

How a Century of War Changed the Lives of Women

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Global Research, March 08, 2018

[Stop the War Coalition](#) 3 February 2013

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Women's Rights](#)

Relevant article selected from the GR archive, crossposted on GR in February 2013.

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Why did the anti-war movement become such a vehicle for women's political action, and what does that tell us about the position of women today?

This is the introduction to Lindsey German's new book, [How a Century of War Changed the Lives of Women](#). Lindsey is convenor of [Stop the War Coalition](#). Her previous books include [A People's History of London](#) (2012) and [Material Girls](#) (2007).

The Stop the War movement, which began over a decade ago in response to the War on Terror, has become the biggest mass movement in British political history. One of its most remarkable features has been the involvement of women of all ages, races and backgrounds who have been at its centre.

Why did this movement become such a vehicle for women's political action, and what does that tell us about the position of women today? To answer these questions we must look not just at the past few years, but at the changes that have taken place over the past century.

Women's liberation and war have often been intertwined in modern history, with the atrocities of war making a dramatic impact on women's role. The history of the two world wars is full of stories of women who broke through stereotypes, worked in unfamiliar jobs, acted with great courage, became feminists, rejected relationships with men and took up arms.

Successive wars have shown not just women involved in wars – although in this era of total war it is impossible to ignore the direct involvement of civilians in war and the effect on them – but women taking an increasing part in opposing them.

It is almost 100 years since the world descended into the horror of the first of two world wars. It began in sunshine and patriotic fervour, endured four years of mud, misery, injury and carnage on an unprecedented scale, and ended in revolutions and social upheaval. The First World War was a watershed: it deposed kings and emperors, ushered in universal suffrage and workers' revolution, and changed people's attitude to war forever.

Governments of the wealthiest countries have never again been able to preside over such carnage and the death of some ten million young men across Europe and further afield. But if the war changed the lives of young men and their families, it also had a profound effect on

women.

By the end of the war they had experienced working in jobs previously reserved for men and been paid wages higher than they were able to earn in domestic service, the biggest single employer of women before 1914.

Although they were denied access to some of these jobs when the war ended, they continued to work in greater numbers and in some of the new fields of work that were opening up. They had the vote, or at least some of them did (full female suffrage would have to wait another decade). They started wearing much more comfortable and unrestricted styles of dress. And while marriage and motherhood were still considered women's main roles, the number of children that women had began to decline quite sharply.

The life-changing impact of the Second World War, just a generation later, was even more dramatic. Women worked in essential industries, joined the armed forces and many jettisoned ideas about chastity and taboos on sex before marriage with great enthusiasm. Again, while they were encouraged to return to the home, marriage and family after 1945, women embarked on careers and education which challenged the traditional stereotypes.

Modern industrialised warfare is fundamentally different. We now have wars of total attrition. Industrial mass production creates and sustains vast armies and unprecedented firepower, and results in unparalleled killing and destruction. It is qualitatively different from previous eras. At Waterloo (1815) Britain had 156 guns; at the Somme (1916) the British army had 1,400 guns, and fired nearly two million shells in just a few days. The Prussian army at Waterloo had 60,000 men; by 1914 the German army had 1.5 million men on the Western Front alone. One outcome of modern firepower was often stalemate and wars of attrition. Industrial output was decisive, mobilising not just soldiers but workers in war industries too. Women were crucial on the home front.

This book is an attempt to understand the relationship between women and war in Britain in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Unlike most of Europe during the Second World War, Britain escaped Nazi occupation, but it was nonetheless subject to heavy bombardment and high levels of government intervention, as well as conscription to create a war economy.

The Second World War shaped the lives of my generation, born in the postwar era of optimism, when people expected improvements in health, education and housing provision as a reward for the terrible years of war, death and dislocation our parents and grandparents had endured. The second half of the twentieth century offered more opportunities for women than at any time in history, and the basis for many of those opportunities was created in the first half of a century which witnessed not only two world wars, but also the worst economic crisis to date.

War has a terrible impact on all people, but increasingly on women as victims of injury, rape, displacement and death. But in Britain and a number of other countries it has also promoted women's emancipation by breaking down oppressive social structures. Many of the great social changes from which my generation benefited had their genesis in war; others were already in gestation but were advanced by the two world wars.

This was true of the vote for women, equal pay, first raised by trade unionists in the munitions industry and in public transport during the First World War but not granted even

in a weakened form until the 1970s, more accessible divorce, education at higher levels, employment in 'men's' jobs, and a falling birth rate.

Although I was born six years after the Second World War ended, the fact of the war was a major feature in my life. 'The war' was a constant reference point. My father, and the fathers of most of my friends, had been in the armed forces. The only time they had been abroad was as a result of the war: to Sicily, Burma, North Africa, Greece. One uncle lost a leg at Nijmegen, Holland in 1944. Another, a merchant seaman, was in the river police during the Blitz, then transported troops across the Channel on D-day. London was peppered with bomb sites. My primary school still had its air raid shelters, now stuffed with old desks and equipment.

