

OUT OF THE CAGE

Women's Experiences in Two World Wars

Gail Braybon and Penny Summerfield

ROUTLEDGE LIBRARY EDITIONS:
WOMEN'S HISTORY



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TWO WORLD WARS

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Penny Summerfield

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Women's Experiences in Two World Wars

**GAIL BRAYBON AND
PENNY SUMMERFIELD**

Volume 5

 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

*TO ALINE AND MARJORIE,
AND IN MEMORY OF PADDY*

‘ . . . it was like being let out of a cage’

Lilian Miles, First World War

‘I thoroughly enjoy my four hours working in the afternoon.
I’m all agog to get here. After all, for a housewife who’s been a
cabbage for fifteen years – you feel you’ve got out of the cage
and you’re free’

Part-time war worker, Second World War

PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We first thought of writing a book about women workers in the First and Second World Wars ten years ago. At that time, Gail had just finished her thesis on men's attitudes to women war workers during the years 1914 to 1920, while Penny was halfway through research into various aspects of the Second World War. Stephen Yeo, tutor to both of us while we were undergraduates at Sussex, happened to be the Internal Examiner for Gail's postgraduate work, and the supervisor of Penny's continuing research. Noticing the similarity in our approach to the problems women encountered as war workers (Penny had just published a paper in *Capital and Class* I, 1977) he suggested we might get in touch with each other, and talk about a book.

This we duly did, as we had remained friends anyway, and we got to the stage of producing a fairly detailed outline, and finding a publisher. There our plans went awry. We were living in very different circumstances, as Gail was unemployed in Sussex, and had plenty of time to get into the project, while Penny was teaching at Durham. What looked just about manageable in the first few months after we signed the contract became rapidly impossible for Penny, as she changed jobs, moved to Lancaster, and had her first baby. We agreed that Gail should see if she could get her work published on its own, while Penny took longer, writing first her thesis, and then a separate book. So, one book on women in the First World War was published in 1981, while the other, on the Second World War, came out in 1984.

That might have been that, particularly as Penny then had numerous teaching and writing commitments, and another baby, while Gail had gone into the world of computing, having

been unable to find any work in history. But, we were both disappointed by the fact that our respective books had come out as expensive hardbacks. How many people could afford to buy such things? We still wanted to reach a wider audience, and Gail approached Philippa Brewster, at Pandora, to see if there was any chance of paperbacking her original book. There were doubts about this, and just in passing she mentioned the possibility of writing a new book, with Penny, about women in the two wars – this idea was greeted with enthusiasm. All that remained was to let Penny know about the idea! Fortunately, she too was keen, and suddenly the project was live again.

We wrote our plan, and then gradually started writing, amidst the numerous demands of home and work. We already knew that this would have to be rather different from our earlier books, and that we wanted more people to read it than had ever seen our original work. It soon became obvious, as we became immersed in it, that we should use the words and opinions of the women themselves as much as possible. This turned it into a different book altogether: we were not re-working our old material, we were producing something fresh. As a result, this is a companion to our earlier books, not a replacement. We also realised that we were probably producing something far more interesting than our original joint work would have been. We each had greater confidence in our ideas, and knew that we had already put our opinions on the line, in our individual books. We now had more to say, and more sources than had been available 10 years before. We needed all the help we could get, as we were writing 200 miles apart, and squeezing the work in around all the other projects taking up our time! But in the end we really enjoyed producing this book because we felt that women's wartime experiences would be as important to readers as they were to us.

Many people have helped us in this project. Gail would like to thank the librarians at the Departments of Sound Records, Printed Books and Documents, at the Imperial War Museum, for all their help; Sian Jones, of the Southampton City Museums Education Service, and those who organised the Oral History Project on women's war work, namely Jean Berry, Dr Jan Stovold and Jenny Wing, for allowing access to a valuable collection of interviews and photographs; Antonia Ineson, for

allowing her to borrow (and quote from) her thesis on women munition workers, and many conversations in the past about women and war; Alan Scott, for telling her when she had done enough work for the day; and Brighton Polytechnic Computer Centre, for allowing her to borrow on numerous occasions, the wonderful Apple Macintosh, which made this book so much easier to write.

