

# Between Amazons and Sabines: a historical approach to women and war

**Irène Herrmann and Daniel Palmieri\***

Irène Herrmann is associate professor of modern history at the University of Fribourg and lecturer of Swiss history at the University of Geneva. Daniel Palmieri is historical research officer at the ICRC.

## **Abstract**

*Today, war is still perceived as being the prerogative of men only. Women are generally excluded from the debate on belligerence, except as passive victims of the brutality inflicted on them by their masculine contemporaries. Yet history shows that through the ages, women have also played a role in armed hostilities, and have sometimes even been the main protagonists. In the present article, the long history and the multiple facets of women's involvement in war are recounted from two angles: women at war (participating in war) and women in war (affected by war). The merit of a gender-based division of roles in war is then examined with reference to the ancestral practice of armed violence.*



Since time immemorial, war has been an integral part of the history of humankind.<sup>1</sup> Yet this age-old activity seems to have been the preserve of only part of humankind, since war is still perceived as being essentially a male affair. Many arguments have been put forward to explain this male predominance. 'Innate violence', 'the predator instinct', or even 'the death wish', traits believed to be particularly developed in men, are said to explain their propensity to go to war. Cultural traditions which instil the cult of war into boys from an early

\* The views expressed in this article reflect only the authors' opinions.

age – training them to regard it as glorious and status-enhancing, and initiating them into waging war through competition and displays of strength – are further deemed responsible for this dichotomy. Similarly, anthropological studies have shown that war could be seen as an extension of hunting, and that in traditional or pre-industrial societies, the purpose of many warlike expeditions was to ‘hunt’ men for economic reasons or to satiate the demands of gods greedy for human lives, if not to assuage their own cannibalistic appetites!<sup>2</sup>

The other half of the human race is rarely the focus of the debate on belligerence, except as victims. Whether as prey or plunder, women are supposedly merely the passive objects of men’s warrior instincts. Better still, they are said to be by nature more peaceably inclined in contrast to their combative male counterparts. As the ‘givers of life’, they do not belong on the deadly battlefield other than as involuntary victims of the throes of war.

The latter statement can be disproved by only a glance at the situation today, where women soldiers are present in both regular and irregular armed forces, and at the very scene of hostilities. In retrospect, too, a case can be made against such a clear-cut distinction between male combatants and female victims, for like their male counterparts, women through the ages have certainly joined in the waging of war. As in certain traditional American Indian societies, the ‘fairer sex’ has often been mobilized in the event of war, whether symbolically – by performing rituals intended to bring victory – or in practical terms, by helping to prepare for military expeditions or attending to the consequences (caring for the wounded or supervising prisoners). The direct participation of women in combat has been a relatively rare event, however, although certain American Indian peoples (the Delaware, Navajo and Cheyenne tribes) have women warriors.<sup>3</sup> Some authors argue that this absence is due primarily to a gender-based division of the use of objects: although war is not formally prohibited for women, they nevertheless lack the means of engaging in it, since the monopoly on weapons is reserved exclusively for men.<sup>4</sup> This would also explain why the Amazons, those legendary women warriors, have made such a lasting impression on people’s minds – precisely because they possessed the warrior attributes to which men alone were entitled until then.

In the present article the long history of women’s involvement in war is recounted from two angles: women at war and women in war. The merit of a

- 1 Jean Guilaine and Jean Zammit, *Le sentier de la guerre: Visages de la violence préhistorique*, Le Seuil, Paris, 2000; Lawrence Keeley, *War before Civilization: The Myth of the Peaceful Savage*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1996; Pierre Clastres, *Archéologie de la violence: La guerre dans les sociétés primitives*, Éditions de l’Aube, La Tour d’Aigues, 2005.
- 2 A custom that struck fear into the first European visitors – see Jean de Léry, *Histoire d’un voyage fait en la terre de Brésil*, Le livre de poche, Paris, 1994; see also Marvin Harris, *Cannibals and Kings: The Origins of Culture*, Vintage, New York, 1977, pp. 47–64.
- 3 Emmanuel Reynaud, *Les femmes, la violence et l’armée*, Fondation pour les études de défense nationale, Paris, 1988.
- 4 Paola Tabet, *La construction sociale de l’inégalité des sexes: Des outils et des corps*, L’Harmattan, Paris, 2000.

gender-based distinction is then examined with regard to the ancestral practice of armed violence.

