

Zoltán Molnár*

The role of women during the first world war in Great Britain, 1914–1918

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This summer marks 110 years since the outbreak of the First World War, which fundamentally shaped the entire 20th century, also known by contemporaries as the Great War. The conflict, lasting four years, not only unfolded on the battlefields but also profoundly transformed the daily lives of the warring states' home fronts. A large portion of men were conscripted, leaving behind tasks for those at home and women to create essential economic and social conditions necessary for continuing the war efforts. This study examines how the First World War altered the traditional social and economic roles of women established in the 19th century, and how their societal status changed as a result of wartime conditions, specifically focusing on Great Britain, a member of the Entente. It explores the activities women engaged in both on the home front and in the theatres of war.

KEYWORDS: The First World War, Women, Great Britain

A nők szerepe az első világháború idején Nagy-Britanniában, 1914–1918

Idén nyáron már 110 éve annak, hogy kitört az egész 20. századot alapjaiban meghatározó első világháború, vagy ahogyan a kortársak hívták a Nagy Háború. A négy éven át tartó konfliktus nem csupán a hadszíntereken zajlott, hanem gyökeresen alakította át a hadviselő államok hátországainak mindennapjait is. A férfiak nagy részét besorozták, az otthonmaradottakra és a nőkre várt a feladat, hogy megteremtsék a háború folytatásához nélkülözhetetlen gazdasági és szociális feltételeket. A tanulmányban az antanthoz-tartozó Nagy-Britannia kapcsán vizsgálom meg, hogy miként változtatta meg az első világháború, a nők 19. században kialakult hagyományos társadalmi és gazdasági szerepét, illetve hogyan alakult a társadalmi megítélésük a háborús körülmények következtében. Milyen tevékenységeket folytattak a hátszágban, illetve a harctereken.

KULCSSZAVAK: első világháború, nők, Nagy-Britannia

Introduction

The Prime Minister of Great Britain, Lloyd George, earnestly praised women's role in the war in his message to the Paris meeting of Allied Women War Workers held on 21st August 21 1918. “If it had not been for the splendid manner in which the women came forward to work in hospitals, in munition factories, on the land, in administrative offices of all kinds, and in war work behind the lines, often in daily danger of their lives, Great Britain and, as I believe, all the Allies would have been unable to withstand the enemy attacks during the past few months. For this service to our common cause humanity owes them unbounded gratitude.”¹

*University of Public Service; Doctoral School of Military Sciences, PhD student – Nemzeti Közszolgálati Egyetem Hadtudományi Doktori Iskola, doktori hallgató – E-mail: molnarzoltan910211@gmail.com; <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0357-8265>

¹ From the archive, 22 August 1918: David Lloyd George on women and the war. Source: <https://www.theguardian.com/the-guardian/2013/aug/22/women-first-world-war-lloyd-george> (13. 06. 2024.)

After the outbreak of the Great War, Defence of the Realm Act was came into force on 8th August 1914, which fundamentally changed the everyday lives of people living in Great Britain. This legislation made it possible for the government to intervene in many areas of the life of population in the hinterland. Just think of censorship, food rationing, control over mines and railways, the introduction of daylight-saving time, the dilution of beer, and the regulation of the period of sale of alcohol.

Newspapers and radio stations were constantly censored. So people could only hear about war successes. In this way, it was possible to maintain the population's support for the war effort. Agricultural lands were placed under the supervision of the government, which allowed ensuring that enough food was available to the population and the army despite the German submarine attacks. Due to daylight saving time, it remained light longer, thus enabling longer working hours in the factories. With control over mines and railways, the state managed to prioritize war production. Beer had to be diluted so that the workers would not get drunk and the continuity of production could be ensured. Pubs could only be open for 2 hours during lunch and 3 hours in the evening.²

Like the other belligerent states of Europe, Britain also hoped for a quick victory, many enlisted in the army, trying to prove their patriotism. Britain had no professional army. The government wanted to enlist 100,000 volunteers, but 750,000 applied in just 1 month. As a result of War Minister Lord Kitchener's recruitment campaign, 2.5 million men volunteered for the army by the spring of 1916.³ Countless propaganda posters appeared. British women also stood up for patriotic slogans.⁴

Women's work in the hinterland

As a result of conscription, unemployment was soon replaced by a labour shortage. As the war dragged on, volunteering was no longer enough. In January 1916, compulsory military service was ordered first for unmarried men between the ages of 18 and 41, and then from May for married men as well. In 1917 and 1918, the range of conscripts was further expanded, the last one already applied to men between the ages of 17 and 55.⁵ Because of all this, women began to be employed in more and more places. Be it in factories, offices, public transport, or even, if necessary, they had to work as window cleaners, chimney sweeps, farmers, or ticket inspectors. In general, it can be stated that they were paid less than men, although there were exceptions such as weaving.⁶ The Women's Service Bureau started operating at the beginning of the war, thanks to which they were able to provide work for thousands of women.⁷ Women worked in the fields immediately after the fighting started, as there were not enough farmers to harvest the crops. In 1917 Meriel Talbot founded the Women's Land Army. She was the

² DORA – Defence of the Realm Act. Source: <https://revisionworld.com/gcse-revision/history/world-history/world-war-one-1914-1918/dora-defence-realm-act> (12. 06. 2024.)