Penny would like to thank Dorothy Sheridan, of the Mass-Observation Archive, and Liz Neeson, Joyce Jeal and Alex Sumner of Thames TV for introducing her to some wonderful sources and beautiful photographs recording women's experiences; Pam Schweitzer of Age Exchange Theatre Trust for granting permission to quote some of the women who appear in Age Exchange's book, *What Did You Do in the War, Mum?*, and for making available personal photographs from their collection (Age Exchange have produced nine books from the oral history archive they are currently building up, and welcome inquiries at 15 Camden Row, Blackheath, London SE3 0QA); Aline Torday, Marjorie Easterby-Smith and Celia Bannister for permission to use their photographs; friends and colleagues for their interest and support, especially Celia Briar and Jane Mark-Lawson; David Smith of Castle Computers, Lancaster, for help in unscrambling word processing problems; Mark for interviewing Marjorie and many other things besides, and Sam and Sarah, who were always ready to create a cheerful diversion.

We would also both like to say thank you to all those women who have talked or written about their lives during the wars, and have allowed their experiences to be used.

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INTRODUCTION

This book is about women's experiences in the First and Second World Wars.¹ In it we are aiming to do two things. The first is to make the voices of working women, of whatever class, heard. Women have had much to say about their lives when asked, and the rise of oral history has led to a growing number of fascinating collections of wartime memories in the past few years. As we wrote, we allowed the concerns of the women themselves to influence the form of the book. So we have written about the experience of call up, personal reactions to war, feelings about the pay and the company at work, and the effects of war on women's health and home lives. Women's pride in their work comes through very strongly in their testimony and so too does the sense of freedom many felt when comparing their war work with the confines of home or a typical 'woman's' job. In both wars there were women who felt that they had been 'let out of the cage' even when they were critical of the pay and conditions they had to put up with, and the way that men reacted to them.

The second thing we aim to do is to lay bare the prejudices surrounding women, and show the way in which attitudes towards their roles at home and at work remained remarkably consistent over nearly fifty years. Both wars put conventional views about sex roles under strain. Women were after all working long hours next to men, learning new jobs, and earning better wages than they had before. They were, particularly in the 1939-45 conflict, partners with men in the war effort. Commentators during the First World War feared that women would not want to settle down to being the nation's wives and mothers after the war and expected changes in the relations between the sexes to result from their new

work. But the surprise and hostility with which women were greeted when they were once again moved on to new jobs in 1939–45 do not suggest that the First World War had led to permanent changes. And although a larger number of older and married women went out to work during and after the Second World War they were not considered to be as important and valuable as male workers. Nor was there any suggestion that they should stop being primarily responsible for home life. The belief that men and women naturally occupy separate spheres within which they pursue quite different tasks was not shaken during either war: men were not expected to take an equal share of domestic responsibilities; nor was it considered proper that women, like men, should die for their country.

The book is divided into two sections on the respective wars. Although we cover similar themes in each, the two halves of the book are not perfect mirror-images of each other. As individual authors (Gail writing about the First World War and Penny about the Second), we each have our own style, and our own ways of putting things. Had we tried to obliterate these differences we would have made life harder for ourselves, and would probably have produced a less interesting book for the reader! However, other things also affected the way we wrote the two halves of the book, and we need to make these clear.

