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978-1-107-00194-7 - Gender, Nationalism, and War: Conflict on the Movie Screen

Matthew Evangelista

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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.

MATTHEW EVANGELISTA is President White Professor of History and Political Science and former chair of the Department of Government at Cornell University.

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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.

Contents

	<i>List of figures</i>	<i>page</i> ix
	<i>Preface</i>	xi
1	Virginia Woolf’s purse	1
	War as a mostly male activity	4
	Hypotheses on gender, nationalism, and war	11
	Masculinity, femininity, and violence in the American Western	17
	Trailer: gender and nationalist violence on film	21
2	Algeria: a world constructed out of ruins	25
	Colonial exploitation and discrimination	27
	Gender roles before the independence movement	32
	Origins of the Algerian war	35
	Subverting stereotypes in <i>The Battle of Algiers</i>	39
	Pontecorvo’s neorealism and its limits	58
	Algeria after independence	63
	The proliferation of small (misogynist) men	66
	Legacies of violence	78
3	Yugoslavia: archetype or anomaly?	80
	Yugoslavia’s history: conflict and coexistence	82
	What constitutes difference? Bosnia’s ephemeral ethnicity	86
	Grievance and greed: economic sources of conflict	90
	Media manipulation: “Television was more important than history”	95
	Women and nationalism in Yugoslavia	98
	Gender and the wars	103
	<i>Pretty Village, Pretty Flame</i>	114
4	Chechnya: virgins, mothers, and terrorists	139
	Two centuries of Russo-Chechen relations	143
	Solidifying stereotypes in Chechnya	145
	Socio-economic change and the demise of the Soviet model	147
		vii

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-00194-7 - Gender, Nationalism, and War: Conflict on the Movie Screen
Matthew Evangelista
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

viii	Contents	
	Chechnya’s bid for independence	149
	War after war	151
	Women, violence, and Islam	156
	Gender between tradition and modernity	159
	Sexual violence and the limits of peacemaking	165
	Chechnya on screen	169
	From romantic realism to crude caricature	177
	From “White Stockings” to “Black Widows”	187
	Gender role reversal and the promise of redemption	192
5	Québec: <i>oui</i> , no, or <i>femme</i>	203
	Origins of French Canadian nationalism	204
	Women and the early nationalist movement	209
	The Quiet Revolution	212
	Language and sovereignty	214
	The FLQ and the October Crisis	218
	<i>Nô</i> : “The culture survives because of the mothers”	223
	Yvette and the 1980 referendum	236
	Choosing not to choose: “So what’s the problem?”	242
6	“To live to see better times”: gender, nationalism, sovereignty, equality	253
	Nationalism	255
	Sovereignty	259
	Equality	263
	Sequel: gender and nationalist violence on film	269
	<i>Index</i>	272

