“A disgrace to the country they belong to”: the sexualisation of female soldiers in First World War Britain

« Elles déshonorent la nation » : les femmes soldats et la sexualisation de leur image en Grande-Bretagne pendant la Première Guerre mondiale

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Abstract

Cet article, qui aborde la représentation « sexuelle » des femmes soldats britanniques lors de la Première Guerre mondiale, démontre que l’entrée des femmes dans les forces armées déstabilisait aussi bien l’image de la masculinité que celle de la féminité, car il était considéré que les femmes en uniforme militaire s’introduisaient de façon illicite dans une sphère d’activité entendue comme étant réservée « par nature » aux hommes. Centré sur les femmes qui servaient dans le premier et le plus grand des services auxiliaires féminins, le Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC), faisant appel à des sources contemporaines variées, l’article examine comment il était souvent dit que les femmes en uniforme étaient « déplacées » et comment de façon récurrente elles furent représentées en fonction de leur sexualité. Cette représentation des femmes en uniforme selon leur identité sexuelle prenait deux formes prédominantes : les femmes furent perçues tantôt comme des Amazones aux allures masculines, profitant des conditions nouvelles de la guerre pour adopter une identité masculine, tantôt, au contraire, comme des hétérosexuelles survoltées, excitées par les conditions de guerre et motivées par l’intégration au WAAC afin de s’approcher des combattants masculins. En conclusion, l’article prend en considération les femmes en milieu militaire de nos jours afin de faire remarquer qu’en dépit des changements sociaux, culturels, politiques et économiques des quatre-vingt-dix dernières années les femmes soldats sont encore souvent considérées comme des êtres « déplacés » et continuent à être définies selon leur sexe.
“A Disgrace to the Country They Belong To”: the Sexualisation of Female Soldiers in First World War Britain

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This article begins from the premise that when women put on military uniform, gender roles are disturbed. War has long been seen as a fundamentally male sphere of interest, and the military, particularly when in combat, the most masculine of all aspects of war. Although militaries have often had to draw on women’s labour, firstly as camp followers, then in times of total war and more recently as permanent members of the armed forces of most nations, the process of creating a military role for women has rarely been straightforward, involving as it does a renegotiation of gender roles. The sociologist of the military, Christopher Dandeker, has argued that the military has to be both culturally distinct from civil society, providing a space where the violent acts rejected by civil law, such as killing, are condoned and even encouraged, but at the same time has to reflect the mores and values of the nation which the military exists to serve and defend1. This tension can be seen in the debates which have accompanied the British military’s relationship to social change, such as the institutional unwillingness to oppose discrimination against gay men and lesbians in the service which exists alongside attempts to open the

military up to these same groups. Thus the military has to reflect the shifts in civil society, perhaps by offering new roles to women, or by admitting gay men and lesbians, whilst at the same time maintaining its status as an organisation distinct from civil society. The entry of women into the military threatens to disturb not only this civil-military nexus, but also existing paradigms of masculinity and femininity.

When women wear a military uniform and take on the work and responsibilities traditionally associated with the male soldier, both the masculinity of the male soldier and the femininity of the uniformed woman are disturbed. According to legend, Amazons, the mythical female warriors of the classical world, cut off their right breasts so that they could better use bows and arrows. Again and again, images of Amazons stress both their “unnaturalness” in removing one of the most potent symbols of their femininity and their promiscuity. By creating themselves as warriors, they both distanced themselves from femininity and threatened the military and sexual prowess of men. As Marjorie Garber has argued, “the sight of women wearing medals or ‘orders’ attached to their chests” suggests that “such orders can be unpinned, detached, from men”\(^2\). Masculinity and militarism are closely linked, indeed as Nicoletta Gullace has shown, the petticoat, an item of clothing symbolising a particularly domesticated, passive and impractical version of femininity was sometimes offered to civilian men believed to be avoiding armed service during the First World War as a symbolic alternative to military uniform\(^3\). This gender disturbance has impacted upon both individuals and on social structures in a wide variety of ways. Individual men have experienced the movement of women into the military as both a challenge to their identity and, literally, as a threat to their existence, as the ability of militaries to draw on female labour has historically freed more men for the front line. Other men have welcomed the presence of women as potential romantic and sexual partners\(^4\). Individual women have described their work with the military in terms of liberation, as providing them with the chance to undertake new roles and opportunities unavailable to them in civil society, whilst other women have resisted their incorporation into a military structure understood as monolithic and insensitive to feminine needs and desires. More widely, women’s movement into military roles in Britain has been understood as both an expression of a popular female patriotism during