## Women at war

While the Amazons are surrounded by myth, they had very real equals whose existence has been established since very ancient times. These warrior women were mostly sovereigns. The earliest-known, Queen Ahhotep I of Egypt, is said to have led her troops into battle against the Hyksos invaders some sixteen centuries before our era began.

Her example was followed by others, such as the Chinese military leader Fu Hao,<sup>5</sup> the ancient British queen Boudica (Boadicea),<sup>6</sup> and Zenobia, Queen of Palmyra,<sup>7</sup> to name but the most famous figures of antiquity. Women of more lowly rank have also commanded armies. The most famous is of course Joan of Arc, who was sentenced to be burnt at the stake – not because she had taken up arms, but because she had adopted men's clothing (including armour) in order to enter combat.<sup>8</sup> This serves as further evidence of the taboo surrounding women's use of objects of war. The fact that women sometimes succeeded in donning military dress and even masquerading as men in order to wage war is closely related to the absence of medical examinations for future soldiers, a practice that was not introduced until the nineteenth century.

More recently, Laskarina Bouboulina<sup>9</sup> won fame as the heroine of the Greek War of Independence, and several streets named after her in Greece still commemorate her life today. In the United States, a certain Calamity Jane served as a scout in the American army and took part in several military campaigns against the American Indians. 'La Norita' (whose real name was Nora Astorga Gadea) fought alongside the Sandinists before becoming the Vice Minister of Justice and then Ambassador of Nicaragua to the United Nations. In Africa, Nehanda Nyakasikana led the revolt against British rule in Mashonaland and Matabeleland (present-day Zimbabwe) as the nineteenth century drew to a close,<sup>10</sup> while approximately one century later, Alice Auma (or Alice Lakwena, from the name of the spirit believed to command her actions) led the notorious Holy Spirit Movement in its struggle against the Ugandan government.<sup>11</sup>

5 The British Museum, *The Tomb of Lady Fu Hao*, available at <http://www.ancientchina.co.uk/staff/resources/background/bg7/bg7pdf.pdf> (last visited 19 November 2009).

6 History UK, *Boudica – Britain's Warrior Queen*, available at <http://www.historic-uk.com/HistoryUK/England-History/Boudica.htm> (last visited 19 November 2009).

7 Maurice Sartre, *D'Alexandre à Zénobie: Histoire du Levant antique*, Fayard, Paris, 2001.

8 Georges and Andrée Duby, *Les procès de Jeanne d'Arc*, Gallimard, Folio Histoire, Paris, 1995.

9 Her story is the subject of a novel, *La Bouboulina*, by Michel De Grèce (Pocket, Paris, 2003).

10 David Lan, *Guns and Rain: Guerrillas and Spirit Medium in Zimbabwe*, University of California Press, Berkeley/Los Angeles/London, 1985.

11 Heike Behrend, *La guerre des esprits en Ouganda: Le Mouvement du Saint-Esprit d'Alice Lakwena (1985–1996)*, L'Harmattan, Paris, 2000.

