Gender Under Fire:

Interrogating War in South Africa,
1939-1945.

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Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the
Master of Arts degree in the
Programme of Historical Studies,
University of Natal, Durban.

December 2001

The financial assistance of National Research Foundation (NRF) towards this research is hereby acknowledged. Opinions expressed and conclusions arrived at, are those of the author and are not necessarily to be attributed to the National Research Foundation.
Declaration

This study represents original work by the author and has not been submitted in any form to another university. Where use has been made of the work of others it has been duly acknowledged in the text.

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December 2001
Acknowledgements

This dissertation would not have been possible was it not for the dedication of my supervisor, Dr Catherine Burns, who went above and beyond. The interest she has shown in me through the years and her continuous encouragement has allowed me to grow as a person. I am deeply in her debt.

My great appreciation goes to everyone else at the Programme of Historical Studies – the enthusiasm and dedication of Professor Guy, Dr Breckenridge and Dr Du Toit have been instrumental in expanding my horizons and demonstrating all the positive aspects of university life. Sandi Thomson deserves a special mention – she has uncomplainingly and patiently assisted me with innumerable difficulties and I am extremely grateful for all her efforts.

I wish to thank Campbell Collections for financial assistance.

I wish to extend my appreciation to all those at the Documentation Centre, Department of Defence Archives in Pretoria, who made my research far less of a chore and went all out to assist me in every way possible.

My heartfelt gratitude goes to those who started it all – my teachers: Mrs P. Chetty for encouraging my to write; Mr L. Naidoo for building my confidence; and, most of all, Mr F.H. Khan who instilled in me a love for History.

All my thanks to my friends – Elaine Binedell who helped me immeasurably with research and moral support and is the only one who sees method in my madness; Dinesh Balliah who went all out for me in Pretoria, particularly at the archives and constantly encourages me to reach new heights; and Riashnee Pather who always provides a welcome distraction from the grind of academia.

I am deeply indebted to those who have inspired me – my heroes: Brixton Karnes for encouraging me to follow my dreams and Tim Abell, who personifies honour and duty and has enhanced my love for all things military – Rangers really do lead the way!

And last, but not least, to the strong women in my life – the mother who gave birth to me and the mother who sacrificed so much to raise me and give me every opportunity. Your lives and the adversities you have overcome have been an inspiration to me and are responsible for the person I have become. I dedicate all that I have achieved thus far, and all that I hope to achieve, to my parents.
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Abstract

Warfare in the twentieth century – with few exceptions as the century closed – provided a theatre for the consolidation of gender roles. The gender roles of "soldiers" and "mothers" in particular were remarkably uncontested during war years. Through the last century – as in many other eras of human history – "soldiering" was seen as pre-eminently masculine activity and "mothering", even more firmly, as women's calling. The gender roles of soldiers and mothers allocated to men and women are deeply hegemonic and colour the way in which the two are viewed. Despite the contrasting activities of soldiers, involved in wars and killing, and mothers, who are given the role of nurturers and the bearers of life, the two roles have many common elements such as acting defensively to preserve life, engaging in roles which are life-changing and the underlying notions of sacrifice and duty. Despite this clear categorisation of the two roles the boundaries are blurred – this is most evident in the case of patriotic motherhood where the nurturing and life-preserving role of the mother is given new significance as one of the sacrifice of sons in war. "Mothers of Soldiers" during war periods came to represent a complex web of patriarchal state and civic interests – and women across classes, ethnic groups, nations and regions often participated in "Patriotic Motherhood". War in the twentieth century was also more centrally controlled and directed than warfare in previous centuries. Technologies of mass communication available by the 1930s played at least as crucial a role as weaponry in mobilizing and waging warfare. One element of this mobilization centred around hegemonic gender "drilling".