\(^4\) All of these perspectives can be found in the letters and diaries of male soldiers collected in the Imperial War Museum (IWM), Documents Department (DD) and Women’s Work Collection (WWC). See, for example, DD, Papers of Captain Paul Sulman, DD Diary, Private R. Cude, *Answers*, Letter Page, 26/1/1918.
the First World War, and as an example of national unity, of the willingness of every sector of the population to “do their bit” by subjugating individual desires to national necessity in the Second World War. However, the incorporation of women into the British Army has always been perceived as a threat to both the femininity of the women who don khaki uniforms and to the stability of pre-existing gender roles in both military and civil society. As this article will argue, this has left female soldiers vulnerable to both rumours regarding their sexuality as, by having stepped outside of traditional discourses of femininity they are seen as woman “out of place” and are thus unprotected by ideas regarding “respectable” female sexuality, and to physical sexual assault by male soldiers.

All of these points are illustrated by the rather self-serving memoirs of Maria Botchkareva, the Commander of the Russian Women’s Battalion of Death in the First World War who explained her determination to take part in combat not only in patriotic terms but also because she was unwilling to serve in the support forces as she says: “I had heard so many rumours about the women in the rear I had come to despise them”. Despite warnings from her mother along the lines of “think what the men will do to a solitary woman [...] they’ll make a prostitute out of you”, Botchkareva enlisted and spent her first night as the only women in her local barracks, fighting off the men as they had taken her for “a woman of loose morals who had made her way into the ranks for the sake of carrying on her illicit trade”5. Although we have to treat the veracity of Botchkareva’s ghost written memoir with care, functioning as it did as both a piece of self-promotion and anti-Bolshevik propaganda, her comments demonstrate both the ways in which women attached to the military are perceived in a sexual manner, and the dangers they can face as a consequence of this. This article examines the sexualisation of female soldiers in First World War Britain, considering the ways in which they were, at times, perceived as both “mannish” lesbians, taking advantage of the opportunities the war offered to dress and act as men and to live in a homosocial world, and as promiscuous heterosexuals, motivated to join the women’s service because of the access it offered to the male combatant.

**Amazonian Auxiliaries: the “Mannish” Uniformed Woman**

At the outbreak of the First World War, there were no official military services for women, and in the early days of the war, rumours abounded about women who were, in the absence of any official organisation of women’s labour, attempting to join the army and fight in

France. These women were represented in the press as “Amazons” and suffragettes, as in the persistent rumours of a “regiment of British suffragettes” with “fine, soldier like bearing” who were believed to have appeared in France in early 1915, or in the story reported in the Daily Graphic at the same time of a woman who, “attired in a man’s suit, and with her hair cropped short”, presented herself as an army recruit\(^6\). Women who wanted to emulate the male model of national service in wartime had the choice of enrolling in one of the nursing services, or of joining one of the many voluntary women’s organisations. Many of these offered a form of uniform to their members, and by 1918, the Evening News was commenting on the 42 different forms of uniform worn by women\(^7\). The largest and most visible of these voluntary organisations was the Women’s Volunteer Reserve (WVR), whose members wore a khaki uniform and who practised drill in the towns and cities of Britain. As the war continued however, the need for the Army, suffering heavy losses on all fronts, to draw on women’s organised labour, became more apparent, and following the devastating losses of the Battle of the Somme in the summer of 1916, Lieutenant-General H. M. Lawson was commissioned to carry out a study assessing which occupations could be carried out effectively by women and older men in order to free manpower for the front line. Lawson recommended the army utilize women’s labour in support services, both at home and in France. Although women had a long history of servicing the British Army as camp followers throughout the 18\(^{th}\) and 19\(^{th}\) centuries, Lawson’s Report marks the first official recognition of the necessity of these services in a designated war zone, and in March 1917, following heated argument within the War Office as to the wisdom of using female labour, the Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC) was formed. As I have argued above, women in military uniform, whether paramilitary as in the WVR or official as in the WAAC, were subjected to rumours regarding their, supposedly, promiscuous heterosexual behaviour, and their role as readily available sexual partners for soldiers. However, alongside this set of beliefs there existed a less explicit belief that many women had been drawn to military service because they were attracted by the masculine nature of the work and uniforms. Rather than being attracted by the men in uniform, it was believed that some women were attracted to the very masculinity of the service.

