

Chapter 9 *Women in the Second World War*

On the face of it the Second World War represented a more significant and formative phase for British women than the Great War. They entered it as citizens of their country for the first time, and as such could expect to be called upon to play a more equal part in the war effort than previously. Also the experience of the First World War meant that a number of the policies relevant to women were adopted more quickly or applied more extensively: rationing, the provision of milk and school meals, the establishment of day nurseries and the emergency hospital service. Perhaps more importantly the political momentum behind such social measures ensured that some of them were sustained after the war. Finally, the military circumstances prevailing during 1939–45 were rather different. For much of the period the British effort was comparatively slight in quantitative terms – a consequence of Germany's dramatic successes and the reluctance of the allies to engage them again on the European mainland. Instead the war came home to the civilian population, which put women in the front line. Amongst the 130,000 civilians killed during the blitz there were no fewer than 63,000 women. Moreover, in industry Britain broke new ground as the first power to conscript its women for the war effort, a feat that neither Nazi Germany nor Stalinist Russia managed to emulate. It is reckoned that about twice as many women were mobilised for industry and the services as in the First World War.

On the other hand the war experience for women was to a considerable extent a repetition of the first war. Some of the advances turned out to be ephemeral or actually unpopular with women themselves. Nor was wartime change an uncomplicated matter of emancipation – in some respects it turned out to be distinctly conservative in character. Several writers have observed that despite the centrality of women's role no significant reforms or concessions were actually won by them which would stand comparison with those associated with the First World War. This is partly to be explained in terms of the different chronological pattern. By 1914 the women's movement had concentrated its efforts on a narrow front and was apparently reaching a peak. In 1939 it stood at a rather low ebb after a prolonged period of gradual decline; nor can the movement be said to have been clearly focused upon certain major objectives. It is, then, not surprising that it

proved difficult to capitalise upon women's vital contribution to victory in the war. However, even if it is agreed that no significant policy changes emerged, it is still possible to argue that war made its impact upon the attitudes and aspirations of British women. Unhappily scepticism on this point is greatly strengthened by the availability of rather better evidence than that for the 1914–18 period in the shape of oral testimony and the Mass Observation reports from the late 1930s onwards. The results have had a dampening effect upon claims that the Second World War constituted another revolution in women's lives.

House and Home in Wartime

By 1943, when mobilisation for the war effort reached its peak, there were 7,250,000 women employed in industry, the armed forces and civil defence, many of them admittedly reluctant and dissatisfied recruits. However, it should not be forgotten that even more (8,770,000 in fact) remained full-time housewives. War impinged upon the domestic sphere in ways that nearly all of these women found disruptive and demoralising.

As a result of the prevailing assumption that 'the bomber will always get through' the British authorities anticipated that war would commence with huge numbers of casualties leading to a collapse of civilian morale and the crippling of industry in a fairly short time. Hence the swift imposition of a policy of evacuation to the less vulnerable parts of the country which was applied to some 3.75 million people, largely children, during the first three months. Over half the women subsequently questioned by Mass Observation either refused to part with their children in the first place or brought them home again after a short period. Of those whose children remained in the countryside the majority were unhappy about it.¹ This hardly requires explanation. Not only was the war taking husbands and sons, it was literally breaking up homes. The insecurity many women felt on parting from their children inevitably engendered a conservative reaction in favour of family, home and marriage. In the short term many women attempted to maintain something of a normal family life even though this meant that they bore a tremendous strain both physically and emotionally. As one housewife, uttering sentiments that recur endlessly, put it:

It's getting on my nerves what with the overtime, shopping, doing a bit of housework here and there, and rushing my meals down, I am fair run down.²

Evacuation proved to be only the beginning of their worries as far as children were concerned. As the war progressed increasing numbers of women took on part-time or full-time employment. The consequent need to find ways of caring for their young children presented one of the great opportunities of the war. The majority of mothers declared themselves content to place children in nurseries, but for several years this facility was simply not available.³ By 1944 some 1500 day nurseries, provided by local authorities, could cope with around 72,000 children at a not inconsiderable cost to their mothers of one shilling per head per day. Even so, three-quarters of children under 5 years old of working mothers were not catered for in the official schemes. Consequently women resorted to a variety of traditional expedients. However, it was not so easy to rely upon relations and neighbours as in peacetime, and mothers often found themselves driven to a succession of child-minders throughout the war.⁴ Nonetheless, nursery provision did represent a major advance on the First World War and inter-war situation, and clearly went some way to meeting one of the demands voiced by feminists. Unfortunately it was not sustained after 1945 and Britain continued for decades to lag behind other European countries in the provision of nurseries. This experience was, however, significant in another way. Mothers of young children in particular felt regret at having missed so much of the early life and development of their offspring; one result was a sense of guilt later in life. This helps to explain why in the late 1940s and 1950s so many women were vulnerable to the propaganda emanating from medico-scientific sources which attributed the problems of British youth to early neglect by mothers. This was to be one of the most profound and conservative consequences of wartime experience.