The wars themselves were quite dissimilar. The fact that they are known as the First and Second World Wars encourages people to see them as alike. But apart from the fact that in each case the main enemy was Germany and the allies were France, the USA and Russia, there were really very few similarities between them. The casualty figures for each war are revealing. In 1914 the population of England, Scotland and Wales was around 37 million. In the following four years 744,000 men in the armed forces and 14,661 men in the Merchant Navy were killed, and 1,117 civilians died in air raids. (Influenza accounted for another astonishing 150,000 deaths in 1918–19.) In 1939 the population was around 40 million. Between 1939 and 1945 closer to one quarter rather than three quarters of a million were slaughtered (264,443), but in addition this time 624 servicewomen were killed. Twice as many merchant seamen met their deaths in the vicious submarine warfare of the Atlantic and British coastal waters (30,248). Far more civilians

were killed in air raids (60,595) and almost as many women as men died as a result of bombing.²

In the First World War British action was concentrated in Flanders on the 'Western Front' and civilians were relatively safe. The Second World War was more truly a 'world' war. Between 1939 and 1945 there were 'theatres of war' in Europe, the Atlantic, the Mediterranean, North Africa, the Middle East. After Japan entered the war as an 'Axis' ally of Germany and Italy at the end of 1941, there were fronts in the Far East, the Pacific and Burma as well. But though war service took many servicemen and women far from home, successive waves of bombing also brought the danger, fear and tragedy of war to the heart of the civilian population.

In military terms the wars were quite different. The stagnation of trench warfare characterised the First War, whereas the mobility of fighter and bomber planes, fast-moving tanks, warships and submarines was a key feature of the Second. This mobility gave rise to the situation, quite unknown before, where men were fighting for their lives in aeroplanes over the channel by day and then drinking in the village pub near the air base in the evening. Camps and barracks all over Britain were bursting with servicemen and women, especially once American GIs started to arrive in 1942. The presence of so many people in uniform in British towns and villages during the Second World War, compared with their 'invisibility' in Flanders in the First, affected the ways civilians and troops reacted during the two conflicts. Even though some members of the armed forces were posted abroad or captured and held as prisoners of war and did not return home for as long as six years in the Second World War, the division between the home front and the war front was nothing like as stark as it had been in the First.

In spite of the build-up of the British Fleet, and talk of hostilities with Germany, the war in 1914 came as a complete surprise to most people in Britain. When war was actually declared, many were gripped by patriotic fervour. They assumed that this would be a minor skirmish in Europe in which the British would sort out the Germans, after which life would rapidly return to normal. As the months of fighting stretched to years, and the death toll reached appalling heights, enthusiasm waned considerably, even though there always

remained a gulf between the fighting men, who experienced the grim conditions of trench warfare and the people at home who carried on with lives that were almost normal. Eventually people simply longed for the war to be over. It became increasingly difficult to hold on to what it was supposed to be about, and discontent was fuelled by the government's industrial policy and its failure to act effectively on such matters as inadequate housing, high rents and food shortages. The experiences of 1914–18 left many with a lasting horror of the whole idea of war, and a determination that there should never again be such a dreadful conflict.

In contrast with the jingoism of 1914 most people were not enthusiastic about going to war in 1939. The fight was seen as something which had to be undertaken, in spite of the strong peace movement of the 1930s. Even though anti-German feeling was whipped up in the press and by politicians, the enemy this time was not such much a nation as a political system headed by a man who would clearly stop at nothing in his pursuit of establishing a 'Greater Germany' and might very well invade Britain. When they went to war this time, the British people knew that they were defending themselves against Hitler and Nazism. The confusion shown by one new recruit in 1914 who told his companions, 'I'm a-goin' ter fight the bloody Belgians, that's where I'm a-goin',³ was unimaginable in 1939. The disillusionment which grew during 1917–18 was not repeated in 1944–5. The mounting number of civilian deaths made people all the more desperate not to lose the war, and politicians' promises of rewards for wartime sacrifices increased determination to create in the aftermath of war a more equitable Britain, in which there really would be homes for heroes, with in addition full employment, free health care and a system of state welfare 'from the cradle to the grave'.

As far as women were concerned, the wars were also different in a number of ways. In both, Britain was beleaguered by the submarine blockade which led to shortages of all sorts of essentials from food to soap and clothing. But the interruption to trade was far more serious in the Second War, and the pressure on women to apply their domestic skills to compensating was greater.

When women entered 'men's trades' and the armed forces in the Second World War they knew it had been done before, but