Many women have fought under these female commanders and other leaders, often alongside their male counterparts. During the Cimbrian War (113–101 BC), for example, the Germanic army also included women warriors, who according to the Roman Chronicles were fiercer than their male counterparts. It is reported that after the final Battle of Vercellae (101 BC), when these women saw that their companions had been killed and that defeat was imminent, they preferred to kill their children and then commit suicide rather than fall into the hands of the troops of Consul Marius<sup>12</sup> (the practice of mass suicide – *jauhar* – when military defeat was predictable was also widespread amongst Rajput women in India from the fourteenth to the seventeenth century). In his *Gallic Wars*, Caesar in turn cites a large number of examples where women took part in battles. When the Swiss rose up against the French occupying forces in Nidwalden (central Switzerland) in 1798, the numerous women in the ranks of the insurgents fought with tremendous tenacity. The suppression of the revolt by the French armed forces also caused many casualties among the women of that canton's population.<sup>13</sup> However, the most famous women soldiers are without a doubt the Amazons of the kings of Dahomey.<sup>14</sup> This female corps – comprised of troops who were trained, equipped with guns and wore a uniform – was first formed in the eighteenth century. A hundred years later it had become an army of up to 7000 women – one-third of the kingdom's fighting forces. These Amazons were known for their cruelty and their courage; they amazed the European visitors/colonials and deeply offended their bourgeois principles. When King Behanzin attacked the French forces in 1890, they were in the front line of his troops. Confronted with these women, their opponents – to their own great misfortune – initially hesitated to open fire on them. In the end it was the superiority of the French weapons – and the use of machine guns – that finally got the better of this elite corps.

For a long time, such examples of female troops nevertheless remained relatively few and far between. This changed with the two world wars (in particular World War II), which not only resulted in a 'feminization' of the armed forces but also brought an impressive upsurge in the number of female fighters.

This phenomenon was truly remarkable in Russia. In World War I, under the Kerensky government, a unit of women soldiers known as the 'Battalion of Death' (!) and consisting of 2000 volunteers was already sent to fight on the front with Germany. However, it was during the Great Patriotic War, from 1941 onwards, that large numbers of women joined the ranks of the Soviet Army or the partisans. It is estimated that there were one million female soldiers, constituting 8% of the total armed forces.<sup>15</sup> Half of them served on the front, either in support jobs or in actual combat. Women also enlisted *en masse* in resistance movements

12 Florus, *Epitome rerum Romanarum*, III, IV, partim.

13 This was when the famous educationist Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi was appointed director of the orphanage in Stans (the chief city of the canton), where the many children who were orphaned in the revolt and the ensuing suppression were looked after.

14 Joshua S. Goldstein, *War and Gender*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2001, pp. 60–64.

15 E. Reynaud, above note 3, p. 20.

and took part in armed violence, particularly in Italy and Yugoslavia.<sup>16</sup> Although the armies of other States engaged in the second global conflict – both on the Allied side and among the Axis Powers – also occasionally had extensive recourse to female auxiliaries, they rarely deployed them on the front line.

In subsequent conflicts, during wars of national liberation, women also took an active part in the fighting, particularly in Vietnam where several hundred thousand women were engaged in combat between 1946 and 1975, first against the French occupying forces and then the American and South Vietnamese troops. The Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army guerrillas, who fought the racist regime in Salisbury, included some 4000 women soldiers, i.e. 6% of the movement's forces.<sup>17</sup> Over 30% of the Tamil Tiger fighters were women.<sup>18</sup> The participation of women in armed opposition movements is now a permanent feature.<sup>19</sup>

Although women were sometimes equal to men in the face of enemy fire, this had little effect on their status within the society for which they took up arms. King Behanzin's Amazons were no better treated in everyday life than the other women in Dahomey, despite their obvious warrior qualities. In the Viet Cong army, female soldiers were generally considered inferior to their male counterparts, a prejudice that reflected the position of women in Vietnamese society. Furthermore, like the army of the Soviet Union where the proportion of female soldiers dropped to 0.2% of the total forces in the post-war period, armies reverted to their essentially male composition once a war was over.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, the aforementioned tendency in non-industrial societies to withhold weapons from women continued in the twentieth century, even if women did take part in war. The Soviet Union with its hundreds of thousands of female soldiers between 1941 and 1945 can be regarded as an exception. It is therefore more appropriate to refer to women *in* war rather than women *at* war.

