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**How Far Did Women's Work Contribute to the
Outcome of World War One?**

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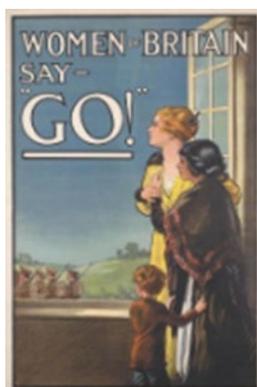
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How Far did Women's War Work Contribute Towards the Outcome of World War One?

Tamara Joseph

Abstract

During WW1, propaganda posters depicted women as marvelling at men in the army, with many men going into the war with the idea that they were protecting an idyllic, helpless female utopia at home. However, the narrative this told only made it more difficult for women to gain jobs in the armed forces and other traditionally male fields as they were still depicted as holding their traditional domestic roles. In fact, women did much more than just wave their sons off to the Western Front as this story of WW1 often suggests, with them managing to supplement and eventually drive the wartime economies, especially in Allied nations. Most existing academic papers that look at the work of women in WW1 focus on the *conditions* of their work rather than on the *value* of the contributions they made to the war economy. This essay analyses the substantial contributions of women to the war effort through the main areas of their employment: in paramilitary units, factories, nursing/hospitals and agriculture. It shows how Britain's victory was significantly aided by its superior mobilisation of women. The main focus is on Britain and Germany, but evidence from Austria is used to supplement the less extensive German statistics. Within each section of this essay, a direct comparison is made between the countries under consideration, and in the conclusion these ideas are drawn together, in conjunction with considering where these women were resourced from, to support the thesis that Britain's victory was significantly aided by the work of women.



Part 1 – Women in Paramilitary Units

Britain

Women generally faced lots of opposition to their joining of the armed forces. Despite the fact that over 100,000 women joined Britain's army during WW1 (Curry, 2018), the Women's Royal Naval Service and the Women's Royal Air Force were only set up in November 1917 and April 1918 respectively, meaning that their impact was minimal. Therefore, women had their biggest impact in the armed forces through paramilitary units.

In her article in *The International History Review* Kristina Roberts looks at the contributions of women to the war effort through paramilitary units. During WW1, over 100,000 women in Britain served in the two types of paramilitary units – the volunteer corps and the women's services – performing 'non-combatant jobs for the armed forces' (Roberts, 1997, p.52). These units operated with military-style discipline, initially preparing in case of an invasion of Britain (as the hope was that they would then be able to defend Britain while the men were still on the Western Front). However, once the trench system was established and an invasion of Britain became increasingly unlikely, women started to perform more welfare work, with the aim of freeing up men for the Western Front – this work included running troop canteens, entertaining the wounded, recruiting and clerical work and driving vehicles for the army. For example, from 1916, the Women's Legion supplied drivers for postal companies, which freed up men to go and fight on the Western Front (Roberts, 2013, p.320)., and at the time of the first Zeplin raid in 1917, the Women's Reserve Ambulance was the first to reach the injured and give them aid, meaning that there was no work for the male medics to do once they arrived on the scene. Women also 'voluntarily trained themselves in every kind of signalling, semaphore-flags, mechanical arms, morse, etc.' (*The Public Health Journal*, 1918, p.587) and learnt map reading. Some of these female signallers were sent to France, and within less than a year the Officer Commanding Signals asked for thousands more as their work was so good. This clearly demonstrates how the work of women in paramilitary units during World War One was recognised as being a very beneficial contribution towards the war effort. There were also women in these paramilitary units with more senior roles: the 'Hush Waacs' numbered around 12 people connected with the Censor's office, with the responsibility of decoding signals and written messages.

As well as filling clerical positions, the women in these paramilitary units also worked on the battlefields themselves. 'Salvagers' worked to salvage battlefield debris in order to make these materials into something useful again. For instance, up to 30,000 boots were repaired each week (*The Public Health Journal*, 1918, p.588), with these boots being distributed to men in trenches, prisoners, people in lines of communication, etc, and when uppers couldn't be used any more they were made into items such as laces and helmets. The women that did this work were vital for the maintenance of the war effort as they ensured that resources didn't run out through their constant upcycling of materials. This shows Britain's determination to maximise its resources: it not only

mobilised more of its workforce by employing women, but it then used this expanded workforce to make further use of scarce resources through reusing materials.