³ Németh 2006, 73.

⁴ Ward 2001, 23–45.

⁵ Doyle 2012, 30–35.

⁶ Harris 2014, 12.

⁷ Atkinson 1988, 37.

first female inspector of the Ministry of Agriculture from 1916. The farmer girls took some special jobs as well, working as shepherds, carriers, or even tractor drivers, having done a 6-week training to acquire the necessary knowledge for farming and animal husbandry. The wages of women working in agriculture were usually much lower than those working in other fields. At first, they earned just 18 shillings a week, which later rose to £1. In addition, this type of activity was very physically demanding. Women's Land Army operated until 1919 due to a significant food shortage. By then, 260,000 women had worked on the fields, of which 23,000 were members of the organization.⁸

In addition to agricultural work, one of the biggest burdens was the repair work in the factories. However, this was not a new factor since representatives of the fairer sex had already been employed in the textile industry even before the war. The difficulty, however, was that during the conflict the demand for this type of labour ceased, so the workers there lost their jobs because Great Britain could no longer export cotton clothes to America. With the increasing involvement of men, women also took up space in industry. More and more of them worked in electrotechnical, chemical, and machine factories and plants. In 1916, there was a serious shortage of ammunition in the country; therefore, the government took over the operation of the ammunition factories in order to maximize production. As a result, soon women from a wide variety of social backgrounds formed the dominant part of the workforce.⁹ The role of women in the production of munitions was unavoidable, as they primarily performed this extremely dangerous and tiring work that enabled the country to endure and win the material war against Germany and its allies. In 1916, the War Department issued a triangular badge exclusively for women doing urgent war work, which gave them priority boarding and reduced fares on public transport, and also communicated that there was nothing wrong with these ladies traveling alone at night. Before the conflict, there were only 3 state-owned factories where military projectiles were produced. These were: the Royal Ordnance Factory at Woolwich, the Royal Gunpowder Mills at Waltham Abbey and the Royal Small Arms Factory at Enfield Lock. Towards the end of the Great War, nearly 9,000 companies and factories were engaged in the production of weapons and ammunition but only 218 of them were considered state-owned war factories.

On 3rd January 1917, an explosion occurred at a munitions factory in Middlesex, killing at least 2 women. Production began at the plant on 30th October 1915, and they received permission from the Ministry of War to produce small projectiles, cartridges, detonators, lighters and other minor items. By the end of the First World War, approximately 8,000 women and 1,400 men had worked in the 14-hectare (34.6 acres) compound.¹⁰ According to official statistics, between July 1914 and July 1918, the number of women employed rose by more than 1.3 million, a wartime increase, of 22.5%. The greatest expansion took place in industry, which included the metal industry and state-owned ammunition factories, and a particularly significant increase was experienced in trade, with many women taking on administrative tasks at banks or insurance companies and in the transport sector. The

⁸ Doyle 2012, 46–47.

⁹ Harris 2014, 13–14.

¹⁰ Wynn, Wyinn 2017, 11–21.

