

Women's Autobiographical and Biographical Experiences of War across Continents

An Introduction

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The volume we offer here is concerned with contemporary issues. It reflects our anxieties about the spread of social conflict – even extreme violence – throughout the world today and our awareness of the fragility of peaceful existence. To see beautiful cities turned into rubble in this digital age, with its global economies, its international institutions, while social media cut across international, social and ethnic boundaries, is almost unbelievable. Sitting comfortably at home watching the devastation shown on TV we cannot believe our eyes. Commentators struggle to explain today's news stories by references to past events, before the modern technological wonders of our twentieth century existed. We can say that the past interprets our present for us; it is always with us. It is there as a warning and as an inspiration. And we come to realize that our present is a heritage for the future. When grand events dominate, their impact on individuals is overshadowed. The everyday disturbances to people, the personal tragedies and the ways they are overcome get lost in the thunder of events. So, as well as considering ongoing events, this book looks at former times, as reflected in the narratives of women experiencing conflict. For example, through their voices we learn from women in the jungles of the Cambodia-Thailand border, along the canals of Venice, in the hills of Rwanda and in the harsh terrains of Afghanistan.

There are multiple visions here – held by women who see themselves, or who are seen by others, as victims or heroines, as liberators or oppressors, as indigenes or refugees. In one lifetime a woman may pass from being one to another, perhaps several times over. A ‘liberation movement’ to some may be an ‘insurgency’ to others. Apparently benign acts, such as policies to prevent soil erosion, may trigger turmoil or worse, as was the case in Cameroon before Anlu (a women’s revolt), and in Kenya before Mau Mau. Not all Kenyans supported Mau Mau, though they may have shared its ultimate objectives. It depends on who is counting.

We should note that the emphasis in this book is not on institutions, political parties or policies, nor is it primarily focused on the historical causes of conflict; rather it is placed on named persons, on family, on those with whom they interact, for good or bad, in specific contexts. The authors report on what people tell them, and they consider the ways women’s actions have impacted on life today as memories cascade down to the present, sometimes bearing with them unexpected outcomes. They show how women on active service are still coping, and contributing, in today’s war zones.

In 2013, Sharon Macdonald (p. 217) wrote ‘Some pasts loom especially large in both official and popular memory within Europe. That of World War II is perhaps the largest and loomiest, and ... far from fading, its public marking is increasing.’ Given this interest, it is fortunate that, just before the Second World War began, members of the British public were invited to record their daily activities in diaries which they deposited in the newly established Mass Observation programme. Continued and expanded throughout the Second World War to include the day-by-day thoughts of men and women at the front, these archives are now a treasure trove offering insights into the life and times – good and bad, simple and complex, amusing and horrifying – which our elders experienced.¹

Indeed, in June 2014 the media of the United Kingdom, as elsewhere, was flooded with recollections as Europe and America celebrated the seventieth anniversary of the D-Day landing in Normandy on 6 June. At such events uniforms come out of wardrobes, young men fly the flags, heads of state and politicians parade. Former foes stand ceremonially side by side in France; their seemingly casual encounters offering them opportunities to negotiate political boundaries and citizens’ rights from very changed positions. Did memories of the politics preceding the Second World War and the cruelties of combat bear upon their thoughts as they discussed today’s boundary disputes in Crimea?

Following the celebrations for D-Day, attention has since moved to an earlier conflict, the First World War (1914–1918). The extensive coverage in British newspapers, and on television programmes, has been reflected in the

public response, notably at the display of ceramic poppies, emblems of the renewal of life on the battlefields, which attracted over four million viewers to the historic Tower of London. The public interest in the past is not merely an expression of nostalgia, nor of heart-rending sentiments. It is because the past offers heroic accomplishments to be cherished, as well as burdens to regret. At the same time the past is refigured as elements are forgotten or revived, especially when claims to prestige and, perhaps, to natural and political resources arise. While acknowledging that traditionalist formations, like military anniversaries, have their place, we cannot fail to note the relative absence of women in the parades. To balance this somewhat, we bring to the fore here how women, in military and in civil society, cope with conflict by their deportment under great stress, their survival strategies, each in her own way and particular circumstances, so that we may identify with them, perhaps learn from them. The chapters that follow open our eyes, both to unfamiliar histories and to ongoing current affairs that we read about in the newspaper or see enacted on TV. We may wonder whether we would manage as well as those women whose lives we discuss here, should events put us into similar circumstances.