Germany/Austria

In 1917, the Army High Command of the Austro-Hungarian army announced that it would free up more men on the front by 'replacing men in army support positions with women'. It did this through setting up the Women's Auxiliary Labour Force in the Field, which recruited between 36,000 and 50,000 women in 1917-18 (Healy, 2002).

In Germany, women in the NFD performed tasks with the aim of supporting the army, and they often hoped that their service would come to be as highly regarded as that of male military service. Jobs performed by the NFD included organising welfare for soldiers' families, widows and orphans and providing food and shelter to refugees. They did to an extent organise female work in industries, but generally their work focused on more female-centric jobs such as cooking, medical aid and care, rather than on distinctly paramilitary work. Due to the fact that both Germany and Austria were so caught up on women continuing to portray female virtues, they failed to optimise the use of women in paramilitary units

Comparison

Whereas women did support the army in Germany, Austria and Britain, especially as the war progressed, it is clear from the evidence that Britain made better use of its female workforce in paramilitary positions than Germany did. There is, admittedly, less evidence concerning the work of women in paramilitary units in Germany, but this is simply because there was less activity of this type to write about. Ultimately, even the women that did get involved in this sense in Germany still weren't on the front lines, whereas the women's paramilitary units in Britain acted with military-style discipline and women in these units learnt skills that were often honed in the armed forces.

Part 2 – Women in Factories

Britain

Working in munitions factories was initially seen as men's work, however in Britain in February 1915, an engineering productivity committee recommended that 'in order to increase output, there should be an extension of the practice of employing female labour on this work' (Abbott, 1917, p.662). This led to the Treasury Agreement of 19th March 1915, in which representatives of trade unions (except the Amalgamated Society of Engineers) agreed to a series of proposals, including that restrictions on the employment of women should be relaxed – the Amalgamated Society of Engineers later agreed to this as well once certain additional safeguards (especially those regarding the maintenance of the security of male labour and pay) had been assured. This agreement hastened the pace at which women workers were able to join

munitions factories, as trade unions had to modify their regulations that restricted the use of unskilled labour and the employment of women.

Once conscription was introduced in 1916, many job vacancies were created and subsequently filled by women, meaning that by 1918, munitions was the largest single employer of women (*Striking Women*, 2019). By 1917, munitions factories (who mostly employed women) made 80% of the weapons and shells used by the British army. The women who worked in these factories often dealt with horrifying side-effects from over-exposure to TNT, with the yellow colour that their skin turned warranting them gaining the name 'canaries'. In fact, around 400 women died during World War One due to overexposure to TNT, showing the ultimate contribution of women to the war effort by paying with their health and lives.

Germany

There is little evidence of mass mobilisation of women in Germany, although their participation in industry did increase as the war went on. Initially, many working class women lost their jobs as the industries they worked in (such as clothing, textile and tobacco industries) relied on imported raw materials, which were now rationed. Not only this, but in general women with small children preferred to do home-based work rather than work in a factory, meaning that there was limited capacity for the mass mobilisation of women. The fact that women sewed military uniforms, made belts and made gunlock covers at home rather than in factories meant that they worked in a less efficient manner. By 1918, there wasn't a scarcity of workers generally, but a scarcity of highly-trained workers who were able to increase output to meet the military's demand for munitions. Overall, mass mobilisation in Germany almost completely focused on males, with campaigns and German military and political leaders being much more focused on male involvement.

From 1915 onwards, more women found themselves with opportunities to work in factories, with the number of women being employed in plants with at least 10 workers increasing from 1,592,138 in 1913 to 2,319,674 in 1918 (Stibbe, 2014). However, it was certainly not the case that industry became reliant on women during WW1, as it still relied on granting periods of leave from military service to urban men in reserved occupations – women were seen as only temporary replacements and, for example, were only used when civilian labourers from occupied countries were not available. In addition, many of the women counted in these stats were not working in war-related industries.