Wartime surveys of morale showed women to be fairly consistently more dispirited and resigned than men. A combination of the blackout, loneliness through disruption of family and neighbourhood networks, rising prices and food queues, poor transport, tiredness and the loss of small luxuries all took a disproportionate toll on those whose life was dominated by domestic concerns.⁵ For example, the normal problems of housekeeping were greatly exacerbated by the deterioration of the housing stock: half a million homes suffered serious damage. To this were added power cuts and shortages or even the disappearance of food items usually taken for granted. Authority was slow to comprehend the importance in most women's lives of an apparently lowly activity like shopping. The employed were obliged to sacrifice lunch times to join long queues for food, or to lose pay by taking time off. For a time

women war workers received priority cards to enable them to jump the queues, but so much friction resulted that shopkeepers abandoned the scheme. One Ministry of Food official loftily dismissed the whole matter: 'It should not be beyond the ability of married women war workers to arrange for a neighbour or friend to purchase their food for them.'⁶ Some did rely on older female relations or on their eldest daughters, but otherwise women were condemned to an unending and wearying scramble to keep their families supplied. As a result women were invariably found to be not only more depressed about the war than men, but to feel less involved and less interested in the progress of the war.⁷ One qualification should, however, be made to this general point. Young and unattached women suffered much less from depression although they, too, were somewhat detached from the war by comparison with men.

As in the 1914-18 war women became the target of a prolonged bombardment by the government propaganda machine, particularly the ministries of Information, Food and Labour, anxious to avoid waste of food and fuel, to lure women into the labour force and to check the expected slump in morale. Rarely was so much effort expended on so many to so little obvious effect. For example, Mass Observation soon discovered that advertisements designed to educate housewives about nutrition failed to get the message across; even when official pamphlets were read they were largely ignored.⁸ Even the BBC's five-minute talks by 'Gert and Daisy', though popular, were considered *entertainment* rather than practical instruction. Eventually the sheer volume of propaganda produced boredom and cynicism. Posters urging the necessity for avoiding gossip drew resentment among both sexes on the grounds that ordinary people had no secrets to give away. One of the most celebrated slogans of the war - 'Be Like Dad, Keep Mum' - was generally thought amusing, though some women failed to understand it.⁹ Significantly no criticism was reported on the grounds of the sexism in the slogan. The flagging impact of official appeals to women presented an opportunity for the women's magazines. By 1941 the proprietors were virtually begging the Ministry of Information to allow them to assist its efforts to encourage women to be more co-operative. Eventually the government succumbed and gave the editors an official contact at the ministry; subsequently they used the magazines as an additional vehicle for propaganda on food and fuel, and also to sound out opinion over conscription.¹⁰ This appears to have been a one-way process in that the magazine proprietors helped the authorities without ever trying to extract concessions for women in return. This was by no means a

peculiar feature of the women's papers. In both world wars most of the press instinctively sought to win prestige by associating themselves with the national war effort.

The strain and drama of the war bore rather less heavily upon many middle-aged women especially those living in small towns and rural areas. For them, after all, the crisis provided a tremendous stimulus to voluntary activity similar to that undertaken in the First World War.¹¹ The chief difference was that the work was now more efficiently co-ordinated by the Women's Voluntary Service (WVS) which acted as a channel of communication between the various organisations and the government. Inevitably the outbreak of hostilities obliged the Women's Institutes and Townswomen's Guilds to suspend their meetings because halls had been commandeered by the authorities. But activity soon resumed. By the second week of war the WI had swung into action to utilise masses of fruit which was about to go to waste; sugar was made available for jam and bottled produce. This, after all, was precisely the kind of work for which the WI had been intended back in 1915.¹² By early 1940 the WVS had some 600,000 volunteers at its disposal, busily engaged in boosting food production by gardening and poultry-keeping, organising collections of scrap metal and other scarce materials, coping with evacuees and receiving servicemen who were often billeted with them at short notice. Such women were essentially playing their conventional domestic role on a grander scale; they received praise but little financial compensation for their efforts. In spite of the friction caused by the clash of town and country, not to mention of middle and working class, the women volunteers at least enjoyed the satisfaction of knowing that they were contributing to the national effort. In Lady Denman's words:

Those of us who are not called upon to endure the hardships of actual warfare will be glad to feel that we have comfort to go without, difficulties to contend with in daily life, and that by meeting such troubles cheerfully and helping our neighbours to do so, we are taking our small share in winning the victory which we believe will come.¹³

In these measured and reassuring tones one senses the strong measure of continuity with the First World War for many middle-aged and middle-class women throughout Britain.

