Victims or Vital: Contrasting Portrayals of Women in WWI British Propaganda

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More than any other war before it, World War I invaded the every day life of citizens at home. It was the first large-scale war that employed popular mass media in the transmission and distribution of information from the front lines to the Home Front. It was also the first to merit an organized propaganda effort targeted at the general public by the government. The vast majority of this propaganda was directed at an assumed masculine audience, but the female population engaged with the messages as well. A small amount of propaganda was directly targeted at women, and these images either emphasized the importance of their traditional roles, or encouraged them to take on new, non-traditional jobs and functions. The images of women in British propaganda from 1914 to 1918 served a variety of purposes and appealed to a number of audiences, but generally cast women in two distinct lights: either as powerless victims, helpless in the face of the war and needing protection, or alternatively as a vital and important part of the nation and the nation’s war economy.

Although the word “propaganda” only came into common usage around 1914, the concept and motivation behind the idea was ancient. The ancient Greeks used drama, handwritten books, and oratory to spread their ideas, and as early as the late 1500s, propaganda was used in ways that resembled modern methods. Ironically, in this early example, both Spain and England used propaganda to tell their sides of the story of the Spanish Armada. This use of propaganda to provide contradictory versions of the same story remains standard fare in modern times. The term “propaganda” originated in the missionary efforts of the Catholic Church in the 1620s with the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, created by Pope Gregory XV. This Congregation was in charge of spreading the faith and regulating the church in “heathen lands.” Those basic ideas—the transmission of a particular agenda and the regulation of behavior—were the two guiding principles of propaganda that remain true throughout the ages. Propaganda gained a negative reputation as being inherently false, but in reality it was more complicated. The idea of propaganda as untrue rested on a host of problematic assumptions about what “truth” was. Simply, propaganda was a version of truth, or intended truth, and it always had an angle. Another common theme in propaganda was the intended audience. As the article on the history of propaganda on the American Historical Association website states, “The battle for men's minds is as old as human history.” For most of history, propaganda has been aimed at patriarchal societies and thus, has primarily targeted men. This remained true throughout WWI, where propaganda came into its own as a form of public information and manipulation. However, women were always part of those societies, and were an increasingly active part of the conversations about the war. They began to be targeted by propagandists as well.

In war, propaganda served a variety of purposes: recruitment of soldiers, encouraging social responsibility, advertising government agendas and programs, vilifying the enemy and arousing patriotism. Various governments throughout WWI found that the image of someone pointing out of a poster was a very effective recruiting tool for soldiers. Posters presented British men with both the glory of war and the shame of shirkers. Women were often placed in the role of encouraging their men to go to war. Many propaganda posters were aimed at men, but used women either as symbols of what needed to be protected, or as images evoking shame for the men who had not enlisted. These posters were not aimed at women, but the women in society would have seen them and internalized the representations. Generally, these posters depicted women as passive, helpless, or as outright victims of the brutality of the Germans. There were propaganda posters aimed at women, and these were mostly used to recruit women out of their established occupations. Women were called to work on farms, in munitions factories, as nurses, and many other professions. These posters depicted women as a vital part of the nation and the war effort.

British men were called to arms at the beginning of the war mainly through atrocity propaganda, which almost exclusively depicted women as victims. Atrocity propaganda dwelt on the violent acts committed by the German and Austro-Hungarian armies, with a focus on their barbarism. It was used as a means of justifying participation in the conflict, and vilifying the enemy. At the very beginning of the war, this was mostly focused on the atrocities committed in Belgium. Vivid imagery, such as the bayonetting of babies and women, was a main component of this propaganda. The image The Gentleman German by British cartoonist Edmund J. Sullivan was one particularly gruesome image of a cherub impaled on a German soldier’s bayonet (See appendix 1). An Australian cartoon by Norman Lindsay served to show the way this image was taken up throughout the allied countries. It also expanded on the image of the bayonettied baby and rampaging Germans to include a trampled Belgian woman underfoot (see appendix 2). It was in fact a veritable cornucopia of German atrocity in one image, including but not limited to, poison gas, a zeppelin dropping bombs, and someone being crucified, in addition to the aforementioned victimized women and baby.