## Women in war

The reference to women in war first brings to mind the image of women as victims of armed violence: because they constitute the majority of the myriad group of people known as 'civilians' and because that non-combatant population is often in the firing line in armed conflicts, they are the first to suffer from the excesses of human aggression. We shall return to this specific category later, but we must first mention other women who play a part in warfare without firing a single shot and whose fate is admittedly sometimes similar to that of war victims.

16 In France, on the other hand, the resistance networks largely excluded women from any active combat.

17 J. S. Goldstein, above note 14, p. 82.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 83.

19 This fact indicates a need for women combatants to be taken into account in demobilization processes and measures for reintegration into civilian society – at present, these are generally geared only towards men.

20 E. Reynaud, above note 3, p. 21.

As shown above, women have been involved for centuries in preparations for war and in the war effort itself. This involvement became widespread and institutionalized with the advent of what are known as total wars, beginning with the American Civil War (1861–1865), which mobilize a country's entire resources, both economic and human. This is epitomized by the two world wars. In situations where all energies were summoned for war work, women were thus assigned roles and tasks unfamiliar to them in peacetime. Often the first call upon the female population was to replace the men who were leaving for the front. In rural areas this hardly diverged from previous traditions; women stood in for their absent male counterparts as they had done in the past. Conversely, in urban areas, World War I had the effect of feminizing occupations (such as those of tram driver or post office worker) that had hitherto been reserved exclusively for men. Female workers often formed the bulk of the workforce in factories, particularly in those which produced military equipment and supplies. In France, for example, the women who worked in arms factories were dubbed 'munitionettes'.

This involvement of women in the war industry reached its height in World War II, and 'Rosie' (the nickname coined in the United States initially for women riveters and welders and then extended to female factory workers in general) became iconic in all countries, though to varying degrees. It must be stated that for reasons of ideology or tradition, the countries of the Pact of Steel (Germany, Italy and Japan) were more reluctant to employ female labour than were the Allies, since they did not consider war a sufficient justification to override the customary policy of women's segregation.<sup>21</sup> There were also cultural differences among the nations of the Grand Alliance, such as those between France and the United Kingdom, whose womenfolk joined the war effort in far greater numbers and for longer than their French counterparts.

The 'home front', as it soon came to be called, also took on a strictly military dimension with women enlisting to protect the country and its inhabitants. Various auxiliary corps consisting essentially of women were thus created in the armed forces. These volunteers – who were known as 'Lottas' in Finland, 'grey mice' in Germany, and 'marinettes' in France – performed all of the non-combatant functions: administration, supplies and materials management, driving and maintenance of vehicles, communication, air surveillance, and passive defence. At the end of the war, there were over 400,000 women enlisted in Britain's various armed services, almost 10% of the total armed forces personnel.<sup>22</sup>

However, the uniform that women don most frequently in wartime is that of nurses. In many cultures, caring for wounded soldiers is an activity traditionally reserved for women. In western societies, before the nursing profession was established, that task was often performed by religious orders. In France, for example, the Daughters of Charity worked on various battlefields from the seventeenth century onwards, as they did during the Algerian Campaign in

21 Claude Quétel, *Femmes dans la guerre, 1939–1945*, Larousse, Paris, 2004, pp. 77ff.

22 *Ibid.*, p.136.

1836.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, during the *Ancien Régime* the armies on campaign were accompanied by a cohort of civilians – soldiers’ wives, victuallers, canteen women, laundresses, prostitutes – who were expected to take care of the male victims when necessary. These ‘daughters of the regiment’, to quote the title of Donizetti’s famous opera, were soon superseded by the emergence of a new category of rescuers from civil society.