Since this book focuses on the experience of particular women who have been chosen by the authors, rather than by complicated random selection processes, no attempt is made to generalize or to come up with syncretized statements. While commonalities are of interest, it is often the *differences* of women's everyday lives that fascinate us. It is the contrast between the actuality of the 'common woman' in uncommon places, times and events that appeals. Given the limited number of cases here, and their diversity over time and place, not to speak of cultures, it would be inappropriate to conflate them. Consider the many millions affected by wars since the outbreak of the Second World War in Europe.

Many thousands of wise words are available in books and articles on the methodology of collecting and analysing field data and written narratives, which are accessible to readers, should they wish to take advantage of them. As most of the authors here are social anthropologists, we can note that nearly thirty years ago, the chapters in Anthony Jackson's *Anthropology at Home* (1987) discussed in depth the positioning of the anthropologist writing on his own and others' cultures. Therein, in her subtle disentanglement of the information gathering and analysing process, Marilyn Strathern (p. 20) warns us that 'Ultimately, the use anthropologists make of their data is for ends of their own making.' The same could perhaps be said of those proffering autobiographical material.

Jumping the years, Helen Callaway and Judith Okely's edited collected essays *Anthropology and Autobiography* (2009: xi) also remind us that 'fieldwork,

the process of writing and the creation of the final text involve a series of choices which depend on the selective interests of the ethnographer: monographs, often presented and read as definitive and timeless, are in fact selective and historically contingent.' Another helpful discussion has been given to us recently by Sharon Macdonald. 'Building, upon a [schema] developed by Edwin Ardener (1989: 26) ... which had a more sophisticated list of levels involved in the structure of history', Macdonald (2013: 55) lists a number of dimensions in her book (*Memorylands; Heritage and Identity in Europe Today*, 2013).²

Besides *multitemporal* considerations, studies of narratives may also be *multisited* (Marcus, 1998). Segalen and Zonabend (1987), quoting Levi-Strauss, say that 'there is one essential datum in our societies: they are *multidimensional* ... we have to take account of the emergence of the state, the church, the role of economics as it connects with kinship or becomes autonomous from it.' Michael Rothberg (2009: 3) considers 'memory as *multidirectional*: as subject to ongoing negotiations, cross-referencing, and borrowing; as productive not private'. From other recent anthropological literature on methodology we can pick out the following books whose titles are suggestive: *The Ethnographic Self as a Resource: Writing Memory and Experience into Ethnography* (Collins and Gallinet 2010), *Up Close and Personal: On the Peripheral Perspectives and the Production of Anthropological Knowledge* (Shore and Trinkka 2013) and *Understanding Cultural Transmission in Anthropology* (Ellen, Lycett and Johns 2013).

The implied message in works of this kind is that, before approaching biographical and historical materials, to avoid the dangers of subjective and textual misunderstandings, readers should undertake a course in how to interpret them. Most social anthropologists, like those in other academic disciplines, are aware of this literature. Taken too literally, perhaps none of us should attempt to deal with narratives! To do so we have to risk the dangers of leading ourselves and others astray. Readers lacking the time and the will to follow suit will draw their own conclusions as they enter the worlds of the women in these pages.