Historian Nicoletta F. Gullace discussed the atrocities in Belgium as marketing for the war in her...
book *Blood of our Sons*. She argued that the use of the events in Belgium was a powerful marketing tool because by using images of violence against women and children, propagandists were able to create “irrefutable moral imperatives” with which to crush protest, justify their entrance into the war, and motivate the continued sacrifice of resources, money and sons to continue fighting. It was unquestionable that the invasion of Belgium was violent and brutal. However, there was a great deal of hysteria and outright fabrication that marrred the historical record of the actual events which allowed for occurrences like the publishing of two fabricated letters, supposedly from Belgian victims, detailing the horrors they were subjected to. Regardless of the real suffering that occurred in Belgium, the events were represented in a stylistic way, which “dwelt on perverse sexual acts, lurid mutilations, and graphic accounts of child abuse of often dubious veracity.” The British used the victimization of women, whether real or exaggerated, to build fervor for war.

The depictions of violence against women in Belgium were not a propaganda tool isolated to the first year of the war. Nor was it all fabricated. A Dutch cartoon by Louis Raemaekers in 1915 called *Thrown to the Swine; The Martyred Nurse* was another sexually grotesque representation of violence against women in Belgium (see appendix 3). This image, unlike a few of the other images of violence against women in Belgium, was inspired by a true event, although turned grotesque in caricature. On October 12th, 1915, British nurse Edith Cavell was executed by firing squad for helping over 200 allied prisoners of war to escape Belgium for Holland. The image was a woman's body, her blood on the floor, surrounded by Germans personified as pigs. At least one of the pigs was drooling, and they appeared to be leering at her dead body in a sexual manner. This image directly supported Gullace's statements about the stylization of violence, and the preoccupation with lurid and perverse sexualization of women being victimized. Additionally, the information, which accompanies the image in Raemaekers' *Cartoon History of the War*, was likely a product of propaganda as well. It is difficult to believe the report by Hugh Gibson, First Secretary of the American Legation at Brussels, that Count Harrach—a German representative at a meeting called to attempt to prevent Cavell's execution—would say “I only regret that there are not three or four more old English women to shoot.” It was impossible to prove if he did or did not say such a thing, but exaggeration was a key characteristic of propaganda, and this incident was internationally provocative. The image and the news surrounding it were undoubtedly intended to provoke outrage in men and women alike over Edith Cavell’s remorseless killing.

Even in propaganda, which did not directly feature women, there was still the intimation of violence against them. In America, the invasion of Belgium was often termed “The Rape of Belgium.” While rape was not a violation committed exclusively upon women, it was women who were historically the victims of rape in the public consciousness. The use of this therefore gendered term, the Rape of Belgium, was twofold. Partially, it linked back to the idea of the personification of the country of Belgium as a woman, but it also evoked the specter of violence against women, which men should join the army to prevent.

Defense of the home front was another subject of WWI propaganda that depicted women primarily as victims. In this case, it was the idea of women at home—the mothers, wives and sisters of the soldiers—who were potentially the victims of the Germans if the war was not fought to keep them back. One British poster called for solidarity with those at the front, in an effort to prevent what happened in Belgium from happening in England. In this way, not only was the tragedy of Belgium continuously evoked, but also the idea of violence towards women. The poster showed war torn Belgium juxtaposed with a peaceful bit of English countryside and the text read “The Hun and the Home; back up the men who have saved you” (see appendix 4). At first glance, this appeared to be another poster directed at women, but a closer reading reveals references to “our homes are secure, our mothers & wives are safe,” which implied that this was either directed at men or at the general population. These ideas of the safety of home were set opposite “their homes are destroyed, their women are murdered & worse.” Presumably, the “worse” that was referenced here was rape, once again tying the idea of Germany's aggression to the idea of women as victims. Only this time there was the added terrifying factor of the idea that rather than being a distant tragedy, it would be coming for them and their loved ones.

An Irish recruitment poster showed the potential of Germans breaking into a home and threatening the occupants: a man, woman, child and old man. The message is clear: join the army, or risk your family becoming victims of the Germans, just like the Belgians (see appendix 5). This fear of a direct German threat on your loved ones was not just a concern where it might be rational, like in Britain. There were cartoonists as far away as Australia who were utilizing the image of Germany invading—and predictably dragging off their women, presumably to rape—in order to promote recruitment (see appendix 6).