This thesis demonstrates that these powerfully hegemonic beliefs were very much in the foreground in the context of the propaganda operated to mobilise the women and men of South Africa during the Second World War – calling men to the front lines to defend home, family and country against the enemy and sending out the plea for women to support their men by taking up positions in the Auxiliary Services and in industry. Women were also called to send forth their sons and to stiffen male resolve. The way in which propaganda was received, and the degree to which any sign of challenge to this emerged, depended on a variety of factors – race, class, ethnicity, gender and political affiliation. While gender contestations were rare, a variety of other schisms were apparent in all areas of South African society over entry into the
war. For many these tensions were resolved by 1941 and those groups treated by the state as second-class citizens, Black men and women and White women to a large extent threw their weight behind the war effort, hoping that it would demonstrate their capability and that victory achieved against oppression abroad would have similar repercussions at home.

The Second World War in South Africa (an understudied area of our twentieth century historiography) presented the possibility for bringing about social change particularly, in opening up debates around race and gender hierarchies. The capabilities demonstrated by women in previously male spheres, the heroics of Black men and the proximity with which they worked with White men, sharing common danger, created a climate for a new social order in South Africa. A number of factors prevented this. Deeply hegemonic beliefs about gender and the contradictions they held for women was most evident in the Auxiliary Services where there was tension over the portrayal of femininity in the military. For those women who had engaged in waged labour for the first time, the hardships wrought by war and the strain of running a home led to many longing for a return to the pre-war status quo. This was exacerbated by the graphic portrayal of the harsh experiences and subsequent physical and psychological effects on men returning home from the front lines. Racial hierarchies at first glance loosened in the context of war, but even during war, the unequal treatment of Black troops in the military and after the war the subsequent mean benefits authorized for them by the White minority state in contrast to White soldiers was meant as, and taken as, a devaluation of their efforts. This war-end tension was aggravated by the powerful and largely unchallenged racism in a group composed of White ex-servicemen which opposed the rise of the Apartheid regime – the Torch Commando.

South Africa stood at a crossroads during the Second World War. There existed the potential for creating a new vision for gender and race roles. It was, however, the very upheaval in society caused by the war, which led to a rise of conservatism and the eventual creation of the repressive Apartheid state. This thesis argues that examining the war from the perspective of changing gender roles sheds light not only on civic and family life, but also on the South African state. Using previously inaccessible state records on the war era, the thesis explores a case study of women's
auxiliary military groupings as a lens through which to view this crossroads. The thesis interrogates the naturalization of gender roles prevalent across so much of South Africa as the war opened and probes to what extent this consolidated or shifted during the course of the war and its immediate aftermath.
Preface

A convergence of experiences and interests shaped my desire to interrogate the relationship between war and gender during the Second World War in South Africa. The first is my fascination with all things military – I’ve always loved the traditions of military service – uniforms, the pomp and circumstance of parades and customs such as saluting or bearing arms. On a deeper level there has always been the notion of honour, duty and glory – features which I question in this dissertation but which have, nevertheless, exerted a powerful influence on my subconscious and conscious mind. My perceptions of military life and war have been shaped by my abiding love of war films – *The Great Escape, The Bridge on the River Kwai, From Here to Eternity*. These films and many others have created a deeply embedded idea of honour and duty which subsequent exposure to films and literature portraying experiences to the contrary have been unable to dislodge.

Two years ago I watched Ridley Scott’s film *G.I. Jane*, which details the difficult experiences and obstacles of a woman’s entry into the Navy SEALS (Sea, Air and Land Services). This led me to consider the ways in which women actually began to enter the military, the reactions to this by men to whom military service and war were a test of masculinity and almost a rite of passage, and the perceptions of women in the military themselves of their own role as women within a previously male domain. Simultaneously, based on yet more images drawn from films, particularly those dealing with the First World War and with other battlefield experiences where men charged into enemy fire, I wished to understand the motivation which would compel these men to so easily and in such large numbers, place their lives at such grave risk.