As the war went on, women's involvement in factory work underwent a fundamental change. In 1916, Hindenburg and Ludendorff were given the reins over the third supreme command. In the December of the same year the Auxiliary Service Law was also passed, which meant that all men aged 17-60 who were not required for military duty could now be called up for labour on the front. Not only did this create even more job vacancies at home for women to fill, but Wilhelm Groener (the head of the new

centralised War Office) also tried to place a focus on ensuring better coordination of female labour recruitment. Marie-Elisabeth Luders (a prominent figure in the BDF) was given the responsibility of heading a new Women's Central Work Office in the Prussian Ministry of War, which was tasked with developing systems for inspecting factories where women worked or potentially may work. In response to moderate opposition to Luder's activities within other departments of the War Ministry, Groener ordered on the 29th January 1917 that all 'prejudice...against the mobilisation of women must fall' (Stibbe, 2014).

This marked a turning point in the attitudes of many Germans towards women's involvement in war work, with many acting commanders of individual districts within Germany targeting women more, especially due to women's increasing involvement in protests due to the growing war weariness. The NFD and other voluntary organisations were to be mobilised in order to deal with defeatism on the home front. In May 1917, the propaganda department of the 10th army corps in Hanover announced that 'The *women of all classes* [...] deserve special consideration in relation to our campaigns. The general command would especially welcome the participation of women's organisations in the delivery of its educational-propaganda work [*Aufklärung*].' (Stibbe, 2014)

Comparison

The key difference between women's factory work in Britain and Germany was the attitude of the nation towards women's contributions to this field. In Britain, although of course there was some opposition to women being allowed into a field that was traditionally dominated by men, allowances were made relatively early on in the war to allow women to work in factories.

Comparatively, although Germany also employed more women in factories and munitions as the war went on, it was less good at optimising the additional labour that women offered than Britain. Krupp was a big armament producer in Germany, yet in 1914 it employed almost no women. Despite the fact that women made up nearly 30% of Krupp's 175,000 workers in 1917 (The National WWI Museum and Memorial, 2018), and nationwide nearly 1.4 million women were employed in the German war labour force in 1917, the number of women employed in Germany was much smaller than in Britain throughout the entire war. In Britain in July 1914, 3.3 million women worked in paid employment, and this had risen to 4.7 million by July 1917, almost 4 times as many as in Germany.

Therefore, Germany's mobilisation of resources was slower and of a smaller scale than Britain's, despite Germany having a larger population. There were two consequences of this: first, Germany was unable to fully mobilise female labour and hence its workforce and army (as men worked in factories rather than being in the army) were weakened, and second, as Britain was able to mobilise more women

specifically in factories, it was able to produce more ammunition, which resulted in Britain having superior mobilisation of ammunition as well.

Part 3 – Women in Nursing/Hospitals

There is no doubt that one of the most significant ways that a person (specifically males) could contribute towards the war effort was through fighting on the battlefield. However, this could not have been facilitated without the nurses who ‘patched up’ the soldiers and kept them going.

Britain

Before the war broke out, there were around 2000 female doctors (BBC Bitesize, n.d.), but a shortage of medical staff during the war meant that women were called upon to volunteer. Many women joined Voluntary Aid Detachments (VADs), which were run with discipline and efficiency due to the inspections and orders that were issued by the War Office, Red Cross Society and Country Director. The roles taken on by women in the VAD included, but were not limited to, maintaining military rest stations, working in temporary hospitals in order to care for the sick until they could be transferred to main hospitals, cooking and preparing diets for the sick and working in ambulance trains.

The work of the VADs was certainly not ‘light’ or ‘simplistic’. There were four main areas of nursing: first aid and bandaging, sick-room cookery, hygiene and home nursing’ (Hallett, n.d, p.187), and this work was generally done to a high standard, with fully trained nurses being hired to train volunteers in order for them to be able to make adequate assistants to the nurses.

As the war progressed and the number of soldiers needing complex treatments increased, VAD nurses had to take on more responsibility from doctors due to a shortage of doctors. In fact, nurses often crossed the lines between surgery and nursing. For instance, nurses that carried out the routine of cleaning wounds would also remove pieces of shrapnel and shell, and daily examinations would also involve picking out pieces of dirt and clothing as they rose to the surface. In emergencies, nurses may even carry out minor surgical operations, and from the second half of the war women were trained in anaesthetics as well. This shows just how significant the work of female nurses was: they filled in wherever they were needed and their willingness to take on new roles was integral to the war effort.