The fear of the Germans at home did not end with the war, and neither did Britain's propagandist's depictions of women as victims. In 1918, the British Empire Union produced a poster warning of the dangers of gestures of goodwill from the Germans after the war, citing wartime atrocities as reasons not to trust Germans (see appendix 7). There was a display of atrocities on the poster, including the oft-repeated bayonetting of babies, and also including a small memorial cross to Edith Cavell. This far-right group hated the Germans and produced this poster just in case anyone was planning to forget that Germany victimized the women of Belgium.
women and would do the same to the British women if given the opportunity.¹⁵

Even though women were often portrayed in propaganda as victims, on the Home Front, they were also pictured as vital parts of the nation and the war effort. Propaganda posters worked to get women into nontraditional jobs, which suddenly needed to be filled when all the men went away. Propaganda normally either showed women as part of the greater work force, or singled them out. One 1915 poster showed two women as a part of a larger workforce (see appendix 8).¹⁶ One woman was working in munitions and the other was a nurse, both necessary jobs to support the war. This poster could be considered aimed towards men, or to the general population. The question the poster asked was “Are you in this?” It seemed to be directed at the man walking by the industriousness seen in the poster, but it could address anyone walking by the poster itself. Here, women were seen as a vital part of the war effort. Additionally, there was no sense of impending violence towards them—they were safe and doing their bit.

“Safe” was unfortunately a relative term in one of the most important industries women moved into during the war. Munitions manufacturing had dangers from both explosions and poisoning, but also resulted in higher wages, and thus higher standards of living, which generally improved women’s health.¹⁷ It was one of the most visual and alluring adventures for girls and women in the war, and occasionally a girl would run away to find munitions work. Munitions work came with better wages, mobility, and a chance to serve the country at the same time.¹⁸ The cover of the first issue of The War Worker magazine in 1917 featured an image with a munitions worker, a soldier and the factories forming a triangle, representing the three foundations of the war effort, and publicly recognizing the patriotic role of the women involved in the munitions industry (See appendix 9).¹⁹ A 1916 propaganda poster portrayed an implicit exchange of salutes between a man going to the front, and a woman going into the munitions factory (see appendix 10). There is the implication that these things are both of equal importance to the war effort: women are also providing a vital service.²⁰ There is also an exchange of places happening: she is going to work in the factory so he can go off to fight at the front. Without the female munitions workers, there would not have been the personnel to produce armaments in the numbers required for the war. There were more women in munitions work than in any other aspect of the war on the home front—almost one million in total. These women were aware of the fact that the shells they were making were deadly and brought death. They believed themselves to be intimately involved in the conduct of the war.²¹

Munitions were not the only job women were called into through propaganda on a large scale. The call for women to serve in the British Land Army evoked powerful images of women as essential to the nation’s survival. With so many men dead or away there was a need for farm workers, and women filled that gap. One British poster showed a woman on a farm being productive and appreciated—being told, “We could do with thousands more like you” (see appendix 11).²² Unfortunately, while most of the posters depict the women being welcomed into the farms, the truth was that many of the farmers would much rather have had male pensioners than women working on their farm.²³ This duality, between what propaganda showed and what people actually felt, can often be found depicted in political cartoons and other visual media of the period. The government recognized the value of women on the land, however, and cleverly framed a call to work as “women’s ‘right to serve,’” thereby engaging all the Suffragettes who wanted further equality for women, and providing an avenue through which to express their patriotism.²⁴ Although the women who worked on the land were not necessarily as recognized for their efforts as the women who worked in munitions—or very appreciated by the farmers—they made a great contribution to the war effort through food production. Before the war, Britain was importing almost half of its food. By 1918, it was producing around 80 percent of its food.²⁵ The Women’s Land Army helped reduce imports by over thirty percent.

Unlike its British counterparts, a 1918 American Women’s Land Army poster bore the legend: “Until the boys come back” (see appendix 12).²⁶ Even as women’s labor was necessary, there was a great deal of concern about men having to compete with women for jobs when they came back, both in farm and factory work. Even though not all American Land Army posters contained this implied constraint, it was likely a way to embed the idea that after the men came back home, women should leave their newfound jobs and return to more traditional employment; leaving the jobs open for the men.

One of the main roles women were depicted fulfilling in propaganda was that of recruitment aid. It was seen as vital for women to help send more men to the front, whether through encouraging them or shaming them into going. There were a large number of posters to this effect, including some of the most famous from the era. A poster stating, “Women of Britain say—Go!” depicts two or possibly three generations of women watching out the window as the men leave for the front (see appendix 13).²⁷ Women were employed as a tool to shame men into enlisting.