Concern with the behaviour of “masculine” women was by no means new, being seen, for example, in much discussion of the “new woman” of the late 19\(^{th}\) and early 20\(^{th}\) centuries and informing both the debates of the sexologists and the public perception of the suffragettes.

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\(^7\) *Evening News*, 24/1/1918.
These concerns were, however, given a new impetus by the appearance in British society of large numbers of women in military and quasi-military uniform during the First World War. Whilst these women were, on the one hand, welcomed as very visible symbols of national unity and a shared patriotism, they were also criticised as selfish and even abnormal, donning military uniform less as a means of expressing their patriotism and desire to serve than as a way of appropriating the signs and symbols of masculinity. The war offered women an opportunity to dispense with traditional women’s clothing and to take on some of the visual trappings of masculinity. Although women usually wore feminised versions of the male military uniform, often with skirts rather than breeches or trousers, and fitted jackets which accentuated their shape, the strongly masculine nature of the military uniform was sometimes seen as negating the femininity of its wearer, imbuing her instead with “unnatural” masculine qualities.

Whilst the service that many uniformed women were carrying out was usually praised, many of the newspaper and magazine articles which were critical of women’s adoption of various forms of military uniform during the war focused on the impact these uniforms were believed to have upon their femininity. Although articles and letters critical of these women’s adoption of uniform focused upon its perceived impact upon their appearance and behaviour, underlying this criticism was the belief that military uniform had the potential to negate a woman’s femininity, and thus had a particular appeal to “mannish” women, lesbians or the “inverts” of sexological writing. Whilst this was not made explicit in any of the journalism I have looked at it was at times implied, sometimes humorously and at other times spitefully, as in the Daily Mail’s description of uniformed women in 1916 that “they were in such a hurry to be like men that a section of them have earned the title ‘it’” 8. Sexologists had already argued that same sex institutions such as boarding schools and prisons, were frequently the site for sexual activity between women, and, again whilst this was not made explicit in the contemporary press, it appears to have informed the arguments of many of those who opposed the formation of uniformed military organisations for women9. Even Lady Londonderry, the Colonel in Chief of the WVR, was privately concerned that the organisation was too militaristic and was attracting women for the “wrong” reasons, commenting in her memoirs that “we had to contend with a section of she-men who wished to be armed to the teeth”10. This tendency was perhaps typified by Mrs

8 Daily Mail, 10/6/1916.


10 Marchioness of Londonderry, Retrospect, London: Frederick Muller, 1938, 112.
Charlesworth, Acting Colonel of the WVR in 1916, who claimed in the *Daily Graphic* during the Battle of the Somme that the WVR was ready to provide women to replace men in the army: “I have with me 250 hunting women, all hard as nails, and each brought up from girlhood to know and understand horses. Why waste us? The machinery to train and discipline a women’s army is ready and waiting” 11. It was a straightforward task for the press to imply that women seeking such a new role were also seeking out other forms of “masculine” behaviour.

Radclyffe Hall, describing the attractiveness of wartime uniform for Stephen, the lesbian heroine of her 1928 novel *The Well of Loneliness*, made what was implicit in much wartime writing explicit, explaining that:

One great weakness they all had, it must be admitted, and this was for uniforms […] and although their Sam Browne belts remained swordless, their hats and their caps without regimental badges, a battalion was formed in those terrible years that would never again be completely disbanded12.