However, it struck me from a young age that there was another side to the war and one that I understood especially from my mother. This was in stark contrast to the image of war projected from most sources. It was about going out to work and having enough money to go to the Streatham Locarno, the London Palladium and especially the Hammersmith Palais with Canadian and American soldiers and airmen, with money in their pockets and only a brief time to enjoy.

This lifestyle was not enjoyed by all women, but my mother was a teenager when war broke out and had no family responsibilities or children. However, her experience was typical of many young women and shows how the war gave them opportunities they would have thought impossible only a few years earlier. Most importantly, they paved the way for future generations to seize opportunities which they were only beginning to define and articulate.

This was in unoccupied Britain. Just a short distance across the Channel, women's lives were much more dangerous and repressive. Women in the occupied countries and under the Axis powers faced rape, torture, imprisonment, death on a daily basis. Nevertheless many of them fought bravely in the resistance movements. Even in Britain, death and danger were ever-present, and many, including my mother, lost loved ones. The contradictions expressed in these lives are what this book is about.

The modern form of warfare which sucks civilian lives into its core is a product of an economic system based on industrial competition. Even in the age of globalisation these corporations are tied to nation states or alliances of nation states. Their fates are interlinked. They form part of an international matrix of competition which, periodically, descends into armed conflict. War is a means of safeguarding and extending their markets and geopolitical reach. In this way competition between, say, Ford and Volkswagen or Exxon and Gazprom can become the root of conflicts resolved on the fields of battle – a process that involves destruction and waste on a vast scale.

The beneficiaries of war are not the poor and working class, who fight, work, suffer and die, but those who control the system. Their property, their profits, are at stake. But if they succeed in vanquishing their competitors, they can enjoy the prospect of even greater profits and more lucrative markets. There is an exploitative system, which relies on one class controlling the wealth another class produces. Women are not separate from this process but are themselves part of the class society, and how they respond tends to reflect their position in society.

War is one of the most terrifying aspects of modern capitalism, an all-pervasive war economy which threatens to catapult us back to barbarism. It is also a major force for

change: it forces apart old ways of working and living in such a way that women and men are drawn along in its wake, obliged to take on new roles, confront challenges and dangers, revise their ideas and, if fortunate, come out at the other end in one piece.

However, progress for some comes at the cost of the mass annihilation of others. There is no greater mark of a barbarous and dehumanised social system than one that destroys lives, creates wastelands and leaves devastation on such a scale that most people conclude a different system has to be created. It took tens of millions of deaths, the Holocaust, the rise and fall of fascism and nuclear terror before people were ready to try to build a society based on more equal and just principles.

War has also created an odd dialectic for women: their lives have been changed by processes wrought by wars. This has helped them to develop a much deeper understanding of war and a strong commitment, now seen in many women across several generations, to campaign against it. So the consequence of total war has been to build opposition to it and to make women more politically aware and active.

The wars of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have played a pivotal role in British politics. Britain's history as an imperial power, its continued interventions in the affairs of other countries (albeit since 1945 as a junior partner of the United States) and its warmongering under successive governments have all helped to create an opposition to war which is one of the touchstones of left-wing politics. Time and again, questions of war have been major political issues: in 1914; in 1938 with appeasement; in 1956 with Suez, the Cold War and nuclear weapons; and in recent years, especially 2002–3, the Middle East. War and domestic politics are interlaced.

In Britain my contemporaries and the men and women of later generations have less direct experience of war, but even so, war has become a permanent fact of life for us. The 'balance of terror', which until recently existed between the United States and Soviet Union, was sometimes justified as the means to ensure that a third world war could never happen. But many who had lived through the First and Second World Wars knew that wasn't necessarily true, that deadly weapons could lead to war even if the consequences seemed too horrific to contemplate. The Cold War always contained within it the threat of a major 'hot war'.

So, relatively soon after the Second World War a new opposition to the threat of war and nuclear weapons emerged internationally, as the implications of armed peace became clear. No one with any awareness could ignore the sometimes very real threat of nuclear annihilation, and this helped lead to the movement against nuclear weapons. The Cuban missile crisis of 1962 was, it was feared, likely to lead to another war less than 20 years after bombs and rockets had devastated London and other major British cities.

Opposition to war has grown since then. This has been specially marked among women. The movement against the Vietnam war took place in a period of social change: women were moving into new jobs, entering higher education, discovering a freer sexuality and engaging in political action. It propelled women's concerns to centre stage, exposing an American Left that was simply incapable of relating to these problems.

