

Women at the Heart of War

Anne Chapman



NATIONAL CENTER FOR HISTORY IN THE SCHOOLS
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, LOS ANGELES

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Introduction

APPROACH AND RATIONALE

Women at the Heart of War is one of over sixty teaching units published by the National Center for History in the Schools that are the fruits of collaborations between history professors and experienced teachers of both United States and World History. The units represent specific issues and dramatic episodes in history from which you and your students can pause to delve into the deeper meanings of these selected landmark events and explore their wider context in the great historical narrative. By studying a crucial turning point in history, the student becomes aware that choices had to be made by real human beings, that those decisions were the result of specific factors, and that they set in motion a series of historical consequences. We have selected issues and dramatic moments that best bring alive that decision-making process. We hope that through this approach, your students will realize that history is an ongoing, open-ended process, and that the decisions they make today create the conditions of tomorrow's history.

Our teaching units are based on primary sources, taken from government documents, artifacts, journals, diaries, newspapers, magazines, literature, contemporary photographs, paintings, and other art from the period under study. What we hope to achieve using primary source documents in these lessons is to remove the distance that students feel from historical events and to connect them more intimately with the past. In this way we hope to recreate for your students a sense of 'being there,' a sense of seeing history through the eyes of the very people who were making decisions. This will help your students develop historical empathy, to realize that history is not an impersonal process divorced from real people like themselves. At the same time, by analyzing primary sources, students will actually practice the historian's craft, discovering for themselves how to analyze evidence, establish a valid interpretation, and construct a coherent narrative in which all the relevant factors play a part.

CONTENT AND ORGANIZATION

Within this unit, you will find: Teaching Background Materials, including Unit Overview, Unit Context, Correlation to the National Standards for History, Unit Objectives, Introductory Activities, Table of Dates, and Lesson Plans with Dramatic Moments and Student Resources, or Documents. This unit, as we have said above, focuses on certain key moments in time and should be used as a supplement to your customary course materials. Although these lessons are recommended for use by grades 7–11, they can be adapted for other grade levels.

Introduction

The Teacher Background sections should provide you with a good overview of the lesson and with the historical information and context necessary to link the specific Dramatic Moment to the larger historical narrative. You may consult it for your own use, and you may choose to share it with students if they are of a sufficient grade level to understand the materials.

The Lesson Plans include a variety of ideas and approaches for the teacher which can be elaborated upon or cut as you see the need. These lesson plans contain student resources which accompany each lesson. The resources consist of primary source documents, any handouts or student background materials, and a bibliography.

In our series of teaching units, each collection can be taught in several ways. You can teach all of the lessons offered on any given topic, or you can select and adapt the ones that best support your particular course needs. We have not attempted to be comprehensive or prescriptive in our offerings, but rather to give you an array of enticing possibilities for in-depth study, at varying grade levels. We hope that you will find the lesson plans exciting and stimulating for your classes. We also hope that your students will never again see history as a boring sweep of facts and meaningless dates but rather as an endless treasure of real life stories and an exercise in analysis and reconstruction.

Teacher Background Materials

I. Unit Overview

There were women in World War II who had guns, and used them. Women fought beside men in resistance movements against the enemy in occupied areas of Europe and Asia. In the U.S.S.R. alone among the countries at war, women took part in combat as part of the Armed Forces. In the United Kingdom, service women in non-combat roles made up 10 percent of the military. In the U.S. they made up 2 percent. In Germany, women did not have military status but served as auxiliaries (called *Hilferinnen* or “helpers”) attached to the various services. In China, they fought in the Communist Army and with partisan forces.

Even so, women untouched by combat, unthreatened by physical violence, neither carriers nor targets of guns, were affected by the war in many ways. Most immediately, they were affected by the men who fought: being afraid for them (and of them); supporting them by word and deed; producing the supplies they needed; opposing them, missing them, healing them, and mourning them.

Women also had to change their lives in many ways, small and not so small. Shortages of food, clothing, and much else obliged French women to raise rabbits on apartment balconies, Japanese to cook without rice, Italians to go without oil, those in famine areas to eat cats and rats, and all to “use it up, wear it out, make it do, or do without.” Millions of women took paid jobs for the first time. Women wearing pants, first on and then even off the job, became accepted fashion in European countries and the U.S., where the number of households with domestic servants fell by 50 percent. Women had to learn to think and act in new ways; look after themselves and their children on their own; deal with unfamiliar situations; and make critical decisions that had ripple effects beyond their own lives. They made a difference in the war; and the war made a difference to them.