Family and Morality

A good deal of contemporary comment from the 1939-45 period focuses on the marked loosening of social behaviour and the drop in moral standards. Much of this is very similar to criticism made during and after the First World War. It is obviously impressionistic and exaggerated, and should not be taken as indicative of long-term social change. Rather predictably much of the male comment during the war tended to attribute declining morality to women. The Auxiliary Territorial Service, for example, was widely regarded by men as an opportunity for women to pursue sexual adventures. For its part the government found it desirable to distribute condoms to the servicemen in order to protect them from venereal disease, but left the women in the forces to face the dangers of becoming pregnant. In contrast to the traditional male view one notices that women's accounts during the war tend to suggest that they became the victims of excessive teasing, sexual harassment and violence, especially in isolated and exposed situations in the Land Army or when serving as conductresses on trams at night.

Yet wartime had its attractions for many young and unattached women. Their experience was often a much happier one than that of the housewives who loom so large in the Mass Observation reports. Freed from some of the usual restrictions of home life, earning more money, meeting daily with large numbers of people of both sexes, they found it all too easy to relieve the tedium of work with a lively social round. Male responses to this were distinctly mixed. For some, wartime presented unusual opportunities for promiscuity, but others clearly felt unsettled, even intimidated, by the large numbers of young women appearing in public places normally dominated by men.

One conspicuous manifestation was the growing tendency for women to visit public houses; in London Mass Observation found over 40 per cent of customers to be female. In fact this was no more than an acceleration of an inter-war trend. Some publicans still preferred to serve men only, often failed to provide ladies' toilets, and claimed that women got drunk more easily. But they admitted that women were extending the market, and were, in any case, entitled to brighten up their lives. Amongst the drinking classes one-third continued to disapprove of women's presence in public houses, especially if not accompanied by husbands. It was still claimed that the women were really there for immoral purposes. But basically men feared the invasion of their club: 'It kind of puts the damper on us blokes when there's women about.'¹⁴ Nonetheless the critics grudgingly tolerated

the phenomenon as another consequence of wartime: 'it's like everything else, they rule the roost now they have come in the place of men'.

It was often the older, married men who felt most threatened and voiced criticism of moral lapses, as this comment made towards the end of the war suggests:

Sexual morality has decayed a great deal in recent years, and the war has spurred on a process already set in motion earlier. Promiscuity is no longer considered wicked. ... No one seems to see any value in fidelity to one and the same partner.¹⁵

Behind such views were the many wives separated from their husbands, who were lonely and keen to find wider social outlets. Many inevitably began relationships with servicemen, also bored and restless, whose numbers were swollen halfway through the war by an influx of American troops. The latter enjoyed notable advantages in the form of a higher income, access to scarce consumer goods, and greater self-confidence and maturity in their approach to women. Inevitably the widespread separation of married couples, the extra-marital affairs, and the growing number of marriages hastily contracted by young partners after fleeting affairs resulted in an unusually high level of marital breakdown. Whereas during the four years before the war an average of only 7500 people filed petitions for divorce each year, the average rose to almost 39,000 in the four years after the war; and 58 per cent of these emanated from *men*, a sharp reversal of usual practice. Some of this increase would, however, have occurred anyway as a result of a further liberalisation of the laws on divorce in 1937.

Angus Calder has suggested that the Second World War induced a kind of *wanderlust* in British women. But if so, this is not obviously demonstrated in their subsequent behaviour. Even those who left for Canada and the United States were going in order to marry and enjoy a more comfortable family life style. The war seems, in fact, to have done nothing in the long run to check the trend towards marriage. Certainly the marriage rate dropped sharply during 1941–5, but thereafter it rose above the pre-war level and continued to rise until 1972.¹⁶ It was the popularity of marriage that helped to keep the birth rate in Britain surprisingly buoyant in this period. Naturally the immediate effect of war was to push the rate slightly below the level of the 1930s. But this turned out to be a brief phase. With the return of the troops from the continent in 1940 the birth rate rose again; it dipped rather low in 1941, then increased sharply in 1942, reaching a peak by 1944. This was followed by the famous baby-boom of 1946–8 after which a slight downward drift began.¹⁷

What provoked so much pessimistic comment from moralists at the time was the fact that a growing proportion of the children being born were illegitimate – 9.1 per cent of the total births by 1945, which represented a doubling of the pre-war rate. However, the figures are misleading. During the 1930s roughly one-third of all mothers first conceived when out of wedlock, but a high proportion of them married before giving birth. Wartime circumstances often delayed marriage and thereby inflated the official figures for illegitimate births. Illegitimacy was thus, in a sense, a phenomenon of wartime, but an ephemeral one.