The work of the nurses was especially important during the 1918 epidemic of Spanish Flu, during which, despite there being no effective vaccine to prevent or treatment to cure the disease, nurses were able to alleviate symptoms for soldiers that caught it by making patients comfortable, monitoring their vital signs and administering fluids and pain relief.

However, the work of the VADs was slightly limited by the fact that once they completed their basic training, they had to complete 6-month placements, training under a nurse to consolidate their skills. In reality, this often resulted in them doing

more mundane (although arguably still very important) tasks, such as sweeping the floors of and preparing breakfast for the wards of sick, which meant that the VADs couldn't have a great impact on the war effort until quite a while after they started training (whereas men could be sent to fight on the Western Front reasonably quickly after they were recruited). Not only this, but most VADs actually started by working in civilian wards, which frustrated many of them as they wanted to contribute more directly towards the war effort. Nonetheless, this work was still important as their work in civilian hospitals freed up other nurses to work on the Western Front, as well as freeing up male doctors to fight in the war. From spring 1915, VADs were allowed to practise in military hospitals, and they could go to overseas hospitals once they had demonstrated good skills in hospitals at home first, meaning that those women that did end up working in hospitals on the Western Front were generally of a high standard. Despite this, trained nurses still found it difficult to be released from British hospitals to work overseas, and were often upset to be stuck in England working with civilians when VADs were working in base hospitals on the Western Front.

Hallett summarises: 'the allied working force of the First World War was a complex, heterogenous group of the trained, semi-trained, and the almost completely untrained'.

Germany

Likewise, Germany also enlisted women to help with nursing during the war. On 1st August 1914, the German Red Cross had 6,000 fully trained nurses (Krankenschwestern), over 1,000 assistant nurses (Hilfsschwwestern) and 7,000 aides (Helferinnen). One German nurse wrote in a letter home, 'we don't have time to become tired, when so many are waiting our help' (*German Nurses of the Great War*, 2017). According to *The International Encyclopaedia of the First World War*, women made up around 40% of the medical personnel attached to the field and reserve armies in Germany.

In Austria, nurses in the Austrian Red Cross (who had been working since 1915) were more accepted than women working in the Women's Auxiliary force as they were commended for their feminine virtues.

Comparison

Despite the fact that many women in the VAD grew frustrated about having to perform more mundane tasks in hospitals, the reality is that had they not performed tasks such as cleaning and cooking, disease would have run rampant and Britain's military force would have collapsed. The extent of the success of female nurses in Britain is seen by the fact that they were sent abroad to Allied countries, showing how the scale of nursing operations in Britain was large enough to be able to support numerous countries. Therefore, there is no doubt that the work of the VAD and trained nurses was essential for the maintenance of the British war effort. Germany's war effort also was incredibly reliant on the work of female nurses, and there was certainly less opposition to women working in hospitals than to them working in factories due to the

fact that hospital work was seen as nurturing feminine virtues such as care and hospitality. However, the scale of the mobilisation of female nurses in Germany was much smaller than that of female nurses in Britain. Whilst 80,000 British women volunteered as nurses during WW1 (Curry, 2018), Germany was never able to reach this number, meaning that they were less able to maintain their combatant force. Ultimately, Britain's superior nursing system allowed them to better maintain the soldiers that they did have, despite them having a smaller population than Germany.

Part 4 – Agriculture

One of the most fundamental necessities for a country in wartime is for it to be self-sufficient. A key component of this is a country's ability to feed its population, without having to rely on other countries, with whom relations could possibly be difficult in war time, or who may be struggling economically and so may be unable to export foodstuff during certain periods of time.

Britain

The Women's Land Army (WLA) was established in February 1917 with the aim of increasing female participation in farming. This was necessary both due to the reduction in the size of the labour force in this sector due to men being conscripted to the army, as well as due to the need to grow more food as supplies were being threatened by German submarines. This initiative, despite only coming into place towards the end of the war, managed to achieve the full-time employment of 23,000 women in the WLA by the end of world war one (Women's Land Army.co.uk, n.d.).