This was not just a sentiment seen in propaganda—Women took it to heart, and sometimes too far. In acting out their role as being vital to the recruitment effort, some women created more victims. The Order of the White Feather was created in August 1914, by Admiral Charles Fitzgerald. The order handed out white feathers to anyone not in uniform as a way of shaming the non-enlisted.²⁸ A few took it too far, or handed out feathers without understanding the circumstances. One man, James Cutmore, was rejected
in 1914, and was safe from conscription because he had three small daughters. In 1916, he was given a white feather while walking home, and enlisted the next day. By that stage in the war it did not matter that he had been rejected for several reasons, Britain was too desperate for men. Cutmore died in 1918.29 By attempting to fulfill the role assigned to them of encouraging recruitment, some women caused more unnecessary deaths. Other methods to encourage men to enlist also seemed to involve shame. One group of women hung a petticoat out a window, and challenged men to enlist or wear the petticoat in place of a uniform (see appendix 14).30 These women took their responsibility of ensuring that men continued to fight seriously.

Women were occasionally depicted as heroes beyond the Home Front. This happened mostly within the context of nursing. Wounded First, a Raemaekers' cartoon from September 1915, depicts the heroic efforts of a woman nurse to save the wounded on a sinking ship, which had been torpedoed by the Germans (see appendix 15).31 This cartoon reinforces the idea of women as making important contributions to the war effort. Interestingly, this cartoon is subverting many of the standards for wartime propaganda. Men are normally seen as the strong ones, and women as the vulnerable ones in need of saving and protection. Here, it is the man who is wounded and vulnerable, and the woman saving him. This image of woman as succor, angel, and caretaker was one of power. This was a necessary service that women could help provide. The image of women nurses as angels was a common one. A British poster calling for aid for the Belgian Red Cross literally depicts a nurse with white wings providing aid to a wounded soldier (see appendix 16).

As if the mixed messages being sent by the aforementioned two categories of propaganda was not confusing enough, there was also a selection of propaganda images which either straddled the line between the depiction of woman as victims or vital, or could be interpreted in different ways depending on the perspective of the viewer. One of the earliest of these was a 1914 Irish recruiting poster showing an Irish woman holding a rifle and asking a man if he will go rescue Belgium, or if she must go instead (see appendix 17).32 At first glance, this fell into both the category of victimization of Belgium and of the vital role of women in recruitment. Additionally, it introduced the idea of women as capable of fighting on the front lines themselves. The woman in this poster was standing strong, and fierce and determined to do what was right. She had agency and vitality. That may not have been the intention of the poster, but it was one of the potential readings. Although this poster was too early to be directly referencing the eventual rise of all-female battalions in Russia—which did not happen until 1917—there was obviously a desire among some women to fight on the front lines. In Russia, this manifested in women sneaking into service as men long before the all-female battalions were formed.33 While there was no evidence of Irish women doing the same, it was possible to infer that there was similar proactive sentiment elsewhere in Europe other than Russia. Viewing this poster in that light allows for an alternate reading of the question on the poster “Will you go, or must I?” as serious rather than rhetorical.

Some images lend themselves to alternate readings. Another example is a 1914 Russian print, which showed a Polish farm girl spearing an Austrian soldier with a pitchfork (see appendix 18). This poster was intended to mock the Austrians for their assumption that the Polish would not fight on the side of the Russian, as well as to show that the Polish were fighting back, not surrendering.34 It was difficult to say if this image was intended to use the farm girl as a symbolic representation of Poland, the way that Belgium and many other countries were represented by a female figure, or if this was supposed to be a more literal image: an image that said even the farm girls were fighting the invading Austrians—and winning, apparently. This Russian print contrasted with the Irish recruitment poster because while the Irish poster may have subliminal meaning, its clear purpose was the recruitment of men. The participation of women as vital and active agents in the defense of their country was much more obvious in the Russian print. They both were published in the same year, which indicates the vast differences in perspective and priorities even between allies in WWI. Both of these images depicted women as important features of the country’s wartime defense, and their willingness to take it into their own hands, if they must.

