excluded not only women but also a significant percentage of mobilised men who had not been on the front lines, and who as a result could not claim membership of what was understood as a veteran elite. In France, these tensions were played out in the 1920s veterans' press in debates over who should have the right to carry the 'carte du combattant' (combatant card), which gave veterans certain rights and privileges.[27]

Even if the use of 'ex-servicemen' rather than 'ancien combattant' does not imply the same privileging of front-line combat experience in Britain, similar notions were nonetheless at play in the British Legion's emphasis on the promotion of an ideal of male comradeship amongst ex-servicemen, which was seen to mirror and reproduce the positive aspects of wartime life. The reluctance of many members of the British Legion to allow First World War ex-servicewomen to participate in their activities is also evidence of British veterans' desire to limit membership to men who had seen active service. It had been initially decided at a conference in 1921 not to allow ex-servicewomen to join the Legion and to form a Women's Auxiliary Section, but this decision was revoked in 1922. However, the social side of Legion membership remained reserved for men, and the Women's Section was open not only to ex-servicewomen but also to female relatives of ex-servicemen, which to some extent aligned it with other women's organisations such as the Women's Institute. At a local level, prejudice often remained against ex-servicewomen in branches of the British Legion.[28] In sum, in both Britain and France, a clear hierarchy of veterans existed, at the top of which were male combatants who bore arms and who risked life.[29]

As John Horne points out, moreover, it was only ever a minority of ex-servicemen who joined ex-servicemen's organisations, even in France,

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[26] Watson, *Fighting Different Wars*, p. 306.

[27] Jean-François Monte, 'L'Office National des anciens combattants et victimes de guerre: Créations et actions durant l'entre-deux-guerres', *Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporains* 205 (2002): 71–83.

[28] Barr, *The Lion and the Poppy*, pp. 48–50.

[29] In this context, Adrian Gregory's and Nicoletta Gullace's discussions of the wartime debates around 'sacrifice' and 'service' in First World War Britain continue to be relevant in a post-war context in which the question of who had borne the greater burdens of war continued to create conflict and tensions. See Adrian Gregory, *The Last Great War: British Society and the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Gullace, *'The Blood of Our Sons'*.

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More Information

where veterans' associations constituted the largest civic movement in the country.[30] It was therefore a self-selecting group of men who chose explicitly to foreground the identity of veteran in relation to many other identities available to them in the post-war period, and they did so for diverse social, ideological and economic reasons. The same was true for women who had been active during the war. Relatively few of these women chose to extend their wartime identities into the post-war years, with the majority of women prioritising domestic roles as wives and mothers after the Armistice. For example, only around 8 per cent of the 40,000 or so members of Queen Mary's Army Auxiliary Corps (formerly the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps) became active members of its Old Comrades' Association, attending events, forming regional branches, and contributing to its *Gazette*.[31] The case studies I have chosen to focus on in this book reveal that those women who turned to their wartime identities as a key factor in their self-presentations during the post-war years often did so because they did not fully identify with – or, in some cases, overtly rejected – other more dominant identities available to women during this period.

Gendered Identities in the 1920s

The impacts of the war on women's rights, roles and identities in the interwar period in France and Britain have been much debated by historians and cultural critics in the past fifty years.[32] In the 1960s and 1970s, the war was frequently characterised as a watershed moment in women's history, transforming gender relations and, potentially at least, 'emancipating' women from the pre-war limitations of middle-class domesticity, offering in its place new opportunities and identities. This was especially the case in Britain, where this approach was influenced in 1977 by the Imperial War Museum's exhibition, which was accompanied by the publication of Arthur Marwick's lavishly illustrated book *Women at War 1914–1918*.[33] Both were influential in educating the public about

[30] John Horne, 'Beyond Cultures of Victory and Cultures of Defeat? Inter-War Veterans' Internationalism', in Julia Eichenberg and John Paul Newman, *The Great War and Veterans' Internationalism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 207–22.

[31] Statistics taken from the QMAAC *Old Comrades Association Gazette*.

[32] For other useful overviews of the historiography, see Françoise Thébaud, 'Femmes et genre dans la guerre', in Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Jean-Jacques Becker (eds.), *Encyclopédie de la Grande Guerre 1914–1918* (Paris: Bayard, 2004), pp. 613–25; Birgitta Bader-Zaar, 'Controversy: War-Related Changes in Gender Relations: The Issue of Women's Citizenship', in *1914–1918 Online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War*. doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.15463/id1418.10036

[33] Arthur Marwick, *Women at War 1914–1918* (London: Fontana, 1977).