The advent of women as professional nurses is generally traced back to the Crimean War (1853–1856). While Grand Duchess Elena Pavlovna organized a corps of ‘Sisters of Mercy’ on the Russian side,<sup>24</sup> Florence Nightingale, ‘the Lady with the Lamp’, arrived among the British forces with a group of 38 volunteer nurses whom she had trained herself. The sudden emergence of women other than nuns and soldiers’ whores at the scene of battle inevitably met with considerable resistance by the military medical corps. The Victorian morals of the time were opposed to such a transgression of the boundaries of a world that was composed of, and exclusively reserved for, men. However, the main underlying grievance against those women was that their work revealed the incompetence and inadequacy of the existing medical services. This did not prevent such nurses from working in all theatres of operations between 1870 and 1914. In some countries, civilian nurses were even incorporated in the armed forces through the creation of *ad hoc* units. Later, all countries fighting in the two world wars had nurses as part of their armed forces’ medical services, often in hospitals behind the lines but also on the front or under shellfire.

Although the names of some nurses are recorded in the annals of history, this was not always in the way they would have chosen. Edith Cavell, for instance, was a British nurse who was shot by the German army in 1915 for helping Allied soldiers to escape from Belgium; in the United Kingdom she was, and still is, the epitome of martyrdom. Another nurse and national heroine, the Belgian Gabrielle Petit, was executed in 1916 by the Germans on charges of having helped British military intelligence. Indeed, women were often used in both industrial and pre-industrial societies as auxiliaries to the armed forces’ intelligence services,<sup>25</sup> if not quite simply as spies. Mata Hari (whose real name was Margaretha Geertruida Zelle) obviously remains the most legendary of them; she suffered the same fate as Cavell and Petit, but was shot by the French.<sup>26</sup>

Whereas women were often the eyes of the enemy, in some cases they also spoke on the enemy’s behalf. The part they played in the propaganda war was particularly significant in World War II. Pictures of Marlene Dietrich entertaining

23 Renée Lelandais, ‘Les Filles de la Charité sur les champs de bataille, 1847–1863’, in *Préludes et pionniers: Les précurseurs de la Croix-Rouge, 1840–1860*, Henry Dunant Society, Geneva, 1991, pp. 299–319.

24 Walter Gruber, ‘La grande-duchesse Hélène Pavlovna et ses auxiliaires en Crimée’, in *Préludes et pionniers*, above note 23, pp. 119–129.

25 In the Fiji Islands, for example, women were frequently deployed as scouts or lookouts who subsequently passed on information to the combatants – see *Under the Protection of the Palm: Wars of Dignity in the Pacific*, ICRC, 2009, p. 16.

26 Pat Shipman, *Femme Fatale: Love, Lies and the Unknown Life of Mata Hari*, William Morrow & Company, New York, 2007.

crowds of enthusiastic GIs (or later of Marilyn Monroe performing for American troops engaged in the Korean War) were widely disseminated. The Axis Powers used the same stratagem: ‘Tokyo Rose’ tried to demoralize the American soldiers fighting on the Pacific front by broadcasting the latest American hit parades and making cruel insinuations about what had become of their wives or sweethearts back home.<sup>27</sup>

Finally, there were the humanitarian workers, the last category of women in war. Like the nurses, with whom they could be confused, such women have mainly been present in the history of armed conflict since the latter half of the nineteenth century. They were far removed from the battlefield to begin with, organized as temporary groups of well-meaning helpers who endeavoured to provide wounded soldiers with bandages and other dressings, or items to give them comfort (tobacco, wine, liqueurs, etc.). These ‘ladies’ associations’ gradually became institutionalized or simply merged with the National Red Cross Societies set up in Europe at the end of the century. The presence of women aid workers close to the victims of armed violence (particularly civilians, in this case) only began after World War I with the gradual creation of institutions such as the Save the Children Fund. The development of the ‘without borders’ movement in the 1970s meant that women started to work directly in war zones, and had the effect of ‘obliging’ certain humanitarian organizations previously composed essentially of men (such as the International Committee of the Red Cross) to admit women to their ranks.