The journalist Charles Dawburn, writing in the *Evening News* in September 1916 described “the masquerade” of masculinity which he believed uniformed women were performing, with “the short cropped hair, the mannish stride, the swagger stick – even the appellation ‘Sir’ which I have heard the younger women address to their seniors” being singled out as features which were especially unattractive to soldiers on leave from the Front13. The following year Max Pemberton, writing in *Parsons Weekly* described the “dashing spectacle” he came across in a London restaurant, where “a bevy of finely built girls” who “called each other old chappie […] in the uniform of a well known corps, and the cigarettes that they smoked should have filled hospitals”14. Similarly, a 1917 article in *The Globe* claimed to reproduce a letter from “Betty”, a member of a female paramilitary organisation, either the WAAC or the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry, who wrote:

I have just received my Commission and I now wear a British ‘warm’, the dinkiest of riding breeches, a Sam Browne belt and top boots! In fact, I am dressed exactly like a man except I do not sport spurs!

The author went on to describe “the type of swaggering khaki clad girl, her hat tilted at an acute angle, and held by a chin strap, her regimentals complete with brass buttons and badges, and a mannish assurance that is by no means an attractive quality”15. Whilst none of the

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11 *Daily Graphic*, 22/7/1916.
articles cited here explicitly called these militarized, “masculine” women lesbians, the terminology with which they were described was redolent of the language used by the sexologists to describe female “inverts”, and was clearly intended to imply that many uniformed women shared these characteristics.

As well as undermining the femininity of the women, their adoption of military uniform, and its impact upon their appearance and behaviour, was also often seen as a threat to the existing social order, specifically to the sexual status quo. In an article entitled “The Gentle Sex?”, Katherine Cox described a “dear old white haired lady” being pushed aside while boarding a bus by “two big overheated young women with their hats askew and dishevelled hair” asking whether “there is any necessity for us to stride about, our hands thrust deep in our pockets, and [to] look and behave as much like ploughboys as we possibly can?”\textsuperscript{16} At times this role reversal was depicted approvingly, as in the Bystander cartoon of 1918, entitled “The New Gallant”, which showed a woman in uniform giving up her seat on a bus to an overdressed, overtly feminine woman. In this representation, however, the uniformed woman is also viewed as feminine, with a small waist, long elegant legs, smart gloves and a gathered, flowing jacket. Her dress does not provide a threat to the status quo as she has managed to negotiate a path between the masculinity of her uniform and her behaviour, giving up her seat on the bus, and her femininity, maintaining her figure and graceful posture. As both Susan Grayzel and Krisztina Roberts have argued, women such as this, by combining femininity with patriotism could be seen as a symbol of modernity, promoting acceptable “wartime innovations in gendered behaviour”\textsuperscript{17}. Nonetheless, despite the qualified approval of uniformed women which existed, criticism of overtly masculine women in uniform continued throughout and after the war. Often, this criticism was expressed as a fear that masculine, militarized women would not make attractive or desirable sexual partners for the returning soldiers, one soldier was quoted as qualifying his approval of “khaki girls” with the comment that “I don’t think they are the kind of girls we men will want to marry. When a man does settle

\textsuperscript{16} K. Cox, The Evening Standard, 14/6/1917.

\textsuperscript{17} S. Grayzel, Women’s Identities at War: Gender, Motherhood and Politics in Britain and France During the First World War, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999, 200; K. Roberts, “‘All That is Best of the Modern Woman?’: Representations of Paramilitary Woman War Workers in British Popular Culture 1918-1938”, unpublished paper, The First World War and Popular Culture Conference, University of Newcastle, UK, 2006. It is worth noting that this type of action was not always reported in such an approving manner. The Weekly Dispatch ran a story on 4/7/1915 reporting a similar incident, when a member of the WVR offered her seat to a hospital nurse, “young and in the rosiest of health”, who accepted. The article was entitled “The New War Sex: What Are We Coming To?”.
down after the war he will choose, above all, the girl who is womanly.”18 Thus, these women were in danger of abandoning not only their femininity but their “natural” role as wives and mothers. Given the implied sexuality of these Amazonian women, it could be suggested that this would not necessarily pose a problem for them. However, the increased visibility of uniformed, potentially “masculine” women meant that they were perceived as a potential threat to the social order. Whilst, as the war went on and the need for manpower increased, the need for women’s militarized labour became more and more apparent, women were not expected to appear to be enjoying the new opportunities which the war sometimes presented to them, whether these were opportunities for new types of work, for travel, or for the masquerade of masculinity.