According to a statement issued by the British Board of Agriculture in January 1917, the aim of the WLA was 'increasing the supply of women workers on the land and of securing their efficiency and employment'. This demonstrates a clear juxtaposition to the work of women in Germany: despite women contributing towards agriculture in Germany, this was only done out of necessity and the general culture of Germany was still largely anti-female employment, whereas through the WLA the government in Britain once again showed its willingness to have women in full time employment, even if, for example, this may disrupt or delay domestic expectations of women, such as bringing up a family. In March 1917, a national appeal was made for young women to enrol in the WLA as a part of the National Service Scheme. Village Registrars were enlisted by county Women's War Agricultural Committees to act as representatives, with them being given the job of keeping registers of local female farm workers. WLA training courses at existing agricultural colleges were established to give an introduction to work on the land for 'land girls', allowing them to achieve their goal of working as efficiently as possible. From April 1917 onwards, some well-educated women were chosen as 'Gang Leaders', and they were to take responsibility for the work of 3-4 field workers (known as 'land girl gangs').

The WLA was split into three parts. The first was agriculture, and by the autumn of 1918, this section employed 12,649 members of the WLA, most of whom were milkers

or field workers. The second section was forage (haymaking for food for horses) – the Forage Corps had been started in 1915, but they became a part of the WLA when it was established in 1917. The Forage Corps worked in Great Britain and Ireland, and they had accumulated 8,000 members by the end of 1919. The last section of the WLA was the Women's Forestry Corps. Set up in 1916, they carried out forestry work in order to increase timber production. By January 1918, 400 women worked as foresters in the Women's Land Army.

Germany

When men left for wartime, wives of farmers tended to step up to look after the farms. In a 1916 census in Bavaria, there was found to be a 36.3% decline in self-employed male agricultural workers due to them being conscripted to the army (Ziemann, 2020). This demonstrates the weight of the burden that fell on many women in Germany: not only did they have to continue with their traditional domestic roles (such as running a family), but they now also had to take on the work of the men that had left. In fact, by 1916, around 44% of all farms in Germany were headed by a woman (Ziemann, 2020).

The agricultural work carried out by women was done in much more difficult circumstances than encountered by their male counterparts before the outbreak of WW1. Women had to train and drive teams of horses and other cattle to work in the fields without the usual division of labour that men had done this with. Not only this, but peasant women had traditionally been dependent on advice from their husbands, so it was difficult for them to manage without their support. This issue was exacerbated by the fact that the remaining male farm owners weren't particularly willing to help these women in their agricultural endeavours as they were, for the most part, uncomfortable with accepting the changes in women's roles which was made necessary by the war.

The agricultural work that women had to take on in Germany was especially heavy during harvest time, where the result of a shortage of workers was that women often had to work from 3am to 9pm in the fields. This took a great toll on female peasants, who were subject to great physical strain as they had to take on a triple burden of working on the farm, working in the household and raising children (although the latter of these became a less significant issue throughout the course of the war as the birth rate fell drastically). This great physical strain meant that after 3 years of the war, there were reports of more and more women suffering from abdominal pains and miscarriages due to physical over-exertion, and towards the end of the war, the capacity of these women to work fell due to physical burn-out.

However, this is not to say that agriculture became fully reliant on women in Germany. In fact, as with industry, the German war effort relied heavily on granting periods of leave from military service to farmers at harvest time, and prisoners of war were still often used on farms in preference to female labourers due to their lower salary requirements. According to Ziemann, in late 1916 there were 46,305 prisoners of war

working in Bavarian agriculture, and by the spring of 1917 this figure had grown to around 62,000.

Comparison

Britain's mobilisation of female farm-labourers was certainly more organised than Germany's. In Britain, management of these farms was centrally controlled and highly publicised. This is not to say, however, that females had a larger impact in agriculture in Britain than they did in Germany. In fact, despite the fact that it is hard to measure as statistics are scarce, it is generally accepted that farmers' wives were the key contributors towards agriculture during WW1 in Germany. Not only this, but agriculture was a far more important component of Germany's economy than it was of Britain's, with agriculture making up 23% of Germany's Net Domestic Product in 1913 (Ghidc.org, 2025), whereas in Britain agriculture only made up 6% of national income by the early 1900s (Turner, 2004). This means that female agricultural work was more integral to the running of the economy in Germany than it was in Britain, meaning that these women in Germany had a greater impact on their nation's war effort than women working in this field in Britain.