Even with the persistent vilification of the Central Powers, it was very rare to see a woman depicted as villainous, even a German woman. In one 1915 British poster by David Wilson called Red Cross or Iron Cross there is a German woman being cruel to a wounded soldier (see appendix 19). This is particularly remarkable because she was a nurse. Nurses were normally depicted as angels of mercy, but this one was pouring out obviously needed water right in front of a wounded soldier while the Kaiser and a German soldier looked on.35 This poster was vilifying Germany in general, and German women nurses in particular, as part of a call to join the Red Cross. This poster could fit into the general category of women as vital to the war effort because it included a call to arms for women to become nurses to help the wounded. At the same time, it was exploiting the traditional image of women as caregivers to gain moral high ground for Britain by showing just how sadistic the Germans were, if even their women could be cruel.36 This image was shocking because women were so rarely depicted in positions of power in propaganda. Additionally, she was acting in contradiction to the kind and compassionate way that a woman, especially a nurse, was expected to act. This was a woman in a position of authority, who was misusing her power and important position.

Propaganda in Britain during World War I
was prolific, varied, and evocative. However, caution is necessary to avoid overstating the importance and influence of propaganda on the minds of people. When an idea is completely contrary to a person’s worldview they will reject it. Contrarily, if it can be played off of existing beliefs or desires then it becomes extremely effective. The image of women in propaganda reflected the conflicted and changing role of women in society, which had already started shifting before the outbreak of the war, for example through the suffragette movement. The breakdown of women’s roles into two categories—victim and vital—was a very general one, which allows for discussion, nuance and overlap. Being a woman at the time was a matter of balancing between the old and new, the vulnerable and the strong, and the victim and the empowered contributor to society. Within the role of contributor to society, there were many roles that women took over the course of the war that were not mentioned here. One of the most prevalent images of women in wartime propaganda was their use as symbols representing the country as a whole. These images were not discussed in depth here in deference to images featuring representations of potentially real women, rather than symbolic representation of a nation. Women were killed and injured in Belgium, and the women of Britain were in danger if the Germans invaded. Women took positions in public like hearse drivers, firewomen, foresters, and clerical work in large numbers. Women were encouraged to maintain their roles in the household, through reminders to ration their supplies and images of the care of children. Joe Fox came close to resolving the divide between the representations of women as victims and as essential parts of the nation. Fox stated that “propaganda tended to depict women as guardians of the home, their gentle nature and vulnerability making them both objects of men’s affections and victims of the enemy’s barbarous acts, and yet also as resilient, active participants in the war effort.”

There are innumerable volumes in print about the roles of women in the Great War and how they were changing. These changes, and the uncertainty they created, were reflected in the way that propaganda represented women, and how they are represented to different factions of the population. Generally, in propaganda geared for men, women were depicted as victims or potential victims. In propaganda targeted at the general population or at women themselves, women were often depicted as an important, if not vital, part of the war effort. Similarly to the way modern women are inundated with conflicting messages in today’s media, women living in Britain during WWI had to find their own balance between these representations and the reality of their own lives.

Appendix


7) “Once a German, Always a German,” Husband, 73.


10) “Doing their Bit,” in Woollacott, image 3 (third unnumbered page after page 112).


14) “Serve your country or wear this,” Gullace, image 4. (Fourth unnumbered page after 115.)


17) “Will You Go, or Must I?” Gullace, image 5. (Fifth unnumbered page after 115.)

18) “Polish fighter,” Bryant, 35.
19) “Red Cross or Iron Cross,” Husband, 54.

Notes


4“Story of Propaganda.”

5Welch, “Patriotism”


9Gullace, 19.


12“Is your home worth fighting for? It will be too late to fight when the enemy is at your door, so join today.” Library of Congress. Dublin, 1915. http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2003668413/.


14Husband, 73.


16Angela Woollacott, On Her Their Lives Depend; Munitions Workers in the Great War (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), 60.
18 Woollacott, 1.
19 Woollacott, image 1 (first unnumbered page after page 112).
20 Woollacott, image 3 (third unnumbered page after page 112).
21 Woollacott, 1-3.
24 Carol Twinch, Women on the Land; Their Story During Two World Wars (Cambridge: The Lutterworth Press, 1990), 5-6.
25 Twinch, x.
30 Gullace, image 4. (Fourth unnumbered page after 115.)
32 Gullace, image 5. (Fifth unnumbered page after 115.)
34 Bryant, 35.
35 Husband, 54
36 Husband, 54

Bibliography


“How is your home worth fighting for? It will be too late to fight when the enemy is at your door, so join today.” Library of Congress. Dublin: 1915. http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2003668413/.