Regarding the authors' 'positionality' we may note that the authors did not all know each other when they did their fieldwork. They had different life trajectories and ethnicities – English of Dutch descent, Italian, German, Kikuyu, Welsh and English. Three writers were fortunate since – in one case her mother (Jaschok), another her aunt (Clarke) and a third her mother-in-law (Sadon) – had left written autobiographical accounts. One of our authors (Davies) could draw on her letters home to her mother. Of course, books, articles and records in the form of news reports and other publications were also available. Some of our authors were writing in retrospect; some were still

engaged in the field. Janette Davies was a participant witness (in Cambodia) of the events described; Rachel Grimes is still a participating member of the British Armed Forces. Moreover, several authors undertook their work in difficult, even dangerous, situations (see Davies and Grimes).

Despite the geographical and temporal spread, and the cultural diversity, some points of congruence among the narratives emerge as they touch common or parallel concerns. Three places studied had colonial and postcolonial pasts. In two of these we find women suing the British government for money – for different reasons. Fear of or actual sexual abuse, although not a main focus here, is referred to in the studies of a German woman's flight across Europe, of the experiences of Kenyan women during Mau Mau, and of problems encountered by some war correspondents. Three chapters concern displaced women. Three of the studies introduce women who, at great risk, carried guns under the gaze of the enemy.

With such matters in mind, the material can be considered in more detail, broadly in chronological order. First, the recollections of the three women who endured the Second World War intrigue us. Thus the chapter by Lidia Sciama who, born and brought up in Venice (and still a resident), tells us of the exploits of a courageous, well-born young lady carrying guns under German eyes to her partisan father. Sciama brings wartime Venice to life; she shows how the atmosphere changed as the war proceeded and that its likely outcome began to have an effect on German (and Venetian) morale. She reflects upon on how today young Venetians are re-evaluating the period of foreign occupation, and the part women played in the resistance. This exercise is paralleled in another chapter by Tabitha Kanogo's account of the way women's activities in Mau Mau in Kenya, and the crimes committed against them, are being revalued.

Lidia Sciama's account of confronting Nazi soldiers coexists with Marieke Clarke's story of her aunt Ank's brave involvement in the Netherlands, when she gave shelter to a beleaguered Jewish family. Both had close face-to-face relations with an overpowering enemy. The Dutch family have naturally held their memory of those days close. Ank Faber-Chabot's heroic actions were finally acknowledged in Israel after the war. Any effect the war has had on Dutch feelings towards Germany today, whether or not we take into account friendships that cut across national boundaries, is hard to calculate. It was said that the wartime experience of Greek families made negotiations with Germany for bail-out loans during the sudden credit crunch in Greece's national budget in 2009 all the more difficult to swallow. Indeed it was said that Greece's counterclaims against Germany for compensation for wartime deprivations were in the minds of many Greeks. And so the effects of the Second World War linger on ...

It is salutary that we also give space here to the suffering of a German woman, Hildegard Jaschok, as described by her daughter Maria. As the Second World War neared its final climax, Hildegard, who was living in Silesia, a German-speaking component of Poland, was warned by the departing German soldiers about the Poles who were arriving from further East; she was advised to make haste away in the opposite direction. For women, there is not much worse than chaos. The lack of order, the overreaching fear of personal violence, the problems Hildegard faced as she tried to keep her family group together (mother, two children and young servant) is vividly portrayed. This is a story that still has an impact on her daughter and other members of her family. It is a reminder that women on both sides of a conflict suffer. There are no winners here. Hildegard's story raises the question of how women (just as men) choose when to speak, what to repress or omit and when to be silent. There is much more to be said about the unspoken, and why speech is sometimes seen as inappropriate, see, for example, the work on 'muted groups'.³

As an exhausted post-war Europe licked its wounds and struggled to adjust to new realities, countries and regions in other areas of the world, which were also affected by the parts their people played on battlefields, began to flex their muscles. This was especially so in what was quickly redefined as the British Commonwealth, rather than the British Empire. During the war colonial recruits had become world travellers; for example, Igbo men from Eastern Nigeria and other West Africans found themselves fighting the Japanese in Burma. As a result, many were awakened to new possibilities. Anticolonial liberation movements already smouldering were uplifted by the post-war breeze. So it was that in Burma a movement closely associated with Aung San, father of Aung San Suu Kyi began. In many former colonies not only were there nationalist groups based on colonial boundaries, but internal 'tribal' nationalisms were also generated. In India and Pakistan, there were devastating upheavals as the two split up. Later, it was the Igbo who, unsuccessfully, fought other Nigerians and died for 'Biafra'.