Impressionistic evidence suggests that society was becoming more relaxed about both illegitimacy and divorce during the Second World War. But to some extent this was happening gradually during the 1920s and 1930s. The war may simply have accelerated the trend. One must also remember that if war weakened moral attitudes in the short run, it also generated a moral backlash which was still making itself felt in the 1950s. Barbara Cartland, who worked as a welfare officer in the RAF, had first-hand knowledge of the strains placed upon relationships. One suspects that the romantic ideal of love, fidelity and marriage that she advocated so strongly owed a good deal to the impression that broken marriages and illegitimacy had made on her during the war. This is corroborated by opinion surveys and the marriage rate. Men were keen to return to home and family life. Women were on the whole anxious to withdraw from war work to settle down and start families. In this respect the 1939–45 war seems to have been no more revolutionary than that of 1914–18.

The Mobilisation Of Women

For understandable reasons the extent of women's entry into the labour market during the Second World War has occupied a disproportionate amount of attention. By late 1943 46 per cent of all women aged 14–59 years were undertaking national service in one capacity or another. The basis for this was the introduction of conscription for women by the minister of labour, Ernest Bevin, in 1941. Bevin has gained a reputation as a master politician who always knew that conscription would be necessary but moved towards it carefully until the moment was right to launch so potentially controversial a policy.¹⁸ However, such praise seems misplaced when the matter is seen from the point of view of women's attitudes and responses. In fact government policy was rather a mess, though Bevin was by no means to blame for it. During the first

half the women and the Conservatives running third behind the Liberals. On the other hand the number of women elected rose sharply from 12 on the outbreak of war to 23, of whom 20 were Labour. It could not be foreseen in 1945 that the women MPs were to remain close to this level for the next 40 years. As in inter-war general elections the chief explanation for the results lay in the shifts in party fortunes. Thus all the Conservative women members who had not withdrawn before the election were defeated except for Lady Davidson at Hemel Hempstead. The impressive 20 victories for the Labour women were largely a consequence of quite unexpected success in hopeless constituencies rather than the result of any party strategy for women. The outcome also left women's parliamentary position looking rather unbalanced. Of the three non-Labour members Lady Davidson was inactive, Eleanor Rathbone was to die shortly, and Megan Lloyd George tended to cooperate with Labour anyway. In effect this put an end to the wartime experiment of a party for women which crossed the ideological divide of party politics.

The case for regarding the Second World War as having made a more significant impact on the lives of women than the First consists not so much in the extent of change but rather in the fact that changes were often *sustained* into the post-war period. This was partly the result of shifts in public opinion which culminated in the Labour landslide of 1945 – a political pattern quite different from that of 1914–18. Much of course, depends upon the significance one places upon key innovations such as family allowances and the post-1945 welfare state. While family allowances had started out as a feminist reform, by 1945 the momentum behind it was clearly very different. Similarly there is a case for saying that women were simply the incidental beneficiaries of the welfare state measures rather than being central to the ideology behind it. By 1945 the women's movement was too weak at the grass roots to be capable of influencing these innovations, and it is not clear that it was able to draw fresh inspiration from the post-war phase of reform.

It is, perhaps, on the employment front that the positive view of the war gains validity by comparison with the First World War. For example, the marriage bar was suspended in teaching and the civil service, and this turned out to be a permanent gain. On inspection the reason consists largely in official expectations of labour shortages after the war, and in an acceptance that the government could not consistently urge industry to take on married women if it failed to set an example.⁴¹ Thus, although many women abandoned their jobs after the

war, more seem to have survived within the labour force than in the post-1918 reaction. By 1948 there were 350,000 more insured women workers than in 1939. They were largely older, married women. It can be argued that the shift towards employment amongst married women was the most significant consequence of the war. However, some qualification must be made. The trend was already under way in the 1930s. To compare the proportion of married women at work in the censuses of 1931 and 1951 – up from 10 to 21 per cent – would be to exaggerate the effect of the war itself. In any case one must enquire why this happened. It is by no means clear that official ideas changed, simply that after 1945 the government wanted to boost output so desperately that it was even prepared to encourage married women to return to work. This economic opportunity was an indirect consequence of the war. Whether, however, the attitude of women themselves had changed is much less obvious, as is emphasised by the continued trend in favour of marriage and motherhood. If more women felt able to combine a domestic role with employment at some stage or stages in their lives this hardly indicates emancipation, but rather a variation in women's traditional strategies for family survival. And any change clearly depended crucially on the vagaries of the British economy rather than on wartime experience.