II. Unit Context

This unit deals with the experience of women in World War II and can serve as an introduction or supplement to commonly taught topics such as Nazism in Germany, the Holocaust, the “home front,” the U.S.S.R.’s Great Patriotic War, and the struggle between Nationalists and Communists in China.

III. Correlation to the National History Standards

Women at the Heart of War provides teaching materials that address the *National Standards for History*, Basic Edition (National Center for History in the Schools,

Teacher Background Materials

UCLA, 1996), *World History, Era 8, "A Half-Century of Crisis and Achievement, 1900–1945."* Lessons specifically address **Standard 4B** on the global scope, outcome, and human costs of the war. This unit also correlates to the standards for United States History, **Era 8, "The Great Depression and World War II, 1929–1945."** Lessons specifically address **Standard 3C** on the effects of World War II at home.

IV. Unit Objectives

1. To analyze women's participation in World War II in a comparative, world-historical framework, assessing women's impact on the war, and the war's impact on women in Germany, the U.S., the U.S.S.R., and China.
2. To examine how ideas about women's "nature" and their "proper roles" affected their experiences in the war; and also to what extent and in what ways the war affected those ideas.
3. To develop empathy for the moral and ethical dilemmas of special significance in the historical circumstances of a particular era.
4. To study and compare various kinds of historical evidence, analyzing it for reliability and significance.
5. To model case studies of ways to integrate women's history into traditionally studied topics.

V. Lesson Plans

1. Women and Hitler's Ideology of Gender and Race
2. War and Women's Employment in the United States
3. Gender Equality in Soviet Combat Forces
4. Women's Attitudes about War: China as a Case Study

VI. Introductory Activities

1. Ask students to brainstorm, listing answers on blackboard: In what ways were women affected by World War II? In what ways did women actively participate in the war? What circumstances would have made a difference in how women were affected and how they participated? (Some possibilities to look for: country women lived in; enemy-occupied territory or not; class, race, religion, ideology, age, marital status, motherhood.)
2. For each item listed on the board, ask for a show of hands about whether the effect or participation was, in students' opinion, significant or not.

Have a discussion to arrive at consensus as to how “significance” is to be evaluated. (For example: how many people affected; how seriously affected—life or death situation, forced migration, or career threat, as opposed to scarcity or inconvenience; effects long- or short-term?)

3. Have half the class write down what they consider to have been the three or four most significant ways the war affected women and what characteristics of women would have modified the impact of the conflict. Have the other half of the class do the same for women who actively participated in the war.
4. Explain to students that these ideas are hypotheses about women in World War II and that students will look for evidence to confirm, modify, or contradict their hypotheses as they study this unit. Have students share their hypotheses and defend their choices.
5. Introduce students to the idea that in each of the countries at war, traditional beliefs existed about women’s “nature” and their “proper role,” for example, that “woman’s place is in the home.” Ask students, as they work with materials in this unit, to keep alert to 1) the ways such ideas influenced women’s experience (for example, German reluctance to enforce women’s registration for a labor draft), and 2) the ways the war affected these traditional ideas (for example, if women’s place is in the home, how can the government draft them to work in factories?)
6. Compare the source documents in this unit to the discussion of the same topic in the class textbook. What are the advantages and disadvantages of each presentation? Based on the information you have studied, discuss changes you would recommend in the textbook’s presentation of the topic without significantly changing the space devoted to it. What information in the textbook would you shorten, condense, or leave out? What material would you add, and why? Write a letter to the textbook’s author, making recommendations for changing the textbook’s presentation of the topic of this unit? Explain why you recommend these changes.
7. Summative assessment exercise for entire unit. Go back to the hypotheses developed in **Introductory Activities 3** and **5**. Ask students to explain, orally or in writing, how what they have learned confirms, modifies, or contradicts their hypotheses.