proportion of women in the metal industry increased from 9% to 25%, in state factories from 3% to 47%, in the chemical industry from 20% to 39%, and in the entire industrial sector it changed from 26% to 37%.¹¹ During the First World War in Great Britain, the number of women increased from 23,721,000 to 24,538,000. The number of working women rose from 5,966,000 to 7,311,000, which means an increase of 1,345,000. Examining the segments of economy, it can be determined that in industry, the number of women increased by 792,000 (from 2,178,600 to 2,970,600); in commerce by 429,000 (from 505,500 to 934,500); in the government sector and education by 198,000 (from 262,200 to 460,200); in transportation by 99,000 (from 18,200 to 117,200); in hotels, theatres, and public houses by 39,000 (from 181,000 to 220,000); and in agriculture by 38,000 (from 190,000 to 228,000). The number of self-employed women or those employed by private employers increased by 40,000 (from 430,000 to 470,000), while in the miscellaneous category, it increased by 110,000 (from 542,500 to 652,500). At the same time, the number of domestic servants decreased by 400,000 (from 1,658,500 to 1,258,000), although this sector still employed the most women after industry. Within the industry, the most significant increases were observed in the metal industry (from 170,000 to 594,000), the leather industry (from 21,100 to 197,100), the chemical industry (from 40,000 to 104,000), and the electronics sector (from 196,000 to 235,000). However, there were decreases in the clothing industry (from 612,000 to 568,000) and the textile industry (from 863,000 to 827,000).¹² Looking at specific roles within transportation, there were no female ticket inspectors before the war, but by July 1918, there had been 1,972 of them. Similarly, the number of female motor cleaners increased to 3,065 by the end of the period. There were only three female porters recorded in 1914, but four years later, there were 9,980 working in this role. Significant increases were also observed among workshop workers (from 43 to 2,547), engineers (from 44 to 1,082), signallers, gatekeepers, and guards (from 437 to 1,292), painters, cleaners (from 698 to 1,177), and carriage cleaners (from 214 to 4,603). The majority of women in this sector worked for telegraph and telephone services (from 2,800 to 20,995), but they were also significantly represented as cooks, waitresses, and attendants (from 1,239 to 3,641).¹³ At the London General Omnibus Company in April 1917, approximately 3,000 women were employed. Nearly 40% of them had previously worked in domestic service, 11% came from the clothing industry, and 12% had been employed in retail and waitressing. Only 10% of them were in their first job, and a small proportion had left munitions work in favour of employment in the transport sector.

The Labour Exchanges placed nearly 16,000 women in jobs in the metal and chemical industries. In both industries, it can be observed that nearly a fifth were considered new workers, and significant numbers came from domestic service or clothing and textile industries. One-third of the female workers placed in the metal trades had prior experience in this field, while in the case of the chemical industry this proportion was 8%. In 1918, the Woolwich Arsenal employed 25,000 women, with an average monthly wage equivalent to 60

¹¹ Bean 2015. Source: <https://bpb-us-e2.wpmucdn.com/sites.middlebury.edu/dist/d/3502/files/2015/04/Bean.pdf> (13. 06. 2024.)

¹² Report of the War Cabinet 1919, 80–81.

¹³ Uo. 97. and Marwick 1977, 60–73.

shillings. The first minimum wage set by the Ministry of Munitions in 1915 was 20 shillings per week, which increased to 35 shillings by the end of 1918. In general practice, minimum wage levels tended to become maximums; however, at the Woolwich Arsenal mentioned, the majority of positions paid more than 30 shillings per week. Overall, earnings varied considerably between different factories, and it was significant that women performing previously highly skilled jobs traditionally done by men could earn the highest amounts in munitions work. A "female fitter" or "tool-setter," who worked on piecework in national factories, could earn between £5 and £10 per week based on the customary rate paid for the job. During the war, there was a significant increase in the number of female union members, largely because where there was a stronger organization, women's wages increased more dynamically, while in sectors with weaker representation, wages did not rise proportionally to the drastic deterioration in living conditions.¹⁴ In 1914, there were only 437,000 female trade union members, but in 1920, there were already 1,342,000. Most of them also joined the National Association of Women Workers.¹⁵ Before the war, the number of female civil servants was only 600, but by 1918, it had increased to 170,000. Women worked in the police force and in maritime auxiliary services as well.¹⁶

Many frowned upon mothers working, yet most of them had little choice if they wanted to provide for themselves and their children. It became evident that the issue needed to be addressed. The Maternity and Child Welfare Act of 1918 created the conditions for establishing maternity homes, infant and child welfare centres, and nurseries, where trained midwives and health visitors were employed, and where milk and food could be provided to mothers and their children. Unfortunately, despite such measures, maternal and infant mortality remained high during the war.¹⁷

Many female workers started playing sports in order to cope with the strain. The most popular sport was football, and most factories had their own football teams. The most famous club was Dick, Kerr Ladies in Preston. Their match held on Christmas Day 1917 was seen by 10,000 people at the venue, and 600 pounds were collected for the treatment of wounded soldiers. The working conditions in the factory were far from ideal. The work was difficult, monotonous, and tiring. Overall, as in the other belligerent states, although women earned more than before the war in Great Britain, their salaries generally fell far short of men's. In the factories, they were usually paid half as much or even less for doing the same work. They were primarily used for tasks that did not require professional qualifications. It is also significant that since productivity was the most important goal, it was impossible to maintain a work-life balance. After all, working hours consisted of 12-13 hours a day, and there were even women who worked for several days without stopping. Appreciation, on the other hand, was lacking. After the fighting ended, 750,000 women lost their jobs in the factories.¹⁸ In

¹⁴ Bean 2015. Source: <https://bpb-us-e2.wpmucdn.com/sites.middlebury.edu/dist/d/3502/files/2015/04/Bean.pdf> (13. 06. 2024.)