Figures

1.1	Economic emasculation (<i>Glengarry Glen Ross</i>)	page 17
1.2	Symbolic emasculation (<i>High Noon</i>)	19
1.3	Reconsidering nonviolence (<i>High Noon</i>)	20
2.1	Wedding ceremony (<i>The Battle of Algiers</i>)	40
2.2	Passing as Muslim (<i>The Battle of Algiers</i>)	43
2.3	“Didn’t you know?” (<i>The Battle of Algiers</i>)	43
2.4	Female shield (<i>The Battle of Algiers</i>)	44
2.5	<i>Soirée</i> (<i>The Battle of Algiers</i>)	45
2.6	“Don’t you find it rather cowardly?” (<i>The Battle of Algiers</i>)	46
2.7	“Give us your bombers, sir” (<i>The Battle of Algiers</i>)	46
2.8	<i>Boudoir</i> (<i>The Battle of Algiers</i>)	48
2.9	Cutting hair (<i>The Battle of Algiers</i>)	48
2.10	Applying lipstick (<i>The Battle of Algiers</i>)	49
2.11	Waiting (<i>The Battle of Algiers</i>)	49
2.12	Passing as European (<i>The Battle of Algiers</i>)	50
2.13	Ice cream (<i>The Battle of Algiers</i>)	51
2.14	Second thoughts? (<i>The Battle of Algiers</i>)	52
2.15	Passing as women (<i>The Battle of Algiers</i>)	55
2.16	Hiding in the well (<i>The Battle of Algiers</i>)	55
2.17	“They had to transform themselves into us” (<i>The Battle of Algiers</i>)	56
3.1	Cutting the ribbon (<i>Pretty Village, Pretty Flame</i>)	119
3.2	“Will there be a war?” (<i>Pretty Village, Pretty Flame</i>)	121
3.3	“Fuck the art, just pull the trigger” (<i>Pretty Village, Pretty Flame</i>)	123
4.1	Dina guards her prisoners (<i>Prisoner of the Mountains</i>)	174
4.2	Dina takes the guns (<i>Prisoner of the Mountains</i>)	176
4.3	Abdul returns (<i>Prisoner of the Mountains</i>)	176
4.4	Violating “the unwritten rule” (<i>Checkpoint</i>)	178
4.5	Madam investigator arrives (<i>Checkpoint</i>)	179
4.6	Naked welcome (<i>Checkpoint</i>)	180
4.7	Zhanna and Akhmed (<i>House of Fools</i>)	197

x	List of figures	
4.8	“Down with fascism and Russian chauvinism!” (<i>House of Fools</i>)	198
4.9	Zhanna and the “White Stocking” sniper (<i>House of Fools</i>)	199
4.10	“But we are enemies now” (<i>Prisoner of the Mountains</i>)	201
4.11	A soldier’s mother (<i>Prisoner of the Mountains</i>)	201
5.1	A male actor with a female mask (<i>Nô</i>)	226
5.2	A female actor with a masculine face (<i>Nô</i>)	228
5.3	François-Xavier and Sophie (<i>Nô</i>)	229
5.4	Michel (<i>Nô</i>)	229
5.5	At the sushi restaurant (<i>Nô</i>)	231
5.6	Backstage (<i>Nô</i>)	234
5.7	Sophie arrested (<i>Nô</i>)	235
5.8	“They’ve become bourgeois” (<i>Nô</i>)	236

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-00194-7 - Gender, Nationalism, and War: Conflict on the Movie Screen

Matthew Evangelista

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Preface

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

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-00194-7 - Gender, Nationalism, and War: Conflict on the Movie Screen

Matthew Evangelista

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xii Preface

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 language 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, Anindita Banerjee, Olivier Barsalou, Bettina Bradbury, Raphaëlle Branche, Benjamin Brower, Susan Buck-Morss, Holly Case, Debra Castillo, Michele Chiaruzzi, Nancy Condee, miriam cooke, Chip Gagnon, Danielle Haque, Heather Hendershot, Aida Hozic, Jonathan Kirshner, Mark Kramer, Tafer Mahiedinne, Aleksandra Milićević, Vladimir Padunov, Mark Selden, Michel Seymour, Anna Marie Smith, and Suzanne Boivin Sommerville. Some provided valuable advice for framing the study, others read individual case chapters carefully and saved me from numerous embarrassing mistakes, still others offered suggestions and information, including about reproducing the images captured from the films.

I received excellent comments on some of the chapters and related papers from participants in the workshop on Violence, Gender, and the Cinematic Nation, sponsored by Cornell’s Peace Studies Program (now the Judith Reppy Institute for Peace and Conflict Studies), and the members of the Brett de Bary interdisciplinary writing group on Human Rights and Cosmopolitanism, funded by a grant from the Mellon Foundation and organized by Stephanie DeGooyer and Diane Rubenstein. Some of my thinking on this topic benefited from the wonderful experience of co-teaching an undergraduate seminar with my

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978-1-107-00194-7 - Gender, Nationalism, and War: Conflict on the Movie Screen

Matthew Evangelista

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Preface

xiii

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.