Table of Dates

- 1928 Nationalist Republic of China established by Chiang Kai-shek, after Civil War against warlords, initially with Communist help, then fighting against them.
- 1931 Japan invades Manchuria and installs Pu Yi, deposed last Manchu Emperor of China, as “puppet” ruler.
- 1932–37 USSR: over 3 million women newly enter labor force.
- 1933 Hitler is named Chancellor of Germany. First centralized concentration camp for women (Moringen) established, as is Dachau.
- 1934–35 In China, after years of resisting Nationalist attacks, Mao Zedong leads remnants of Communist Red Army to Yen-an on 6,000 mile “Long March” to escape Nationalists. Communists in Yen-an favor gender equality, but only if it is not at expense of “family harmony.”
- 1935 Italy invades Ethiopia.
- In Germany, Nuremberg Laws deprive Jews of citizenship and to protect “pure Aryan blood” forbid Germans marriage or sex with Jews.
- Nazi policy explicitly states that men’s world is the state and that they serve it by fighting; women’s world is the home, but bearing children is an analogue of battle, and motherhood is the way women serve the state. The principle of gender equality is rejected as “the hallmark of a decadent democratic order.”
- 1937 Japan invades North China.
- Chinese Nationalists and Communists agree to fight together against the Japanese as a “United Front” with help from both the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. Nationalist women have no vote; work as nurses, care for orphans, and teach home management and literacy to other women. Communist women have vote, work on farms and in industry, and provide medical support; some serve in army, party, and congress.
- 1939 Soviet-Nazi pact.
- German invasion of Poland.
- France and England declare war on Germany.
- German Labor Service Law becomes binding on women, but due to high-level Nazi disapproval, is not enforced; women in Labor Service never exceed 150,000.

- 1940 Germany invades and conquers France. Resistance groups organize, some with one-third women members.
- Germany prepares to invade Britain.
- In Britain, volunteers for Women's Land Army outnumber jobs employers are willing to give them three to one.
- Blitz (bombing of London); 13,000 tons of high explosives expended; 13,000 people killed; bombing extended to provincial towns.
- 1941 Japan, Germany, and Italy sign alliance (Tripartite Pact); some eastern European countries join.
- Germany invades Soviet Russia; "Great Patriotic War" for U.S.S.R. begins.
- U.S. Congress passes Land-Lease Bill.
- In Germany, authorization given for "the final solution of the Jewish question."
- Japanese attack Pearl Harbor; U.S. and Britain declare war on Japan.
- In Communist Yenan in China, soldiers, peasants, women, and men collaborate in war effort; the class struggle against landlords and capitalists, Mao's "protracted war," is fought at the same time as the guerrilla war against the Japanese.
- In Britain, National Service Act makes women liable for conscription. Those aged twenty to forty-five are registered for national service and drafted for jobs as needed, starting with young unmarried women with no "necessary household duties."
- 1942 Large-scale Allied bombing of civilians in German towns (48,000 tons of bombs).
- U.S. creates War Manpower Commission and its Women's Advisory Committee. Equalization of pay for women doing men's jobs is permitted but not required by government. (Equal pay legislation was passed by two states before WWII, four more during the war, and seventeen more in 1945. Federal legislation had to wait for Equal Pay Act of 1963).
- Executive Order 9066 relocates Japanese-Americans to concentration camps.
- In U.S.S.R. all women aged sixteen to forty-five are made liable for war service.
- Battles of El Alamein, Midway, and Stalingrad.
- In Germany, Wannsee Conference works out details of Jewish extermination as "final solution." Treblinka, just one of several systematic killing centers, starts operating; some 870,000 Jews killed there in a year.
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Table of Dates

- 1943 Allies invade Sicily.
Allies extend bombing of German cities (207,000 tons of bombs.)
Hitler bans public reference to the “final solution of the Jewish question” and again rejects the idea of mobilizing women for labor service.
In Britain, women forty-five to fifty are registered for compulsory call-up; demand for women’s Land Army and for women as industrial workers far exceeds supply.
- 1944 D-Day: Normandy landing of Allies.
German V1 offensive against southeast Britain; a million children, some with their mothers, leave target areas.
U.S. Women’s Advisory Committee (but not War Manpower Commission), favors extending compulsory service to women.
German resistance tries unsuccessfully to assassinate Hitler.
V2 rockets launched against London.
In U.S.S.R. siege of Leningrad ended; nearly one million of its inhabitants died from artillery fire, bombs, and starvation.
Russian legislation gives top priority to various measures intended to increase the birth rate.
- 1945 Germans surrender.
U.S. drops atom bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki; Japanese surrender.

Lesson One

Women and Hitler's Ideology of Gender and Race

Dramatic Moment

He Was an SS Man, He Had to Go

"Every morning around four o'clock, I heard steps, steps, steps. It was Russian prisoners from a nearby camp going to work. They were brought here to our little train station. Every morning at four I woke and got up and saw these sad figures going by, some without shoes. In the *winter*. There was ice and snow. And *completely* starving and completely in rags. But I couldn't give them anything. There were always guards. German soldiers. It wasn't possible."