Towards the end of the war, and following the Armistice, condemnation of “mannish” women in uniform increased. Criticism was accentuated by the desire to return to an imagined pre-war status quo and stability. In January 1919, the Saturday Review published a vicious denunciation of women who had profited from the war:

Let there be no doubt about it; a large part of the female population of the country have had the time of their lives […] they have learnt the joys of freedom, of considerable wage, of swaggering about in very kind of uniform […] are they going to be wives and mothers now the men are coming home? 19

Six months later the Sheffield Daily Telegraph ran a similar story which focused specifically upon the perceived negative impact of army life upon femininity:

In some cases Army life (we omit the nursing and hospital department) in the cases of girls naturally refined or delicately nurtured, has not been an unmixed blessing […] they show a tendency to avoid the home and sever their home ties; the efforts they make to appear bold and masculine, whether it be – to mention one example – in excessive cigarette smoking or the thrusting of their hands deep into their side pockets, all go to indicate the loss of grace and charm which in the old days caused their fathers to espouse their mothers20.

Although again not explicitly accusing these “mannish” women of homosexuality, the influence of sexology and its depiction of female “inverts” as sometimes “mannish” and lacking in traditionally feminine qualities, is apparent here. Arguably these criticisms gained momentum following the war as fears about the future of the race were increasingly articulated in response to the loss of men’s lives in the war and the resulting imbalance between men and women. The sexologist and anti-

18 The Globe, 19/9/1917.
19 Saturday Review, 11/1/1919.
20 Sheffield Daily Telegraph, 12/6/1919.
feminist Arabella Kenealy argued in *Feminism and Sex Extinction*, published in 1920, that the “mannahish woman” had “become a serious cult” and as such women were “incapable of parenthood” they were directly responsible for what she termed “race suicide”21. The masculine uniformed woman, tolerated during the war as a necessary facet of the war effort, became an increasingly unacceptable, marginalised figure in peacetime22. No longer able to appropriate uniform as a symbol of female patriotism, the post-war uniformed woman became a symbol of gender disorder caused by the upheavals of war, which needed to be restored in peacetime.

**Sowing Her Wild Oats: The Image of the Sexually Promiscuous Uniformed Woman**

Whilst criticism of the uniformed “mannahish” woman was muted in wartime, condemnation of militarized women as sexually promiscuous opportunists, determined to entrap male soldiers, was expressed somewhat more freely, albeit in a language muted by the possibility of prosecution under the Defence of the Realm Act (DORA) if the comments were believed to be undermining the war effort23. Despite an early enthusiasm for the WAAC, women’s behaviour and motivations for joining the service were soon questioned and by late 1917 it was widely believed that recruitment to the Corps was being harmed by rumours circulating about the immorality of its members24. A letter from Mona

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21 A. Kenealy, *Feminism and Race Extinction*, London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1920, 263, cited in L. Doan, *Fashioning Sapphism: The Origins of a Modern English Lesbian Culture*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2001, 59. It should be noted here that the judgemental tone of Kenealy’s writing appears to be fairly unusual amongst sexologists, who, for the most part, argued that homosexuality was a medical condition which its ‘sufferers’ could not help and therefore, they should not be judged or legislated against. Arguably, these finer points of sexological writing did not enter into the public consciousness. Instead, some of the terminology used by sexologists appears to have been picked up by the press and the general public and invested with moral meaning. For more discussion of this, see L. Bland, “Trial by Sexology? Maud Allan, Salome and the Cult of the Clitoris” & L. Doan, “Acts of Female Indecency: Sexology’s Intervention in Legislating Lesbianism”, both in L. Bland & L. Doan (eds.), *Sexology in Culture: Labelling Bodies and Desires*, Cambridge: Polity, 1998.

22 Laura Doan discusses the representation of lesbian culture in the 1920s in depth in *Fashioning Sapphism*. Although, as she argues, female fashions of the period allowed fashionable women to “perform” masculinity by donning masculine clothes and cutting their hair short, women in “male” uniform, such as Mary Allen’s Women Police Service were subjected to vicious attack.

23 Two prosecutions for “spreading false reports about the WAAC” were made under the terms of the DORA, one of a Primitive Methodist Minister from Congleton, Cheshire, and one of W. H. Mainwaring, a socialist leader from South Wales. See the *Daily Telegraph*, 16/4/1918, *Vigilance Record*, May 1918.