## Women war victims

Women can also become war victims as a result of their voluntary participation in conflicts, either as combatants or in support of the war effort. The most disastrous outcome in the case of women soldiers is of course death, which often shows that they were engaged in combat on an equal footing with men. In Tito’s National Liberation Army, for example, 25% of the female personnel were killed during the war, compared with 11% of the male personnel.<sup>28</sup> Many women members of resistance networks also lost their lives for that commitment.

Capture is in principle a less tragic fate, although this depends entirely on the goodwill of the detaining authority. Whereas the German army auxiliaries held in the American camp at Chalon-sur-Saône took advantage of the pleasant living conditions there in order to sunbathe (and, according to the ICRC delegate who visited them, their suntan was as good as any Polynesian tan!),<sup>29</sup> the Polish women from General Bor-Komorowski’s army (*Armia Krajowa*), who were prisoners of war in Germany, endured severe hardship which prompted their male fellow

27 C. Quézel, above note 21, pp. 110–111.

28 E. Reynaud, above note 3, p. 22.

29 ICRC Archives, C SC, France 1945, Camps US C.C.E. 29, Chalon-sur-Saône, Subcamp no. 1, Château de Loyère, Report of the visit of 18–20 July 1945, p. 4.



prisoners to request the ICRC to take them specifically under its protection.<sup>30</sup> The ICRC also sent a note to the German, American, British and French governments in 1945 pointing out that the 1929 Geneva Convention protecting prisoners of war also applied to female prisoners, since ‘...women are entitled to the same treatment as [male] Prisoners of War, and even to preferential treatment...’.<sup>31</sup>

More generally, however, women suffer war more than they wage it. Their exposure to its dire consequences is thus very often dictated by circumstance. The massive bombing of cities that became common practice from the Spanish Civil War onwards is a form of indiscriminate violence that takes a heavy toll on women, who are an integral part of the non-combatant civilian population. Even the targeted shelling of strategic objects is likely to kill or injure many women, due to their involvement as labour in the war economy. In a mass exodus, most of the refugees are often women too. At least since the Balkan Wars of 1912–1913, modern technology has recorded images of the long lines of civilians fleeing the fighting.

Deportation is another form of forced departure. The deportation of civilian populations, which was often used as a means of forcing combatants to yield by exerting pressure on their families, was common practice in the twentieth century. Deportation was very often the prelude to a policy of extermination, as was the case with the Herero, the Armenians, and later the Jewish populations in Europe. Although things were not always taken to that extreme, the internment of these large numbers of forcibly displaced people in so-called concentration camps, with the unhealthy conditions prevailing there, had disastrous effects upon them. A quarter of the approximately 100,000 people – most of whom were women and children – who were sent to British concentration camps during the Second Boer War (1899–1902) died of starvation or disease.<sup>32</sup>

Women frequently become the target of sexual violence when separated from their communities and isolated.<sup>33</sup> Since ancient times, rape has been a cruel corollary of war. In *City of God*, Saint Augustine writes that in the pillage of cities that have been conquered, it is just as customary to rape the women as it is to massacre the men. Rape in war is a feature of all conflicts that has nothing to do with cultural background, and differs only in intensity. From the mass rapes committed before and during World War II (Anthony Beevor estimates that two million German women were raped by the Soviet army at the fall of the Third Reich in April 1945)<sup>34</sup> to those perpetrated during more recent conflicts (in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Cyprus, Rwanda, etc.), this sexual brutality penalizes the victims on two accounts – in addition to suffering the act itself, women who have been raped are often excluded by their communities of origin. The consequences of rape

30 ICRC Archives, B G 25/40, *Femmes polonaises de l’Armée du Général Bor-Komorowsky, P.G. en Allemagne*.

31 ICRC Archives, B G 25/40, *Appel aux gouvernements*, letter from President Burckhardt to Anthony Eden, 9 January 1945.

32 Martin Meredith, *Diamonds, Gold and War: The British, the Boers, and the Making of South Africa*, Public Affairs, New York, p. 457.