Frau Brixius felt that such memories, unlike those the soldiers had, led to much estrangement between German men and women. "At home, one experiences very grave things, upsetting things, unusual things. And the other [person] lives in Russia or France or somewhere in captivity and experiences things with which the woman could not empathize. Then suddenly he comes back. For everybody, that certainly was very difficult, and for many, it simply was impossible to be together again. The woman had learned how to forge ahead and help in emergencies and protect her children and earn money and get food or even steal it, if she couldn't find anything else to eat. She could no longer be the true devoted wife who only did what the man wants." [In 1944, she decided to divorce her husband. However:] "Three or four weeks before the war was over, he was here on leave. And I knew, *clearly*, like anyone who could think, observe a little, it was ending. That we'd lost the war or would soon lose it. And I said to him, 'Stay here. Hide yourself here. Don't go back.' I'd have hidden him."

"And a cousin of mine came, the black sheep in the family. He was an SS* man. A completely dear human being, a completely faithful relative still. Who certainly never did anything bad, but was enthusiastic about this war. He had some gold medal, and was an SS officer. He came to us as he was fleeing. As a human being we liked him very much—helpful and loving and attentive and faithful and we let him stay here one night. Then my mother said, 'As hard as it is, you have to move on. We can't keep you here.' He had to go. . . ."

* The SS was the Schutzstaffel, the Nazi Party police.

Source: Alison Owing, *Frauen: German Women Recall the Third Reich* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1993), pp. 206–208.

Lesson One

A. Objectives

- ◆ To assess the degree to which Nazi ideology, including ideas about women, constrained women's lives, experiences, and freedom of choice.
- ◆ To analyze ways that the characteristics of different women, and their relationships to men, affected their experiences during the war.
- ◆ To help students grapple with moral choices people have made in particular historical circumstances.

B. Historical Background

Managing Husband, Children, War—and Genocide

Women in Nazi Germany were encouraged to have as many healthy babies as possible and to serve the state by devoting themselves to their husbands and children. The slogan “children, kitchen, church” (*Kinder, Küche, Kirche*) sums up the favored ideology. Though war propaganda also invited women to “make munitions for their sons,” their response was weaker than in Allied countries. To be sure, the invitation was also more lukewarm. The Nazi government had the power to conscript women for war work but never did so; and it only spottily followed up on the 1943 law requiring women to register for work so they could be called up at need. The presence in Germany of prisoners of war in large numbers, forced laborers brought in from occupied territories, and people imprisoned in concentration camps took up the slack.

Women did not serve in the army but were attached to the various branches of the military as uniformed “*Helferinnen*” (helpers). They were kept strictly away from combat. They were forbidden to use firearms, even to defend themselves against capture.

Opposition of German women to Hitler and Nazism was more often passive than active, and, as far as is known, not widespread. Non-compliance and defiance in low-profile ways, slowing down on the job, resisting having a large family, or refusing to enter the workplace are examples of opposition strategies. However, women also performed acts of kindness toward victims of Nazism, and they gave more substantial help, perhaps the most dangerous being the hiding of Jews. It is notable that about 4,500 Jews (out of a pre-war population of about 240,000) survived by hiding in Germany with the help of non-Jews. Also, Jewish women participated in such episodes as the Warsaw ghetto uprising and concentration camp mutinies.

Hitler had always been anti-Semitic, and he was fanatic about creating a racially pure and physically splendid “Aryan” master-race. The Hitler Youth, he said, had to be “hard as steel, strong and pliant as leather, and fast as greyhounds.” The weak, sick, and racially impure had to be gotten rid of as fast as possible. At first he and his followers saw forced emigration as the “solution” for the “Jewish problem.” This policy ground

to a halt as other countries, including Britain and the U.S., increasingly restricted Jewish immigration. Meanwhile, starting in 1939, the Nazis launched a program of forced euthanasia for the improvement of the race by gassing on a large scale non-Jewish Germans who were feeble-minded, senile, or certified incurably insane. By the end of the war, some 100,000 patients had been put to death. The Nazis applied their euthanasia policy and method of disposal to concentration camp inmates—Jews, political prisoners, habitual criminals, and even some sick German soldiers. These groups, plus Poles, Russians, and others considered “unfit,” made up the eleven million or so people, about half of them Jews, killed by Hitler’s order.

Hitler’s actual decree ordering the deliberate extermination of all Jews has not survived. However, the Nazis are known to have worked out the details of this “final solution” at the Wannsee Conference in Berlin in 1942. They decided to deport Jews to specially constructed death camps to dispose of them by gas followed by cremation. The Nazis thought firing squads were too slow, messy, public, and had undesirable effects on the nerves of the executioners. SS men* who rounded up Jews for execution or deportation to death camps often received an extra daily ration of brandy. German women who were mothers, wives, daughters, sisters, or friends of these men were bound to be affected as well.