¹⁵ Brobst 2006, 63. Source: <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/228641805.pdf> (13. 06. 2024.)

¹⁶ Sullerot 1971, 151.

¹⁷ Kina, Ghemima, Djerraya 2019/2020. <https://dspace.univ-eloued.dz/server/api/core/bitstreams/6f6805ac-24a0-49b3-a134-66d419506163/content> (13. 06. 2024.) 28.

¹⁸ Harris 2014, 14–16.

addition, attempts were made to reduce the number of accidents in the reports so that the public would not learn about some terrible cases. One of the most well-known accidents occurred in Silvertown on 19th January 1917, where an explosion occurred in a factory producing TNT. 73 workers were killed, 400 were injured, and hundreds of houses in the area were destroyed. At the same time, contact with dangerous chemicals not only raised the risk of explosions, but could cause dozens of health problems that continued to weigh on the population even after the war. Again, only referring to TNT, which caused the skin of thousands of female workers to turn yellow, and for this reason they were called canaries. About 400 women are estimated to have died from prolonged exposure to TNT.¹⁹

Women also took an active role in charitable activities. Between 1916 and 1920, more than 11,000 new organizations of such type were created. All this is 30% more compared to 1913. War donations included all the items that soldiers needed on the battlefield, e.g. cigars. The Smokes for Wounded Soldiers and Sailors Society, led by Lady Gertrude Denman, distributed more than 265 million cigarettes and other tobacco products. A pair of good warm knitted socks or gloves was also considered a useful gift. Those who stayed at home also made uniforms and other essential articles, for example, schoolgirls sewed cartridge bags and rifle cases.

In addition to the numerous national and well-known organizations, many smaller and local communities were also established. Their aim was to help poorer families at the so-called soup kitchens where food was offered to them for no price or at a below-market price. Everything was especially important in those times when food prices skyrocketed. But in relation to society's helping work, the new maternity centres, the workshops for unemployed women, the local aid committees, the Red Cross centres or the facilities set up for Belgian refugees should also be mentioned.²⁰

Women as healers

In the context of war, women appear mostly in a symbolic form, as grieving widows and especially as mothers who mourn their fallen sons and hate war. Countless women experienced the hell of war on and near the battlefields, primarily as nurses. These girls and women were depicted as angels as a symbol of self-sacrifice on the posters and paintings of the time. The figure of the nurse-mother who cared for the wounded soldier as a child soon became exalted and took on sacred characteristics and became part of the war myths. Although the tranquillity of the military hospital was an island of peace for most of the wounded, they often harboured serious resentment towards the nurses who cared for them, as many believed that the doctors and nurses were trying to heal them so that they could return to the battlefield as soon as possible.²¹

The self-sacrificing activities of nurses must be highlighted. They can be divided into two distinct groups. There were those who served in the hinterland, while others stood with

¹⁹ Wynn, Wyinn 2017, 18–21.

²⁰ Harris 2014, 9–11.

²¹ Pukánszky 2013, 136–137.

the men on the battlefields. There was a lively debate in societies about whether women were capable of witnessing the horrors of war at first hand, and whether they were strong enough to care for seriously wounded soldiers suffering from unprecedented injuries. However, these feelings were quickly pushed into the background, since more and more nurses were needed as the fighting dragged on and became increasingly brutal. There were many nursing organizations during this period.²² In 1909, the War Office approached the British Red Cross and the Order of St. John with the request that they establish a volunteer organization that could provide assistance to those in need in the event of war. In the following year, almost 200 aid organizations were founded, which became known as VAD, operated throughout the country and had more than 6,000 volunteer members. Katharine Furse was one of the first to join the VAD (Voluntary Aid Detachment), which was attached to the British Territorial Army. Katharine Furse was later recognized as the founder of the VAD force and was chosen to lead the VAD. Along with some colleagues, she first went to France in September 1914. She held her position until November 1917, when she resigned, mainly due to disputes over the living conditions of the organization's members. Shortly after resigning from the leadership of the VAD, she was offered the position of Director of the Women's Royal Naval Service (WRNS).