If women's political issues took centre stage, they did so at least partly in relation to war; those of us who found the Vietnam war to be overwhelmingly a politicising issue had opposition to war engraved in our DNA. Those who created the women's liberation

movement in the late 1960s consciously linked their struggle against oppression with the national liberation movements which were so effective in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s in some of the former colonies of the Western empires.

The changes in women's lives from the 1960s onwards led to women asserting their right to equality and organisation. One of the main concerns of many has been peace. The peace movement was revived in the early 1980s, this time in opposition to the siting of cruise missiles in Europe. In Britain a major expression of this movement was the Greenham Common peace camp organised by women as a feminist response to militarism, though I felt it was too narrow and too focused on feminism to fulfil its potential. It did however mobilise and galvanise very large numbers of people.

It was only a few years before the 'balance of terror' was overturned by the collapse of one side, leaving a much more unstable situation in which new wars became increasingly frequent and dangerous. Since 1989 there has been a rapid succession of wars involving the United States, Britain and other Western powers. The First Gulf War, the Balkans wars (which brought about the breakup of Yugoslavia) and then the War on Terror all indicated how the United States planned to deal with its declining economic power in the twenty-first century.

All were increasingly described not as wars of aggression – which would have been both illegal and politically unacceptable – but as wars of humanitarian intervention. One justification, especially for the War on Terror, became the need to rescue women from subjugation and oppression. Despite the urgency with which this case was pressed by First Ladies and Secretaries of State, the response from many women was to argue that this liberation was not being carried out in their name.

I was strongly opposed to the Vietnam war and to all the wars that followed. But it was from 11 September 2001 that I played a key organising role in building the movement, helping to form the Stop the War Coalition and being elected as its convenor. The high level of involvement and activism in the movement was obvious, with women of all ages, all nationalities and religions, and very widely differing class backgrounds. The legacy of opposition continues and will no doubt give rise to new movements in the future.

It has been remarkable to see how many women have been involved at every level, often with a sense of purpose not found in other spheres of politics, and I have been increasingly intrigued about how this should happen and what political significance it might have. The answer in part seems to do with the cumulative effect of war on women's lives and consciousness. The twentieth century experienced total war, with civilians increasingly the majority of victims and women expected to play an active part in waging war.

War has infiltrated the home, work and social life in a way that would have been impossible throughout most of history. Women have played a role as combatants, as war workers, defence workers and health workers. They have been direct victims of war. They have also suffered bereavements. The social changes resulting from these developments in turn fed involvement in, and often opposition to, war.

I want to explain the hows and whys of women's role in warfare, and why so many women in the twenty-first century now oppose war. Wars have been motors of change for women, altering the family and women's role within it, transforming the sorts of work that women do and their ideas about themselves. The collective and individual decisions and actions of

millions of women and men are how history is made.

This book is about some of their decisions, their implications and consequences and – most importantly – how they can be used to shape the future.

I have interviewed women from different generations about the impact of war on their lives. They have varying backgrounds, beliefs and experiences which I have found extremely valuable in illuminating their motivations, decisions and the impact of war on their thinking. I hope that their views, however subjective, have helped to develop insights about wider changes. The Stop the War Coalition, which began in 2001, is looked at through the eyes of some of its participants. They cover a range of ages and backgrounds, and all are people who have experienced war or have some experience of opposing it.

I look at the questions which have arisen out of the War on Terror: the role of ‘humanitarian intervention’ in modern wars and the way in which arguments about women’s equality are used to justify wars. The attitudes to, and of, Muslim women are also considered. Finally, I use women’s experiences to understand how war has changed women and their ideas, and what the prospects are for peace and women’s liberation in the future.

The experiences are, needless to say, individual. They do not claim to represent all women in the movement or indeed the totality of the movement. There are many organisations and groups within what can be broadly called the peace movement or anti-war movement. These include religious groups, such as the Quakers, who have played a continuing and honourable role in the movement, and groups such as Women in Black which organises internationally for peace.

The various groups often focus on specific issues or take different approaches to organising. The book is not a history of women’s peace organisation or of peace and anti-war campaigning generally. What it does do is raise two major issues – women’s liberation and war – and make connections which I think are relevant and I hope will be useful to those fighting in order to change the world.

The wars that we have witnessed in recent years are not an aberration, but the result of a competitive and crisis-ridden system. Future wars are likely to be about resources, commodities and food and water shortages. They will be about the major powers fighting for market share and strategic control. We will need mass movements to oppose these wars, which endanger the future of humanity.

In Britain, governments are demanding austerity and sacrifice from working people while inequality grows and the spending of billions of pounds on waging war every year continues. As the postwar welfare state sees its greatest threat yet from the same people who support wars and the obscenely high levels of military spending which accompany them, a new generation of women activists are coming onto the field of battle. They have already made clear that they are unwilling to countenance war and militarism, and in the course of opposing those dangers, they are asserting their liberation.

[Click here for more information on the book “How a Century of War Changed the Lives of Women”](#)

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