33 Even when women are combatants, this does not necessarily protect them in practice from sexual assault.

34 Anthony Beevor, *Berlin: The Downfall*, Viking, London, 2002, p. 414.

(unwanted pregnancies or sexually transmitted diseases) are further factors that exacerbate the victims' isolation. Moreover, women are not equal to men when it comes to sexuality in wartime. The so-called 'horizontal' collaboration between women and foreign occupying forces was often severely punished (the women's heads were shaved,<sup>35</sup> they were exhibited naked to public view, or their bodies were branded) by post-war cleansing committees. No account whatsoever was taken of the intrinsic reasons leading to those relationships (love affairs, need for protection, material constraints, etc.). Prostitutes who continued to carry out their profession during the occupation of their country, on the other hand, were not affected by this spirit of revenge, perhaps because they were already regarded as lost women.

Finally, even if they escaped these various tragic destinies, women were still war victims by the very fact that the war could all too easily wipe out their husbands, sons, fathers or brothers who had left for the front. Widowed or orphaned, either in actual fact or in effect (e.g. when their relatives were reported missing), women had to get on with their lives while bearing the burden of that absence.

## Conclusion

'Men invented war so that they could get away from [women] and be amongst themselves', quipped French writer Jean Giraudoux,<sup>36</sup> who was also the author of the famous drama *Tiger at the Gates*. Both his humorous comment and the French title of that theatrical work (literally 'The Trojan War will not take place') sum up the common perception of how women approach armed violence. Deliberately ousted from the battlefield – the ultimate domain of virility – women are, however, often the subject of male quarrels and coveted as booty. The Yanomani Indians of the tropical forests of South America, for example, freely admit that they only wage war to seize women,<sup>37</sup> who are thus the victims *par excellence* of the men's bellicose brutality.

The above remarks demonstrate, however, that the demarcation between gender and belligerence is not as clear-cut as one might imagine. Through the ages women have played a role, albeit small, in war when they were not themselves the main protagonists. Although the feminization of contemporary armies remains a minor phenomenon (according to Goldstein, only 3% of the world's armed forces personnel are women),<sup>38</sup> it is the result of a long narrowing of the divide between femininity and conflict, a process favoured today by the progressive decline in mass mobilization (beginning with the French Revolution in 1789), and by the professionalization of the soldier's trade. Moreover, women warriors are very

35 For practices in France, see Fabrice Virgili, *La France 'virile': Des femmes tondues à la Libération*, Payot, Paris, 2003.

36 In *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, Grasset, Paris, 1943, p. 130. Own translation.

37 J. S. Goldstein, above note 14, p. 7.

38 *Ibid.*, p. 10.

much alive in the national imagination, particularly as a symbol associated with defending the country. One need only think of the allegories of Marianne, Helvetia, Germania or Britannia to appreciate this. The idea that the mother country – in danger, but prepared to defend itself at all costs – is a female figure is not in itself surprising. This can easily be linked with the animal world, where females fight, often to the death, to protect their offspring from danger.

This latter point brings us back to the question of how women relate to the violence of war, a question that is generally evaded. The act of killing is commonly viewed as a typically male gesture. Women, regarded as the ‘givers of life’, are deemed to fill by procreation the void that men’s martial activities create in society, and even to continue to supply ‘cannon fodder’. A whole series of stereotypes have developed from this fundamental societal dichotomy – arising with anti-militarism at the end of the nineteenth century, accentuated during the 1914–1918 wholesale slaughter, and partly revived by the feminist movements in the early 1970s in the context of the Vietnam War. These stereotypes depict women as frail and innocent creatures (the famous ‘weaker sex’), incapable of shedding blood and thus intrinsically more inclined to make peace than war, since their role of bringing forth life makes them aware of its value. However, the fact that wars are (statistically speaking) the doing of men is primarily due to factors of discrimination against the ‘fairer sex’ rather than to atavistic traits. On the contrary, anthropologist Margaret Mead<sup>39</sup> postulated that in situations of armed conflict, women are more inclined to kill than men. She argues that, mainly for cultural reasons, ‘the controls which operate on male aggression seem to be lacking in females’. It is true that, unlike boys, girls are not brought up learning how ‘to use violence in a disciplined way [...] and how to subject aggressive physical behaviour to rules of fair play and appropriateness’, as in certain sports (such as rugby) that are regarded as essentially male. Mead writes that ‘it may be highly undesirable to permit women, trained to inhibit aggressive behaviour, to take part in offensive warfare. Defensive warfare, on the other hand, does not have the same disadvantages, as it invokes the biological basis of defence of the nest and the young.’<sup>40</sup> If this view is substantiated, it would at all events explain why so many women fight in wars of resistance against a foreign invader.<sup>41</sup>