In Burma it was the Kachins and Karens who became caught up in active struggle. We have in this volume an account by Mandy Sadan of how the Kachins, one of the many semi-autonomous ethnic groups that make up Burma, struggled for political recognition. Kachins had filled a significant role in Britain's armed forces in the Second World War, becoming soldiers on the payroll of the UK government, the men receiving pensions as they retired. This wartime experience meant that they were well equipped for armed liberation struggles, against not only colonialism but also against those they were opposed to within Burma. The Kachin State

still has a structured uniformed and armed force, and is still asserting its identity in modern Burma (now Myanmar). Sadan, whose mother-in-law is a Kachin, shows how women contributed to the endeavours of both the colonial and nationalist forces. Moreover, she confirms the presence of the past, for the Second World War lives on today in the claims of former colonial Kachin soldiers, and by widows of serving men, to the payment of UK pensions.

Across the oceans, Africa, as already noted, was also stirring in the post-war period. In Kenya the activities of Mau Mau – defined by the colonizers as insurgent but by others as liberating – has been well documented. Mau Mau was a phenomenon particularly associated with the Kikuyu and related peoples who then numbered about one million, although some Embu, Meru and others of the many peoples of Kenya joined them. The country was traumatized, as people took sides or were caught up in the colonial system of administration and counter-insurgency practices introduced by the British; thousands of Kenyans, mainly Kikuyu ‘loyalists’ and Christians, and a small number of white residents, lost their lives. There is a considerable literature available, some of it from the pen of Tabitha Kanogo, herself a Kikuyu. Here, while she looks over her shoulder at past activities, Kanogo is primarily concerned with contemporary attitudes and assessments within Kenya of that period. As Sciamia does here for Italy, and Sadan for Burma, Kanogo looks at how women fare in today’s public perceptions of those men and women who were activists in their day. In Venice, Rangoon (aka Yangon) and Nairobi, women’s roles are being re-evaluated by historians, including, of course, those of a feminist disposition. And, in all three contexts, the women are not happy: they feel undervalued. And they are protesting about it and even seeking government compensation. While in Burma, military widows appeal for British pensions, in Kenya former Mau Mau activists claim financial compensation for past atrocities during the colonial period – with considerable success.

Some twenty years after the troubles of Mau Mau, millions of men and women in Cambodia suffered badly at the hands of Pol Pot. One of our authors, Janette Davies, arrived over the border into Thailand in the refugee camps set up by the military to house people who (like Hildegard in Germany) had run for their lives to Cambodia from their homelands in Thailand. We are given a vivid eyewitness account – as noted, a participant’s account – of how men and women, both carers and sufferers, coped with the hardships, with their painful memories, and how they began to regenerate their lives. A trained midwife with wide medical experience in Bolivia and Bangladesh before becoming a social anthropologist, Davies has been able to use her letters home, and other documentation, to enhance her memories

of those dark days. Dark they certainly were but, to quote from Davies, the new babies brought a sense 'not of death but of life'. Her chapter, like so many others in this book, describes the interaction, the clash of cultures, between autochthonous peoples and incomers from overseas, be they from military or humanitarian organizations.

