6 Women at War

In order to release men for military service, women in England, France, and Germany responded to their countries' wartime needs and replaced men in all branches of civilian life. They took jobs in munitions factories, worked on farms, were trained for commercial work and in the nursing service. They drove ambulances, mail trucks, and buses. They worked as laboratory assistants, plumbers' helpers, and bank clerks. By performing effectively in jobs formerly occupied by men, women demonstrated that they had an essential role to play in their countries' economic life. By the end of the war, little opposition remained to granting women political rights.

Naomi Loughnan
GENTEEL WOMEN IN THE FACTORIES

Naomi Loughnan was one of millions of women who replaced men in all branches of civilian life, in allied and enemy countries alike, during World War I. She was a young, upper-middle-class woman who lived with her family in London and had never had to work for her living. In her job in a munitions plant, she had to adjust to close association with women from the London slums, to hostel life, and to twelve-hour shifts doing heavy and sometimes dangerous work. The chief motivation for British women of her class was their desire to aid the war effort, not the opportunity to earn substantial wages.

We little thought when we first put on our overalls and caps and enlisted in the Munition Army how much more inspiring our life was to be than we had dared to hope. Though we munition workers sacrifice our ease we gain a life worth living. Our long days are filled with interest, and with the zest of doing work for our country in the grand cause of Freedom. As we handle the weapons of war we are learning great lessons of life. In the busy, noisy workshops we come face to face with every kind of class, and each one of these classes has something to learn from the others. Our muscles may be aching, and the brightness fading a little from our eyes, but our minds are expanding, our very souls are growing stronger. And excellent, too, is the discipline for our bodies, though we do not always recognize this. . . .

The day is long, the atmosphere is breathed and rebreathed, and the oil smells. Our hands are black with warm, thick oozings from the machines, which coat the work and, incidentally, the workers. We regard our horrible, begrimed members [limbs] with disgust and secret pride. . . .

. . . The genteel among us wear gloves. We vie with each other in finding the most up-to-date grease-removers, just as we used to vie about hats. Our hands are not alone in suffering from dirt. . . . [D]ust-clouds, filled with unwelcome life, find a resting-place in our lungs and noses.

The work is hard. It may be, perhaps, from sheer lifting and carrying and weighing, or merely because of those long dragging hours that keep us sitting on little stools in front of

whirring, clattering machines that are all too easy to work. We wish sometimes they were not quite so "fool-proof," for monotony is painful. Or life may appear hard to us by reason of those same creeping hours spent on our feet, up and down, to and fro, and up and down again, hour after hour, until something altogether queer takes place in the muscles of our legs. But we go on. . . . It is amazing what we can do when there is no way of escape but desertion. . . .

. . . The first thing that strikes the newcomer, as the shop door opens, is the great wall of noise that seems to rise and confront one like a tangible substance. The crashing, tearing, rattling whirr of machinery is deafening. And yet, though this may seem almost impossible, the workers get so accustomed to it after a little time that they do not notice it until it stops. . . .

The twelve-hour shift at night, though taking greater toll of nerve and energy, has distinct charms of its own. . . . The first hours seem to go more quickly than the corresponding ones on day work, until at last two o'clock is reached. Then begins a hand-to-hand struggle with Morpheus [Greek god of dreams]. . . . A stern sense of duty, growing feebler as the moments pass, is our only weapon of defence, whereas the crafty god has a veritable armoury of leaden eyelids, weakening pulses, sleep-weighted heads, and slackening wills. He even leads the foremen away to their offices and softens the hearts of languid overlookers. Some of us succumb, but there are those among us who will not give in. An unbecoming greyness alters our faces, however young and fresh by day, a strange wilting process that steals all youth and beauty from us—until the morning. . . .