The members of the organization were predominantly women, but not exclusively. VAD units were established in towns and counties throughout Great Britain, and carried out various tasks thus allowing full-time professional nurses to concentrate on the more skilled aspects of nursing care. As the war dragged on, the casualty rates among British and Allied soldiers continued to rise, increasing the demand for nurses. This highlighted the indispensability of the work performed by VAD members. In general, a VAD section consisted of 20 female members who were responsible for round-the-clock service and often had to care for a large number of wounded soldiers. Four members of the section were required to be qualified cooks to prepare meals for those they cared for. The section was overseen by a commander, who could be either a man or a woman. In addition, there was a female superintendent, who was a professional nurse and had to complete at least three years of training at a hospital that included a nursing school. The men's section operated with a different composition.

If someone applied for a full-time nursing position, they had to meet strict requirements. References were required and verified, proficiency in French was considered a basic criterion, and candidates had to be willing to work both domestically and abroad. Additionally, they were responsible for providing their own uniforms. During the war, countless women wanted to contribute in some way, and for many of them, joining their local VAD was an excellent opportunity. Since their employment was primarily local, they did not have to travel far, and part-time work options were also available to them.²³ Voluntary Aid Detachments were considered the most significant for them, they had the largest number of personnel, they were primarily made up of middle- and upper-class women who had not done any work before. During the Great War, there were 90,000 members of the organization, 10,000 worked in hospitals under the leadership of the Ministry of War, and 8,000 abroad, including France, Serbia, Malta and Egypt. The Navy and Army had their own networks of nurses. These were

²² Storey, Housego 2014, 15–28.

²³ Wynn, Wynn 2017, 21–29. and Jensen 2017, 10–27.

Queen Alexandra's Royal Naval Nursing Service and Queen Alexandra's Imperial Military Nursing Service.²⁴

One of the most famous British nurses was Edith Cavell. She was born on 4th December 1865 in Norfolk. At the age of 20, due to her father's illness, she chose the nursing profession. In 1907 she moved to Brussels, where she was asked to head the school for lay nurses, "L'Ecole Belge d'Infirmieres Diplomees". In 1912, she helped nurses in 3 hospitals, 24 communal schools and 13 kindergartens. In 1914, Edith gave four lectures a week to doctors and nurses. Cavell often returned to her hometown to visit her mother, but on 3rd August 1914, she returned to Brussels on the news of the German invasion of Belgium. The clinic became a Red Cross hospital, where the wounded were cared for regardless of nationality. German soldiers received the same treatment as Belgians. After the fall of Brussels, the Germans rearranged the royal palace for their wounded, 60 English nurses were sent home, but Edith Cavell and her chief assistant, Miss Wilkins, remained. At the same time, numerous posters were displayed throughout the city with the warning that anyone who hides a French or British soldier should be severely punished. In Edith Cavell's hospital, however, wounded Allied soldiers were treated and helped to escape. They were also able to convince the woman to allow a few people who were not injured, but were just hiding from the Germans. They, too, were helped to get to places (Netherlands) where they could then re-join the Allied forces. The Germans became increasingly suspicious of the increased movement around the hospital, and even though Edith was warned of the danger by her supporters and friends, she considered helping and hiding the soldiers to be just as humanitarian an activity as caring for the sick. On 15th August 1915, Edith was arrested by the German police and charged with aiding the enemy. It was also alleged that they not only aided the Allied soldiers, but also used the same lines of communication to divulge German military plans, a very serious charge. Edith was detained for 10 weeks, and even her appointed defence lawyer, Sadi Kirchen, was not allowed to see her until the 7th October hearing. The trial lasted only two days. According to her defence lawyer, she only committed her actions out of compassion for others. However, Edith openly admitted that she helped more than 200 men escape, whom she knew would fight against the Germans again, and some of them even wrote letters of thanks for the help. Based on this, she was sentenced to death for treason. However, the final verdict was postponed for three days. During this period, the neutral American embassy tried to negotiate with the Germans, but they did not achieve results, on 12th October she was executed at the shooting range in Brussels. Edith Cavell's brutal execution was also used by the Allies for propaganda purposes, they talked about the barbaric Germans. Her courage and self-sacrifice are exemplary. Her murder caused a huge outrage worldwide, thanks to which the Germans spared the lives of the other 33 accused. In addition, thousands of volunteers applied to recruiting offices in England, Australia, Canada, and in various other parts of the British Empire. The United States of America was under serious pressure to declare war on Germany.

²⁴ Storey, Housego 2014, 25–28.

