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Women's Experiences of the Second World War: Exile, Occupation and Everyday Life

edited by Martin J. Crowley and Sandra Trudgen Dawson, Woodbridge, The Boydell Press, 2021, xix + 224 pp., £71.14 (hardback), ISBN 9781783275878

This edited collection of essays provides fascinating insights into women's experiences of war on a truly global scale. It is organised around twelve chapters which examine a series of micro-histories aimed at extending our understandings of women and the Second World War. The collection spotlights case studies that have been under-researched or obscured by dominant narratives that tend towards analysing women's wartime experiences along a 'progression-regression scale' (p. 188), that is to say the war years as a juncture that led to greater or lesser gender equality. Instead, this collection draws on a rich and varied range of sources, from oral interviews and scrapbooks to letters, diaries, posters, memoirs, and news media, to highlight the common challenges and experiences of women in vastly different circumstances. In this sense, as the editors outline in their introduction, this volume seeks 'to illuminate the intimate and quotidian as vital to the understanding of women and the Second World War' (p. 6).

In Part One, the chapters review the experiences of women living in exile or under wartime occupation. The chapters interrogate the lives of Protestant missionaries in America supporting Japanese Americans who were incarcerated in camps and resettlement hostels; the memoir of Mme Alice Juliette Wentzinger, an Alsatian woman in German-occupied Alsace; the extraordinary story of Norah O'Hagan, born in Newcastle, England, who became a trapeze artist and entertainer in the wartime travelling troupe The Flying Herzogs, settling in post-war America; and the wartime diaries of two Jewish women in occupied Paris and Amsterdam: Héléne Berr and Ety Hillesum. These chapters trace the itineraries of women who embody the complex geographies of gendered experiences where wartime disrupts existing borders and identities.

In Part Two, living with wartime occupiers, the chapters investigate the lives of women who were impacted by their forced proximity to foreign occupiers. Chapters here broach the 'contact zones' that opened up between Māori women and American servicemen in New Zealand; interracial marriage in occupied Japan; the absorbing story of the role of American and Chinese women in supporting the Ming Sum School for the Blind in occupied Canton; and the case study of a boarding house owner in Morecombe, England, and her relationships with the civilian and military personnel who lodged with her. These chapters surface the transnational and intercultural relationships and legacies of occupation.

In Part Three, the focus turns to everyday life at home and on the battlefield. Chapters in this final section bring into sharp relief the activism of women's groups in America to hasten the demobilisation of American servicemen in 1945; the accounts of Soviet female combatants and the personal meanings and practices of their gendered experience; Canadian servicewomen's wartime scrapbooks and their perceptions and experiences of the military; and American military nurses as visual witnesses to atrocities at the liberation of the concentration camps. As a section, these chapters grapple in the greatest detail with gender as an analytical tool, positioning their work within broader explanatory frameworks that inform how we read gender, war, and questions of equality, specificity, and agency.

Overall, the strengths of this edited volume are the range, diversity and richness of the case study material that is core to all twelve chapters. It is illuminating to read across the different contexts presented – from Māori women in New Zealand to Soviet female combatants. This gives the reader a refreshingly global perspective on women's experiences of war and counters the often geographically segmented histories (European, North American, South East Asian, Pacific, and Antipodean, etc) upon which comparative gender history can be built. The flipside of this extensive reach is that a number of the chapters tend towards a narrativizing approach to engage readers who may not be familiar with the regional/local histories addressed. While informative, this can lead to an overreliance on descriptive prose. This is not, however, to diminish the value of chapters where analysis and interrogation of gender paradigms are woven into the case histories presented. Stand-out chapters in this sense are those from Alexis Peri on Soviet women's accounts from the front line and Sarah Hogenbirk on Canadian women's wartime scrapbooks. Such chapters offer insight, nuance and complexity and attest to the multi-faceted future directions for research into women and the Second World War.