Engineering mankind is possessed of the unshakable opinion that no woman can have the mechanical sense. If one of us asks humbly why such and such an alteration is not made to prevent this or that drawback to a machine, she is told, with a superior smile, that a man has worked her machine before her for years, and that therefore if there were any improvement possible it would have been made. As long as we do exactly what we are told and do not attempt to use our brains, we give entire satisfaction, and are treated as nice, good children. Any swerving from the easy path prepared for us by our males arouses the most scathing contempt in their manly bosoms. The exceptions are as delightful to meet as they are rare. Women have, however, proved that their entry into the munition world has increased the output. Employers who forget things personal in their patriotic desire for large results are enthusiastic over the success of women in the shops. But their workmen have to be handled with the utmost tenderness and caution lest they should actually imagine it was being suggested that women could do their work equally well, given equal conditions of training—at least where muscle is not the driving force. This undercurrent of jealousy rises to the surface rather often, but as a general rule the men behave with much kindness, and are ready to help with muscle and advice whenever called upon. If eyes are very bright and hair inclined to curl, the muscle and advice do not even wait for a call.

The coming of the mixed classes of women into the factory is slowly but surely having an educative effect upon the men. "Language" is almost unconsciously becoming subdued. There are fiery exceptions who make our hair stand up on end under our close-fitting caps, but a sharp rebuke or a look of horror will often [straighten out] the most truculent. He will at the moment, perhaps, sneer at the "blooming milksop fools of women," but he will be more careful next time. It is grievous to hear the girls also swearing and using disgusting language. Shoulder to shoulder with the children of the slums, the upper classes are having their eyes prised open at last to the awful conditions among which their sisters have dwelt. Foul language, immorality, and many other evils are but the natural outcome of overcrowding and bitter poverty. If some of us, still blind and ignorant of our responsibilities,

shrink horrified and repelled from the rougher set, the compliment is returned with open derision and ribald laughter. There is something, too, about the prim prudery of the "genteel" that tickles the East-Ender's [a lower-class person] sharp wit. On the other hand, attempts at friendliness from the more understanding are treated with the utmost suspicion, though once that suspicion is overcome and friendship is established, it is unshakable. Our working hours are highly flavoured by our neighbours' treatment of ourselves and of each other. Laughter, anger, acute confusion, and laughter again, are constantly changing our immediate outlook on life. Sometimes disgust will overcome us, but we are learning with painful clarity that the fault is not theirs whose actions disgust us, but must be placed to the discredit of those other classes who have allowed the continued existence of conditions which generate the things from which we shrink appalled. . . .

Whatever sacrifice we make of wearied bodies, brains dulled by interminable night-shifts, of roughened hands, and faces robbed of their soft curves, it is, after all, so small a thing. We live in safety, we have shelter, and food whenever necessary, and we are even earning quite a lot of money. What is ours beside the great sacrifice? Men in their prime, on the verge of ambition realized, surrounded by the benefits won by their earlier struggles, are offering up their very lives. And those boys with Life, all glorious and untried, spread before them at their feet, are turning a smiling face to Death.

A little modesty, here.

Leon Abensoir
A FRENCH BAKER'S WIFE ASSUMING RESPONSIBILITY

France, like England, employed women in hitherto male-dominated jobs and professions. In addition, Frenchwomen of the middle and lower classes whose husbands owned the thousands of small businesses and farms throughout the country were faced with a special challenge. When the men were called up in August 1914 the wives stepped into their husbands' shoes. In this account, drawn from Leon Abensoir's *The Valiant Ones* (1917), a baker's wife (her name is not recorded) relates how she made the decision to take over the bakery.

Alongside those who grow wheat are those who produce bread. The bakers' wives as well as farmers' wives have merited their country's praise. As President [Briand] said of them, "Their husbands are mobilized and we can observe mobilization equal to that of soldiers in the fire of their bakeries." In a city where one can find plenty of assistance the task, although arduous, is not beyond feminine capacity. But in certain little villages one can see women taking on all the work alone.

Such is the case of the baker's wife of Faux Fresnay who told a woman journalist how, situated on a road which in September 1914 was thronged with refugees from northern France and with soldiers in retreat, she took on, for their sake, the difficult work of the bread oven and kneading trough.

"It was during the battle of the Marne, the Germans were at Connantre [nearby], and the whole area had been evacuated. I alone stayed on with my mother, hoping by my presence to

save my house from pillage. Everybody had run away, not wanting to suffer the horrors of an occupying army. From September 4 onwards, there was a continuous stream of refugees trudging along by the thousand, and wounded soldiers who were trying to rejoin their comrades. Most of them had had nothing to eat for four days and begged for bread.