Her name will live forever. Today, the nursing school in Brussels is called Ecole Edith Cavell and in London there is a statue of her in Trafalgar Square.²⁵

The role of women in the army

It can be stated that even during the Great War, regular women's teams were formed. In Serbia and Russia, many women fought in men's uniforms during both world wars. However, women's military service was opposed for a long time in the West.²⁶ In Great Britain, the police paid special attention to the moral conduct of soldiers' wives. Adultery could harm the morale of soldiers, so in such cases, women involved had their state benefits revoked. Besides regular police officers ("bobbies"), special women's patrols were also established for this purpose. Furthermore, works and plays deemed sexually charged were subject to prior censorship. On the battlefields, soldiers satisfied their desires in military-operated brothels under the supervision of a regimental medical officer to prevent sexually transmitted diseases, which significantly reduced military strength. Troops were issued with condoms and disinfectants. Despite such measures, the rate of venereal disease in Canadian units sometimes rose to as high as 29%, seriously jeopardizing combat effectiveness. In Britain, this figure hovered around 5%, with severe penalties imposed on women who infected soldiers. Overall, the First World War disrupted traditional social norms, as an unprecedented number of men were absent from home, and the spread of casual relationships raised serious concerns in all belligerent states.²⁷

As an introduction, it is important to highlight that among the most problematic roles women could take on were those associated with the military, perceived accordingly as masculine. Soon after the outbreak of the conflict, some women expressed their intention to play a more active role in their country's affairs, surpassing traditional female roles such as knitting and needlework for soldiers, as exemplified by Queen Mary's Needlework Guild, or providing aid to war refugees. In most cases, however, their efforts ended in failure; numerous letters of complaint appeared in the press from women who had been rejected. The War Office informed the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry (FANY), founded in 1908, and similar female paramilitary organizations that they did not intend to utilize their services. The Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD), a volunteer military nursing organization primarily staffed by women, was placed under the supervision of the Territorial Forces, led by men. The Ministry's determination to maintain gender divisions and thus exclude female labour from the military sphere directly led to the emergence of several volunteer female paramilitary organizations at the beginning of the war, such as the Women's Auxiliary Force, the Home Service Corps, and the British Service Corps.

²⁵ Donna Cunningham Both: *Legends and Traditions of the Great War. Edith Cavell Fragile Martyr*. Source: http://www.worldwar1.com/heritage/e_cavell.htm and Edith Cavell's Life & Legacy. Source: [Edith Cavell's Life & Legacy | Edith Cavell 1865-1915](#) (12. 06. 2024.)

²⁶ Béla Pukánszky: *A nőnevelés története*. Budapest, Gondolat Kiadó, 2013. 137.

²⁷ Stephan Burgdorff-Klaus Wiegrefe: *Az első világháború. A XX. század őskatasztrófája*. Budapest, Napvilág Kiadó, 2010. 141–144.

The most significant of these voluntary organizations was the Women's Volunteer Reserve. It was established in December 1914 after the bombing of the East Coast. This organization was the most prominent among the voluntary military organizations for women, offering opportunities for war service. Its two main aims were: firstly, to relieve more men for the firing line, and secondly, to organize more assistance for the helpless ones in the community. They participated in operating military canteens, transporting the wounded, camp cooking, providing first aid, and driving vehicles. They wore military uniforms, referred to their local groups as battalions, and to their members as privates or officers. At times, they even underwent armed training. In 1915, the volunteer Women's Legion was established. A big difference was that it was less militaristic in nature, did not conduct drills, and the activities performed by its members, such as cooking and waitressing in military canteens, aligned more closely with traditional female roles. Therefore, it was more accepted by society.

In February 1916, their work was formally recognized by the Army Council when its members began working directly alongside the army, substituting for men in cooking and transportation roles. This enabled the military to move these soldiers into positions closer to the frontline. Despite the emergence of numerous patriotic women's voluntary organizations following the outbreak of war, such as the Women's Emergency Corps, Princess Mary's Sailors and Soldiers Christmas Fund, and Queen Mary's Needlework Guild, it was not until 1916 that the government officially recognized the need for involving women's labour. The Army Council's recognition of the Legion can be considered the first official step towards employing women's labour in the armed forces, yet it also reinforced traditional gender roles in the division of labour. Then everything changed with the introduction of the Military Service Act in 1916, which mandated compulsory military conscription across the country. Following the enormous losses in the Battle of the Somme, Lieutenant-General H. M. Lawson was commissioned to prepare a study aimed at assessing how the army could benefit from the employment of women. He proposed expanding the use of female labour, but his idea was met with scepticism by Marshall Haig, the Commander-in-Chief of the British forces in France. He stipulated that women should only be employed as auxiliaries and suggested hiring 200 women as clerks and household staff instead of 134 men. Haig was seriously concerned that the presence of women in the army would affect the soldiers' morale and performance. Both aimed to separate the work of women from that of men working behind the front lines. Lawson suggested that if the army intended to utilize the work of women, they should form separate units with their own female officers and NCOs. In other words, the integration of women into the army had to be carried out in a way that would not negatively affect the relationship between the men and the military. The formation of the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps was announced in the press in March 1917, and the first women, all of whom had previously been members of the Women's Legion, departed for France. The manner of their employment was very precisely regulated. Women could be employed in five major categories: domestic, catering, mechanical, clerical, and the care of war graves. Although Corps members wore khaki, which symbolized the colour of combatant men, all other indicators of military service were thoroughly sanitized. In 1917, the War Office decided that women were not allowed to wear military badges, and the second draft of general rules for the