Hannah Spens-Black switches our attention to dramatic events in Africa when she describes the activities of women in the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF). Spens-Black arrived in Rwanda three decades after Davies' arrival in Cambodia in order to meet the men and women who had been involved in the RPF. She was inspired by the stories of a number of notable women, only to discover 'not only how they had experienced war but also the social stereotypes they had to contend with in order to participate'; patriarchal echoes from Kenya ring in our ears here! And we begin to see how the women interviewed by our authors in various parts of the world at different times have common concerns. For example, the Kachin women took loyalty oaths when joining their paramilitary association (the KWA), as in like fashion the Kikuyu and Rwandan women were sworn to secrecy in their fields of protest, while today the British women soldiers promise loyalty to their Queen and country.

Which brings us to the three final chapters, to this millennium – the 2000s. First Glenda Cooper, a journalist herself, looks at the role of women war correspondents, especially those reacting to the so-called Arab Spring in North Africa. Cooper notes that 'during the time of the Libyan revolution of 2011 the first three reporters into Green Square, Tripoli, were women'. They resented being treated as 'phenomena' by the rest of the media, seeing this as patronizing. As Cooper explains, there was a woman correspondent as long ago as 1898, there were well-known women reporters during the Second World War and there have been ever since, so their presence in Libya should not have been so surprising. All the same, such women had problems. Cooper herself draws on the memoirs of correspondents to give us a useful insight into the obstacles placed in the way of women war correspondents and the imaginative tactics used to overcome them.

Journalists, of course, come into contact with army personnel. They have more freedom of expression than the latter, upon whom they sometimes depend for access and information. It is appropriate that Mathew Hurley gives us a study of British women in the structures of NATO. He gives voice to four women serving in different parts of the NATO structure based in Europe. In the opinion of these women, men 'view warfare and provision of security, differently from women'. As one of them put it, 'the inclusion of women challenges traditional understandings'. Hurley's interviewees draw our attention to the different spatial awareness of women and men,

and to the contrast in a war zone between street and home, and the violence within each. Hurley also draws out views on the different ‘competences’ of men and women.

It is fortunate that, for our final chapter, we can turn to Rachel Grimes who speaks to us with authority as a major in the British Armed Forces. She draws upon scholarly works as well as army reports and statutes as she critiques for us the army structures and the military objectives in Afghanistan, Grimes has 20 years’ experience travelling between war and conflict zones from hot spot to hot spot in Europe, Asia and Africa. These first-hand experiences and her discussions with military colleagues add authenticity to her descriptions of life on army air transport, and of what women bring to the British Army’s Counterinsurgency Operations.

Finally, we are grateful to the authors of the following chapters, which we commend to you; but most of all we thank the women whose voices reverberate through the book. With all the caveats, the editors believe that the diverse collection of texts give plenty to think about.

Notes

1. Historians have already raided them: the prize-winning collections of excerpts from wartime diaries made by Simon Garfield (2004, 2005 and 2006) have been bestsellers. They remain startling reading today. Max Arnold’s book (2004) is also composed of interleaved diary extracts. He drew largely on recordings in the Imperial War Museum made mainly by British men and some women, most of whom were in the British and Commonwealth armed services. Two popular illustrated histories of the Second World War include those by Janice Anderson (2009) and Raynes Minns (first published 1945) the latter of which has been through seven editions.
2. Macdonald takes a *multitemporal approach* which, she says, is not only about how the past is referred to in the present. She also identifies:
 - (a) ways in which events, persons or whatever, were perceived and experienced at the time;
 - (b) ways in which events or experiences were encoded at the time, i.e. how they were materialized or documented. Both (a) and (b) may also involve attention to historiography – that is, to the ways historians may have perceived and recorded events, and to notions of time and change (including perceptions of past, present and future);
 - (c) ways in which past traces survive over time, including attention to why these and not others may endure and to the structuring of historical evidence (as text, trace, material, verbal account and so forth) at different moments in time;

- (d) ways in which past events and experiences are perceived, experienced, used and recast today, including the notions of time, change, identity etc. that are implicated.
3. Much has been written on the silencing of people, including on ‘muted groups’ (see E. Ardener 1975 and Shirley Ardener 2005).

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