* SS men were members of the *Schutzstaffel*, or Protection Squad, the Nazi Party police distinguished by their all-black uniforms carrying the death’s head emblem, a symbol appropriate for the jobs entrusted to them.

C. Lesson Activities

1. Have students read the three primary source documents: **Document 1A:** “A Wife’s Dilemma: Living with the Kommandant of a Death Camp;” **Document 1B:** “No Time for Politics, but a Resister All the Same?;” and **Document 1C:** “We Are Being Hunted to Death All through Europe.” Assign the readings as in-class reading or homework as fits your class level and schedule.
 - a. Discuss the readings in small groups or as a class, using the document discussion questions on the following pages as guides.
 - b. After discussing all three readings, have the students answer the **Reading Analysis** questions on page 13. You may do this as a class discussion or use these questions as in-class or take-home short essay assignments. Alternatively, you could divide the class in small groups and divide the questions among each group for a class presentation and discussion.
2. Create a set of diary entries by an imaginary woman in Germany in the early 1940s. How do they reflect her attitude toward the ideology of

Lesson One

“children, kitchen, church;” the war; the Nazi party; and the persecution of Jews? What characteristics of this imaginary woman might help to explain the attitudes reflected in her diary? (Students might be asked, perhaps in groups, to pre-design the characteristics of the imaginary woman: her age, class, marital status, religion, family members, husband’s or father’s job and level of Nazi participation.)

3. Use the “Summary Exercises” for oral or written assessment.

Discussion Questions

Document 1A: “A Wife’s Dilemma: Living with the Kommandant of a Death Camp”

1. Was it different experiences or different attitudes to the Kommandant’s work, or both, that caused problems for the Stangl’s marriage? Explain your answer.
2. What actions were open to Mrs. Stangl, given her feelings towards her husband and his job, as well as German attitudes towards women, Jews, and Nazi officers? What would have been the likely consequences of various possible courses of action?
3. What responses to Mrs. Stangl’s plea for advice could have been given other than Father Mario’s?
4. What advice to Mrs. Stangl would be the most ethical or moral? The most practical? Why?
5. How would the situation have differed if Mrs. Stangl had been the death-camp Kommandant and her husband was asking for advice?

Document 1B: “No Time for Politics, but a Resister All the Same?”

1. How would you define “resistance” (or being a “resister”) to a political regime? Produce a definition and assess how well it fits the information you have about women during World War II. Would your definition fit pro-Nazi activists in the democracies? Pro-Communists in Nationalist-held parts of China? Why or why not?
2. Given her family circumstances and the situation in Germany, in what other ways could Mrs. Haferkampf have resisted the Nazi regime? How could she have further avoided supporting it? What might the results have been?
3. Compare the experiences and actions of Mrs. Stangl (**Document 1A**) and Mrs. Hafenkampf. To what extent were their lives governed by their husbands’ experiences?

4. To what extent and in what ways were Mrs. Stangl (**Document 1A**) and Mrs. Haferkamp behaving in accord with Nazi society's ideal for women? To what extent, and in what ways, did they contradict that ideal ?

Document 1C: "We Are Being Hunted to Death All through Europe"

1. What difference did being a woman make to those in the Dutch concentration camp described here?
2. Compare the choice Hillesum made in going to work at the camp and the young boy made in running away. For what might one praise or blame either of them? Why?

Reading Analysis Questions

1. Which of the three women in the readings do you consider to have most actively participated in the war? Explain your answer.
2. Compare the material about the Holocaust in the class textbook with the information in this unit. What are the positive and negative points about each approach?
3. What is the relative value of a letter written at the time, in comparison with a recollection in an interview many years later, as historical evidence? Which of the original sources in this section is most likely to have been distorted by self-interest? Explain.
4. Citing evidence from the documents, answer the following questions:
 - a. What means can you identify that the Nazis used to control opposition?
 - b. What justifications can you identify that the Nazis made for their actions?
 - c. What justifications can you identify kept non-Nazis from resisting Nazism?
 - d. What ethical dilemmas did Nazism create?

Summary Exercises

1. Taking into account all the information available from your textbook, class work, and this unit, explain why Nazism was, for a time, successful.
2. In living under Nazi rule during World War II, what difference was being a woman likely to have made? What characteristics of women may have had an influence on their experience?