Corps stated that uniforms could not be modified or supplemented. Despite efforts to regulate and restrict the visibility of women in military roles during the war, the image of women in military uniform persisted. They were often viewed with concern and criticized for appearing too masculine, not feminine enough, and even accused of being sexual predators who targeted male soldiers in the British army. By early 1918, this had escalated to such an extent that the government believed these rumours were negatively impacting the success of military recruitment. As a result, the Ministry of Labour established an investigative committee to monitor the activities of the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps. The Commission's Report was published in March 1918 and concluded that most of the rumours originated from letters sent home by soldiers. The conclusion was that these soldiers acted mostly out of jealousy and rivalry, fearing that the arrival of women might displace them from non-combat roles. During a German attack, nine WAAC members lost their lives in Abbeville. Their funerals were conducted with military honours, suggesting that women had also earned their right to sacrifice alongside soldiers. The organization was renamed in April 1918; henceforth, it was called the Queen Mary's Army Auxiliary Corps, and Queen Mary assumed the honorary position of Commander-in-Chief of the Corps. The findings of the report, along with public sympathy towards the mentioned female casualties, eradicated the previous derogatory rumours. By the time of the Armistice in November 1918, between 80 and 90 thousand women had served in the British auxiliary forces. In addition to the largest of these, the WAAC, women had also served in the Women's Royal Naval Service (WRENS), established in November 1917, and the Women's Royal Air Force (WRAF), formed in April 1918.

Although they were significantly smaller in size compared to the WAAC and QMAAC, women in these latter units performed similar roles such as cooks, waitresses, mechanics, clerical workers, storekeepers, and drivers. The state faced a serious dilemma of balancing the essential demand for women's labour and the importance of preserving traditional gender roles. At the end of the war, there was no comprehensive plan for the demobilization of militarized women. It is important to emphasize that they volunteered and officially held civilian status, and could be discharged from service as needed. Typically, the positions of married women and women with children was terminated first.

The QMAAC continued to operate for three years after the war, officially ceasing in September 1921 when the remaining 31 members, who had been working with the Directorate of Graves Registration and Enquiries in France, were sent home. Overall, strict control and regulation of every aspect of women's work allowed the boundaries of gender roles to remain intact and be reconstructed after the war.²⁸ Flora Sandes was the only British woman to serve as a professional soldier during the Great War. She was born in 1876, the daughter of a Yorkshire clergyman. Even in her childhood, it was clear that she had a different attitude compared to the girls of the Victorian era. Flora learned to ride horses, shoot, and drive a car. She always wanted to help others, so she trained as a nurse with the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry. When the war broke out, the then 38-year-old Flora was living in London with her

²⁸ Noakes: Women's Military Service in the First World War. Source: https://www.gale.com/binaries/content/assets/au-resources-in-product/wwsessay_noakes_womens.pdf (14. 06. 2024. and Grayzel 1997, 145–164.

father and nephew. However, she soon volunteered with the St. John Ambulance Service and travelled to Serbia with her unit. Flora spoke Serbian fluently, which helped her join the Serbian Red Cross. Following the Bulgarian attack on Serbia in October 1915, she was allowed to join the 2nd Infantry Regiment as a nurse. The fighting intensified as the Austro-Hungarian and German forces advanced, forcing the Serbs to retreat. Flora was soon enlisted in the Serbian army, as it was one of the few countries that allowed women to fight. She was idolized in the Serbian army, seen as an embodiment of the English who came to aid their friend, Serbia. "The commander of the 4th Brigade, Janachko A. Jovitch, praised Sandes in February 1916 as follows: 'The Serbian soldier is proud to see among us England's noble daughter, whose people are old friends of Serbia. Today, our armies fight side by side for a common ideal, and Miss Sandes can be proud to be in a position to do good, to help a Serbian soldier – the Serbian soldier will always respect her kindness, will engrave her kind deeds deep in his heart, and will forever remember them.'"²⁹