24 Doron Lamm has provided an interesting alternative explanation for the drop in recruitment in this period, arguing that the early flood of applicants had its roots in the contraction of
Chalmers-Watson, Commander of the Corps at the War Office in London to Helen Gwynne Vaughan, Commander in France, set out some of the rumours:

Ninety women from Rouen sent back for misconduct [...] a maternity home, around which the assertor said he himself had done sentry duty. A maternity home, eight hundred beds, every encouragement to procreate, £50.00 bonus to each woman, state adoption [...] Lady Betty Balfour has asked whether it is the case that the recruiting centres are promising a £5.00 bonus to the first case of mother and child [...] Another old and aristocratic bird asserts that the War Office is sending out professional prostitutes dressed in our uniforms.

These rumours reflected wider concern about female behaviour in wartime. The widespread absence of men combined with higher wages for women to produce a picture of female independence which threatened the established mores and values of pre-war society. While married women were encouraged to procreate as their national service, sexually active single women were seen as internal enemies, threats to the health of the nation and specifically to the health of the male soldier. O. M. Taylor, a cook with the WAAC, experienced this belief when, on a trip to Woolwich, South London, the behaviour of the local people demonstrated their conviction that “we had been enlisted for the sexual satisfaction of soldiers”, an experience which, she recorded, left her “broken hearted”.

Women such as Taylor were often resented by the men that they were replacing and “releasing” for the Front, and this resentment may account for some of the rumours which circulated. Informed by a wider feeling amongst the troops that civilians had little idea of the realities of battle, women’s actions in replacing men in the support services were sometimes perceived as being motivated by a misplaced enthusiasm and an eagerness to send every available man into a war of which they knew nothing. One Private, resting behind the lines in France, confided in his diary his dislike of the WAACs he met there claiming that “they are a disgrace to the country they belong to”. Whilst he recognized that “there are good among them” he believed that “the good are overshadowed by the bad”, implying prostitution in the Service by commenting, “girls – I prefer to give them another name altogether”. Even more positive

alternative, more lucrative employment opportunities, such as munitions work. See D. Lamm, “Emily Goes to War: Explaining Recruitment to the Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps in the First World War”, in B. Melman (ed.), Borderlines: Genders and Identities in War and Peace, New York: Routledge, 1998, 377-395.


26 Imperial War Museum, Documents Department, 83/17/1, Papers of Miss O.M. Taylor.

27 IWM, DD, Diary of Private Robert Cude, 15/7/1918.
comments about the WAAC in France acknowledged the rumours about their behaviour. An actor entertaining the troops focused in his diaries on the WAACs appearance and their relationship with soldiers, describing how “Tommy has paired off very quickly with the WAACs”. Anxieties about the social disruptions of wartime were acted out in concerns about the sexual behaviour of young women28.

Women serving with the WAAC in France were particularly exposed to these sorts of rumours, as France was already perceived in the public imagination as a hotbed of vice and prostitution. It was claimed that at least one hospital there was provided solely for the treatment of VD amongst British troops, and that 380 officers and 100,000 men had been infected29. The French system of regulated brothels, the Maisons Tolérées was a source of concern for hygiene campaigners in Britain, and the Association for Moral and Social Hygiene led campaigns to prohibit their use by British troops30. Women serving in France may have suffered by association as their work was hidden from the public eye, only becoming visible through press reports, letters and rumours. However, the social class of many ordinary members of the WAAC also contributed to the rumours about their sexual conduct as the majority of ordinary members were drawn from the working and lower middle classes, women previously employed primarily in domestic, clerical and industrial work. The Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD) of nurses, who were also vulnerable to the same accusations were, to an extent, protected by their social status, as many of them came from the middle and upper classes, and their work could be represented as a wartime extension of the voluntary social work carried out by such women in the late Victorian and Edwardian periods. The members of the WAAC, by contrast, were criticised for failing to display the same patriotism and devotion to duty as their “social betters”, Ethel Alec Tweedie commenting that “in lower middle and lower class education the word ‘Duty’ seems to be unknown”31. Their alleged tendency to place individual needs above the collective needs of a nation at war was blamed in the press for military setbacks, as “the apathy of cooks, housemaids and scrubbers who have not responded to the National Service appeal to join the WAAC” meant that potential male combatants were not being “released for the serving line”32. It was widely agreed that, although the work of these women was

28 There is not the space to discuss the concerns which circulated about the sexuality of young single civilian women during the war, but their behaviour was also the cause for much concern and comment. For more discussion, see S. Grayzel, Women’s Identities in Wartime, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998.