Part 5 - Conclusion

Many people refer to WW1 as a war of resources, with the Allied victory often being attributed to their superiority in this regard. However, simply aiming to obtain or output more resources is a futile exercise if existing resources are not fully maximised. Labour is one of the most integral parts to any economy, and although neither Britain nor Germany made full use of the female labour force they had at hand, Britain did a far better job of it than Germany. Germany's failure to maximise its resources meant that, as an economist would put it, it was sitting well below its Production Possibility Frontier. It could have maintained its war effort with more vigour over a longer period of time had it allowed women to take on more jobs.

Stibbe also argues that unlike in Britain where many more women entered the workforce, in Germany, although the workforce expanded a little, it was mostly just a reallocation of female workers that took place. This is seen from the fact that although the number of women working in metal and electrical industries multiplied by over 8 times from March 1914-March 1918, in the same period the number of women employed in textiles fell by more than 1/3 and the number of women working in clothing fell by almost 1/2. This shows that even when women did become more involved in the war effort in Germany, this occurred at the expense of the efficiency of other industries, so Germany didn't actually mobilise many women who hadn't been in employment already, meaning it didn't use women to expand its labour force (rather than just rearrange it) as Britain did.

Furthermore, the women that were mobilised in Germany weren't mobilised as cohesively. Many continued to perform home-based work rather than work in factories, meaning Germany's workforce was less efficient than Britain's, where women tended to work more collectively. One reason for this is that the German government saw women's work as a last, meaning it couldn't bring itself to drive massive campaigns, whereas the British government called on women relatively early on in the war. Although the German government changed its perspective on this issue in around 1916 (out of sheer necessity), this was too late as women in Britain had already long been instated as a part of the workforce by this point, whereas Germany was only just getting to grips with it.

The one area where Germany was perhaps more successful in its mobilisation of female labour than Britain was in agriculture, however this mobilisation came about naturally as women took over farm work from their husbands and it wasn't of the same scale as the industrial mobilisation that happened in Britain. In addition, it is to be expected that more women were working in agriculture in Germany than were in Britain, as agriculture made up a larger component of Germany's economy than it did of Britain's, meaning it was a natural industry for women to participate in, especially as it often allowed them to continue to express their feminine domestic virtues (such as those of care). This does mean, however, that just looking at female contributions to the war effort in Germany by looking at those in paid employment is bound to understate their contributions as this won't consider the farmwork that many women performed.

Britain was relatively successful at utilising the labour of women. There is no doubt that the inclusion of women in the British war effort still left much to be desired, and of course by modern standards far fewer women were working than would have been the case had there been complete equality between genders, but in reality, before the war, having so many women in employment was unheard of. Britain was able to step out of its 'comfort zone' of keeping women in domestic roles, whereas a key reason for Germany mobilising its female workforce to a lesser extent was because it couldn't shift its more traditional views of the role of women in society to allow them to participate more in the war effort. This played out well for Britain as it was able to maximise its resources much better than Germany could. It could be said that Britain's superior mobilisation of female labour was due to its awareness of having a smaller population, meaning it was forced to be more efficient with its labour supply, an issue which Germany (with its larger population) was less concerned about. However, whatever the reasoning behind Britain's superior mobilisation of women, be it cultural, political or other, it massively contributed towards the outcome of WW1.

It will never be possible to measure the true contribution of women to the war in neither Britain nor Germany as, for example, a numerical value cannot be put on the domestic duties they performed (including caring for children alone), and it will also never be possible to determine whether or not Britain would have won the war without its mobilisation of women. However, there is no doubt that it would have been much more difficult for both countries to function without the work of women. Therefore, women's

contributions towards the war effort in WW1 was a critical plank of the Allies' ultimate victory. WW1 was a war of resources, and Britain made better use of the greatest resource they had: human capital and labour.

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