Flora Sandes spent much of her time on the battlefield, and in November 1916, a Bulgarian grenade severely wounded her in Macedonia. The shrapnel caused serious injuries, including a broken right arm. For her bravery, King George awarded her the Star of Karadorđe. After recovering, she returned to England, where she raised money for Serbian soldiers. Then, from May 1917, she volunteered for service again. By the end of the war, she had been promoted to sergeant, and upon her discharge in 1922, she held the rank of captain. Afterwards, she returned to Serbia and married a White Russian officer, and they resided together in the new Yugoslav state. In 1941, when Nazi Germany attacked Yugoslavia, the 65-year-old Flora once again took up arms. Yugoslavia suffered defeat within days, and the Gestapo interned Flora and her husband in Belgrade. Sadly, her husband passed away shortly thereafter. Flora then returned home to England. On 24th November 1956, at the age of 80, Flora Sandes passed away in Suffolk.³⁰

The post-war situation of women

Of significant importance for women was the law passed in 1919, which aimed to eliminate discrimination based on gender. This law deemed the exclusion of women from workplaces, solely due to their gender, illegal.

Primarily, this created opportunities for girls belonging to the upper middle class. From then on, they could become Members of Parliament, lawyers, police magistrates, and even serve on juries. Overall, the 1920s saw a significant improvement in the status of women across the entire continent, including in Great Britain. However, it is important to note that in the labour market, many women had to relinquish the positions they had acquired during the war once the men returned from the battlefields and reclaimed them. This was true even in fields where traditionally there had been a higher number of female workers, such as the laundry industry, where they found themselves competing with disabled men. Under the so-

²⁹ Sandes 1916, 226.

³⁰ Castelow: Flora Sandes. Source: <https://www.historic-uk.com/HistoryUK/HistoryofBritain/Flora-Sandes/> and Sandes A Great Unsung Military Heroine. Source: <https://www.royalmint.com/discover/uk-coins/first-world-war/personal-stories/flora-sandes--a-great-unsung-military-heroine/> (14. 06. 2024.)

called Restoration of Pre-War Practices Act, the majority of women were forced to withdraw from the positions they had acquired during the conflict. Those who raised their voices against the mass dismissals had to face the anger of the vast majority of society. At the same time, there were those who managed to retain their jobs, such as conductors, and in public service, three times as many women were employed as before the war. Additionally, women were employed in unprecedented numbers in the fields of the church and engineering. However, the traditionally female-dominated textile and clothing industry could no longer be as significant as it had been before the World War.

The Great War forever changed the lives of families as well. The number of soldiers who died or went missing exceeded 870,000, and in addition, one and a half million returned home with permanent injuries.³¹ Women's active participation in the war efforts was rewarded with limited suffrage. One of the most significant outcomes of women's activities was the granting of suffrage. In accordance with the Representation of the People Act, which came into effect on 6th February 1918, women over the age of 30 were granted the right to vote if they were property owners, wives of property owners, graduates of British universities, or women who were considered qualified but had not yet obtained their degrees. Approximately 8.5 million women were able to exercise this new right in the 1918 election. In addition, women were given the opportunity to actively shape political life by becoming representatives.³² The first female Member of Parliament in the House of Commons was elected on 28th November 1919. Lady Nancy Astor, a conservative and wife of a millionaire newspaper owner, held this historic position.³³ The fact that British women, even if only in a limited capacity, gained the right to vote had a significant impact on similar efforts by women in other countries.³⁴

Summary

In the study, I aimed to present the multifaceted role of women in Great Britain during the First World War period. I demonstrated that women's work was essential both economically and charitably for the country to successfully meet the challenges of war. Women took on roles previously reserved exclusively for men, whether in agriculture, factories, transportation, or employment in the military. I also concluded that despite initial reservations in Great Britain, women were boldly employed across almost every sector to sustain the economy and to free up as many men as possible for combat activities. Despite recognition for their diligence and talent, their salary was generally significantly lower than that of their male counterparts, even for the same activities. However, conservative society struggled to accept their increasing presence in the workforce, fearing the breakdown of families and viewing it as a threat to femininity. Instances of failure or missteps were often highlighted to support such concerns. Due to their wartime contributions and resilience, women gained the right to vote, setting an example for other countries across the continent. While their presence in factories and agriculture diminished in the 1920s, they made

³¹ Harris 2014, 30–33.

³² Atkinson 1988, 39–40.

³³ Who was Nancy Astor? Source: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/newsround/50605229> (20. 06. 2024.)

³⁴ M. Madarász 2014, 589.

significant strides in intellectual careers, enjoying greater freedom and independence than before, embodying the ideals of the new, modern woman. In the paper, I presented several outstanding women who excelled in their fields and whose contributions have been highly esteemed by posterity, with their names today synonymous with sacrifice and patriotism during wartime. However, I believe it is equally important to commemorate the masses without whose contributions society surely could not have endured the shock caused by the misery of war.

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