What was to be done? Well, I went down the steps to the bakery to relight the oven and try to do what I had so often watched my husband doing. I was helped by my old mother, and night and day without stopping, while the battle raged, we baked bread.

The first evening, utterly exhausted, I cried for a long time in a corner of the bakery. But the poor people going by, more numerous every day, snatched the hot round loaves from the oven before they were properly baked through. Unfortunately, the next morning the machine which kneaded the dough broke down. A major in the medical corps seeing our distress repaired the machine after a fashion, but we now used our hands to knead the dough. The task was more tiring, but at least we made certain of getting the batches of loaves done.

Until September 8 my mother and I did not leave the bakery, nor did we sleep a single moment, and when we heard of the victory on the Marne we fairly died of joy; we hugged each other and cried.

Since then I have gone on working, and here we are, two years later, supplying bread to Faux Fresnay and the nearby villages, baking regularly for two hundred customers. We begin to make the bread at two o'clock in the morning, and each day we use up two sackfuls of flour. At midday we have a quick meal, my mother and I, and then we set off to deliver bread to our customers; that takes until seven o'clock in the evening. When we get back from our deliveries we have to rub down the horse, and then we have to split wood [for heating the oven].

By now we are used to our hard life and we have never been ill, not for a single instant. So you see it was a very easy decision to make."

RUSSIAN WOMEN IN COMBAT

From 1915 onwards accounts began to appear in American magazines of Russian women disguising themselves as men and joining up with male soldiers, or fighting as all-female units in the Russian Army. The first women's unit was called "The Battalion of Death," and its valor on the Russian front inspired a movement for a women's army. By the winter of 1917, five thousand women were in training throughout Russia.

No official statistics of women volunteers in the regular Russian Army were kept, but judging by the frequent reports of women soldiers awarded the St. George's Cross for bravery at the front, their numbers were considerable. They came from all classes of Russian society and assumed male names and attire, as the following account relates. It was originally published in a Russian newspaper and was reprinted in *The New York Times*.

Stories are filtering in from the various belligerent countries telling of actual fighting in the ranks by women. . . . A correspondent of the Novoe Vremya tells an interesting story of the experiences of twelve young Russian girls who fought in the ranks as soldiers of the line.

The story, as related by one of their number, was also authenticated by the Petrograd correspondent of *The London Times,* who wrote as follows:

"She was called Zoya Smirnov. She came to our staff straight from the advanced positions, where she had spent fourteen months wearing soldier's clothes and fighting with the foe on even terms with the men.

"Zoya Smirnov was only 16 years old. Closely cropped hair gave her the appearance of a boy, and only a thin girlish voice involuntarily betrayed her sex.

"At the beginning Zoya was somewhat shy; she carefully chose her words and replied confusedly to our questions; but later she recovered and told us her entire history, which brought tears to the eyes of many a case-hardened veteran who heard it.

"She and her friends decided to go to the war on the eighth day of mobilization—i.e., at the end of July, 1914; and early in August they succeeded in realizing their dream.

"Exactly twelve of them assembled; and they were all nearly the same age and from the same high school. Almost all were natives of Moscow, belonging to the most diversified classes of society, but firmly united in the camaraderie of school life.

> We decided to run away to the war at all costs, said Zoya. It was impossible to run away from Moscow, because we might have been stopped at the station. It was therefore necessary to hire izvozchiks [carriages] and ride out to one of the suburban stations through which the military echelons were continually passing. We left home early in the morning without saying a word to our parents and departed. It was a bit terrible at first; we were very sorry for our fathers and mothers, but the desire to see the war and ourselves kill the Germans overcame all other sentiments.

"And so they attained the desired object. The soldiers treated the little patriots quite paternally and properly, and having concealed them in the cars took them off to the war. A military uniform was obtained for each; they donned these and unobstructed arrived at the Austrian frontier, where they had to detrain and on foot proceed to Lemberg. Here the regimental authorities found out what had happened, but not being able to persuade the young patriots to return home allowed them to march with the regiment.