29 IWM, DD, Misc. 221 3180, entry for 11/7/1917.


32 The Times, 12/7/1917.
necessary to the success of the war effort, they would have to be closely monitored by upper class officers who understood the public school notions of honour, duty, sacrifice and moral rectitude which those serving the nation were expected to embody, an organisational structure which closely mirrored that of the mistress-servant relationship in the upper class Edwardian home. Although women in the WAAC were united by the uniform and their gender, they were divided by the application of the existing rules of social class to the organisation.

The War Office was concerned about the rumours circulating during late 1917 and the Minutes of Weekly Conferences held at the Ministry of Labour, which was in charge of recruitment, record Chalmers Watson agreeing that “steps should be taken to further emphasise in the press the provision of welfare measures” in order to counteract rumours that women were spending their spare time in unsupervised fraternisation with soldiers. When Chalmers Watson was replaced as Chief Controller of the Corps by Florence Leach in February 1918, one of Leach’s first tasks was to swear an affidavit declaring that no member of the WAAC had ever been “requisitioned or sent to France for any immoral purposes whatsoever”. Various attempts were made by the War Office and government to redeem the WAAC’s reputation and so encourage recruitment, which dropped dramatically from 11,000 women enrolling in October-November 1917 to just over 2,000 in December 1917-January 1918. Recruitment rallies focused on dispelling the rumours, with potential recruits being told that “not only must they maintain the highest standards of honour, conduct and purity, but [...] they must let others see that they do” and that “if people heard anything of the stories going round they could rest assured they were a splendid set of girls [...] and that there was nothing to be said against them”. However, the rumours continued and, in early 1918, a Commission of Enquiry was appointed by the Ministry of Labour to investigate. The Commission, which was made up of six women, visited twenty-nine camps in France and interviewed over eighty people. Their Report, which was published in March 1918, found “not only are the rumours untrue, but [...] the number of undesirable women who have found their way into the Corps has been very small”.

33 TNA, WO162/42, Minutes of Weekly Conferences of the Women’s Services Held at the Ministry of Labour, 5/11/1917.
34 Col. J. Cowper, A Short History of the Queen Mary’s Army Auxiliary Corps, Aldershot: WRAC Association, 1957, 44.
35 TNA, WO162/53.
37 Report of the Commission of Enquiry into the Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps in France, Ministry of Labour, 1918, p. 3, para. 3.
civiliansociety\textsuperscript{38}. Nevertheless, they concluded that female police patrols should be introduced at WAAC camps in France, that powers of dismissal should be used more widely and that women serving close to the front line, where they believed “greater danger exists” and “special vigilance […] is necessary”, should be closely monitored\textsuperscript{39}. The idea that proximity to warfare could be sexually arousing, as reflected in the notorious “memoirs”, \textit{WAAC: The Women’s Story of the War} and \textit{Not So Quiet: Stepdaughters of War}, both published in 1930, thus informed the conclusions of the Commissioners\textsuperscript{40}.

The publication of the Report, although reported by the press, was overshadowed by the unexpected German spring offensive which began the following day. In this offensive, eight members of the WAAC were killed in a bombing raid at Abbeville, and their funeral, with full military honours, was widely reported as demonstrating that women had, at last, “confirmed their right to khaki”, making them “one in sympathy and sacrifice with the fighting services”\textsuperscript{41}. Numerous articles appeared in the newspapers emphasising both the femininity and the good behaviour of the Corps and women not in uniform became the focus of public anxiety. The \textit{Daily Express} argued that special uniforms should be introduced to identify the “strumpets” who were “picketing army huts” and the \textit{Evening News} criticised the “apparently uncontrolled soliciting of our boys by women on London streets”\textsuperscript{42}. Thus, as criticism of women in uniform as a sexually promiscuous threat to the soldier decreased towards the end of the war, the woman out of uniform was increasingly attacked for her (combined) lack of morality and patriotism.