A further controversial issue is women’s close connection with the violence of war. Although history shows that women have taken part in armed conflicts since ancient times, it also implies between the lines that to some extent, they have done so against their will, precisely because there was a major threat to

39 Margaret Mead, ‘A national service system as a solution to a variety of national problems’, in M. Anderson (ed), *The Military Draft: Selected Readings on Conscription*, Hoover Institution Press, Stanford, California, 1982, p. 441 (original edn 1967, paper reprinted by permission of the publisher from *The Draft: A Handbook of Facts and Alternatives*, edited by Sol Tax, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1967).

40 *Ibid.*

41 This hypothesis is further supported by the fact that joining in hostilities has very often been the only chance for women – most of whom had no political rights at all until the end of World War II – to help shape the national destiny.

the existence of the community. Other than in these exceptional situations, the instinct to harm one's fellow human being supposedly remains the 'prerogative' of men.

However, certain historical events refute this angelic vision, demonstrating that torturers are found among women too. To cite only a recent example, what is known in the media as the Iraq prison abuse scandal at Abu Ghraib shows that women can also, without any constraint, commit acts as hideous as torture, and take perverse pleasure in doing so. The female American soldiers involved in those practices are every bit as obnoxious as Ilse Koch, the 'Bitch of Buchenwald' or Irma Grese, the 'Beast of Auschwitz', who had indulged in their sadism and brutality some sixty years before. Similarly, the fact that there are women amongst the suicide bombers who blow themselves up in Iraq, Chechnya or elsewhere shows that they too are prepared to become the vectors of indiscriminate violence. This is further confirmed by the participation of female soldiers such as the women Tamil Tigers in the massacre of civilians. Even nurses, the very image of compassion, have been able to pervert their ideals for the needs of a totalitarian ideology.<sup>42</sup> Rape, a war crime hitherto regarded as exclusively male, can also be committed by women... against other women. A recent study on the civil war in Sierra Leone showed that it was neither unknown nor even rare for women to take direct part in sexual torture inflicted on female victims.<sup>43</sup>

The existence of these 'black sheep' certainly does not change the fact that the majority of women in conflict situations still belong to the category of victims. This basic tenet of humanitarian organizations is upheld all the more strongly as it does not, in our societies, call into question the precepts of child-rearing, a certain social order, or even how we envision gender. In other words, it is easier to relegate women everywhere to a passive role than to consider that they are all capable of full participation in war or other situations.

By stigmatizing warriors and regarding the mother figure as essentially innocent, this dichotomy between the two also means that the awkward truth can be evaded – namely, the fact that war and the violence associated with it are not a matter of gender, but first and foremost of individuals, and that we must therefore regard aggression as a human rather than a male activity. To put it more bluntly, it means that each and every one of us, whether man or woman, could one day lapse into barbarity.

42 On the participation of German nurses in the euthanasia programme launched by the Third Reich, see Rebekkah Bronwyn McFarland-Icke, *Nurses in Nazi Germany*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1999.

43 Dara Kay Cohen, 'The role of female combatants in armed groups: Women and wartime rape in Sierra Leone (1991–2002)', communication presented at the international colloquium on 'Rape in Wartime: A History to be Written', Paris, 11–13 May 2009.