"The regiment traversed the whole of Galicia; scaled the Carpathians,[1] incessantly participating in battle, and the girls never fell back from it a step, but shared with the men all the privations and horrors of the march and discharged the duties of ordinary privates, since they were taught to shoot and were given rifles.

"Days and months passed.

"The girls almost forgot their past, they hardly responded to their feminine names, for each of them had received a masculine surname, and completely mingled with the men. The soldiers themselves mutually guarded the girls and observed each other's conduct.

"The battles in which the regiment engaged were fierce and sanguinary, particularly in the Spring, when the Germans brought up their heavy artillery to the Carpathians and began to advance upon us with their celebrated phalanx. Our troops underwent a perfect hell and the young volunteers endured it with them.

> "Was it terrible?" an officer asked Zoya. "Were you afraid?"
>
> "I should say so! Who wouldn't be afraid? When for the first time they began to fire with their heavy guns, several of us couldn't stand it and began to cry out."
>
> "What did you cry out?"
>
> "We began to call 'Mamma.' Shura was the first to cry, then Lida. They were both 14 years old, and they remembered their mothers all the time. Besides, it seems that

[1]Galicia was an Austrian province in east central Europe, which is today divided between Poland and Ukraine. Lemberg was the capital of Galicia. The Carpathians are a range of mountains stretching through eastern Europe, where many battles were fought in World War I.

I also cried out as well. We all cried. Well, it was frightful even for the men."

"During one of the Carpathian engagements, at night, one of the twelve friends, the sixteen-year-old Zina Morozov, was killed outright by a shell. It struck immediately at her feet, and the entire small body of the girl was torn into fragments.

Nevertheless, we managed to collect her remains [Zoya stated with a tender inflexion in her voice]. At dawn the firing died down and we all—that is, all the remaining high school volunteers—assembled near the spot where Zina had perished, and somehow collected her bones and laid them in a hastily dug grave. In the same grave we laid also all Zina's things, such as she had with her. The grave was then filled up and upon the cross which we erected above it the following inscription was written: "Volunteer of such and such a regiment, Zina Morozov, 16 years old, killed in action on such and such a date in such and such year."

On the following day we were already far away, and exactly where Zina's grave is I don't remember well. I only know that it is in the Carpathians at the foot of a steep rocky incline.

"After the death of Zina other of her friends were frequently wounded in turn—Nadya, Zhena, and the fourteen-year-old Shura. Zoya herself was wounded twice—the first time in the leg, and the second time in the side. Both wounds were so serious that Zoya was left unconscious on the battlefield, and the stretcher-bearers subsequently discovered her only by accident. After the second wound she was obliged to lie at a base hospital for over a month. On being discharged she again proceeded to the positions, endeavoring to find her regiment, but on reaching the familiar trenches she could no longer find a single regimental comrade, nor a single fellow-volunteer; they had all gone to another front, and in the trenches sat absolute strangers. The girl lost her presence of mind, and for the first time during the entire campaign began to weep, thus unexpectedly betraying her age and sex. Her unfamiliar fellow-countrymen gazed with amazement upon the strange young non-commissioned officer with the Cross of St. George and medal on her breast, who resembled a stripling and finally proved to be a girl. But the girl had with her all necessary documents, not excepting a certificate giving her the right to wear the St. George's Cross received for a brave and dashing reconnoissance, and distrustful glances promptly gave place to others full of respect.

"Zoya was finally induced to abandon the trenches, at least for the time being, and to try to engage in nursing at one of the advanced hospitals. She is now working at the divisional hospital of the N—division, in the village of K., ten versts from the Austrian town of Z.

"From her remaining friends whom she left with the regiment which went to another front Zoya has no news whatever.

"What has befallen them? Do these amazing Russian girls continue their disinterested and heroic service to the country, or do graves already hold them, similar to that which was dug for the remnants of poor little Zina, who perished so gloriously in the distant Carpathians?"

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How was Naomi Loughnan's life transformed by her job as a munitions worker?
2. What insights into gender and class distinctions at the time of World War I does Loughnan provide?
3. What, in the account of the baker's wife, impresses you most about her wartime activities?