\textbf{Conclusions}

The sexualisation of women in uniform during the First World War illustrates both contemporary concerns about the perceived linkage between the dangers of war and illicit sexual activity and the widespread belief that women should be excluded, so far as possible, from the immediacy of combat. The proximity of death in wartime led to a fascination with sex, played out in concerns about the sexual activity of the soldiers near the front line in France and about the impact of the war on women’s moral behaviour. Women in uniform being, metaphorically,

\textsuperscript{38} The rate in the Corps was approximately 3:1000.

\textsuperscript{39} Report of the Commission of Enquiry, p. 8, para. 17.

\textsuperscript{40} Helen Zenna Smith, \textit{Not So Quiet: Stepdaughters of War}, London: A. E. Marriott, 1930, Anon, \textit{WAAC: The Women’s Story of the War}, London, T. E. Warner, 1930. Helen Zenna Smith was a pseudonym used by the writer Evadne Price, who served as an ambulance driver on the Western Front during the war.

\textsuperscript{41} The Times, 1/6/1918.

\textsuperscript{42} Daily Express, 20/9/1918, Evening News, 24/9/1918.
if not always actually, nearer to the front line than civilians and also being symbolically transgressive “women out of place”, were particular targets of these concerns.

Although uniformed women were a necessary feature of a society in total war, and were often welcomed as a sign of national unity, of women’s patriotism, and as an indicator of modernity, they were also the most visible reminder of the ways in which the war was disturbing gender roles. Concern with gender roles focused on the perceived changes in women’s behaviour in wartime, particularly the belief that women were acting in ways which would have been unacceptable before the war; taking on activities and characteristics previously only associated with men alongside their new occupations. Women in military uniform were particularly subject to these concerns, sometimes seen as abandoning their femininity with their civilian clothes and at other times as simply abandoning traditionally feminine moral codes of behaviour. The multiplicity of representations of militarized women as opportunistic potential sexual partners both for the soldiers and for one another indicates the extent to which these “new” women appeared to threaten not only existing gender relations, but also, in Eugenic terms, the whole future of the British “race”.

However, the First World War, with its challenges to Edwardian mores and values, and the new opportunities that it offered to women, was by no means the only time when military women have been seen sexually. In the Second World War common nicknames for the ATS (Auxiliary Territorial Service) included “officers’ groundsheets” and Auxiliary Tarts Organisation. In the Gulf War of 1990-1991, when women were at times in units which were close to the front line, fears were expressed that they would be subjected to sexual assault and rape if captured. British MPs, discussing women’s military role in the 1990s, commented on the possibility of sexual relations between male and female soldiers serving together on the front line: Robert Key’s comment that “many wives will worry about an increase in the number of women in the forces” being trumped by Desmond Swayne’s colourful claim that “to be with a woman and not to have intercourse with her is more difficult than to raise the dead”, to which he added “as one is not capable of the latter, one is certainly not capable of the former”.

43 These were also seen in the First World War. See The Daily Graphic, 13/1/1915 which argues that, apart from women’s “physical unfitness for the strenuous life of a modern campaign” “the fate of wounded Englishwomen who fall into the hands of Prussians or Bavarians” was also an “obvious” reason to prevent their participation in or close to the Front Line. For an interesting discussion of the representation of German soldier as rapist see S. Grayzel, “The Maternal Body as Battlefield: Rape, Gender and National Identity”, Identities at War, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1999.

sexual and romantic liaisons between soldiers were one of the reasons behind the government’s eventual decision not to include women in front line infantry and tank regiments\textsuperscript{45}. The first television play in Britain to focus on a lesbian romance had, as its two leading protagonists, a Private and an Officer in the Women’s Royal Army Corps. The NAAFI Bar, the singularly unpleasant discussion forum on Army Rumour Service, the unofficial website of the British Army, currently includes numerous discussion strands which assume the male heterosexual identity of the reader, such as “Reader’s Wives”, which discusses the physical attributes of soldiers’ wives and partners and strands cataloguing and ridiculing the sexual attractiveness of female soldiers\textsuperscript{46}. The military is still seen as a male domain, and women who enter it are still at risk of being defined by their, alleged, sexuality.