In this dissertation as I sought to understand these aspects of masculinity and femininity I was at the same time, unpacking my own preconceptions and interrogating my own belief systems about honour, duty and the glory of military service. It is with this in mind that I turned my attention to the South African men and women – as well as those from the other Allied countries – who appeared to some extent to be shaped by similar belief systems despite the more than half a century separating us and the differing experiences of a more cynical, post-Vietnam generation. There thus appears to be a deeply hegemonic philosophy underlying war,
military service and the roles of men and women, which continues to exert an influence. Concurrently, these sets of beliefs are not static – I am not persuaded by the confinement of women to the role of mothers and I am very much in favour of military service for women on an equal basis with men, which was very much an issue in the Second World War, and continues to invoke strong emotion in the present as South Africa's military (among very few in the world) strives for gender equality across the Armed Forces. It is within this context that I turned my attention to the interrogation of gender during the Second World War in South Africa.

Chapter One, entitled *Soldiers and Mothers*, is concerned with the traditional dichotomy of fighting men who are engaged in wars and killing and their perceived other – mothers, involved in bearing and nurturing children. This chapter demonstrates that the two roles are not as contradictory as is often portrayed but that they share fundamental elements – duty and sacrifice. The idealisation of both involves a preservation of life and a form of sacrifice for others, be it children or comrades. In addition the role of mothers and soldiers are often portrayed as integral to their genders – it is the duty of women to bear children and the duty of men to fight to defend home and country. Although these perceptions vary in their intensity over time and space there is in place a framework, which underlies assumptions about mothers and soldiers. The core theory of this chapter is Antonio Gramsci’s notion of hegemony where there is a dialectic between perceptions of soldiers and mothers, which change according to circumstance but which nonetheless carry essential features. For this chapter I was heavily influenced by Jean Bethke Elshtain’s *Women and War* where she discusses this relationship between mothers and soldiers. Simultaneously she portrays motherhood as being more than noble isolation from the public sphere – instead women have been integral to society, bringing their morality to the public sphere and actively exhorting men to fight during war. Michael Adams’ discussion of the private schools and armies of the Victorian era suggests that the school system and the military itself provided a kind of private sphere where young men were isolated from women in all-male environments, enhancing the separation and lack of understanding between the genders. Furthermore, war was itself portrayed as a game, a perception strengthened by the use of sporting metaphors which detracted from its negative aspects – for young men this ideal was valorised: it was more desirable to die a noble death in battle than become old and corrupt. I
found great similarities between Adams’ portrayal of Victorian male society in the United States and England and Robert Morrell’s discussion of settler masculinity in Natal evident in his dissertation as well as the Journal of Southern African studies issue on masculinity – similar ideas of the military, war and sport were generated in the colonial and settler school system and as cadets in the military system. This was true for Black men who attended missionary educational institutions too.

Neither Adams nor Elshtain however discuss issues of motherhood, soldiering, femininity and masculinity in the colonial context, which is key to the South African situation. In this chapter the roles of mothers and soldiers were complicated by race where women extended their moral role to the colonies, and were essential to the preservation of White racial superiority. This was related to the way in which they also often formed the basis around which White men mobilized themselves militarily – to protect women from the “swart gevaar”. Motherhood and notions of femininity took on different connotations under colonialism and its settler aftermaths. Black women were not idealised by White men – their race superseded their gender. However, key to this chapter is my belief that there are no cast-iron rules when considering issues of gender. My discussion of the colonial situation in India shows that Indian women were idealised by the nationalists as the guardians of Indian culture and their presiding over a private sphere, which had to remain impervious to colonisation. Thus the Eurocentric view of motherhood was utilised by Indian nationalists as a means of strengthening their fight against colonial subjection. That this possibility did not end up emerging (linking Black and White mothers) in South Africa post 1945 does not diminish the opening up of this possibility in several cases.

Whereas, Chapter One, while making reference to South Africa, acts as an introduction and is a more general overview of the deeply hegemonic perceptions of the roles of men and women, Chapter Two, Mobilization, is explicitly concerned with the way in which South African society was mobilised upon the outbreak of the Second World War. Key to mobilisation was the use of propaganda by the state. Propaganda made appeals to the ideals of modernity (representative government and the rule of law), nationalism and patriotism – the war against a defined aggressor. Benedict Anderson’s notion of an “imagined community” aptly describes the response to this propaganda inherent in the large numbers of African, Indian and Coloured
volunteers. The desire to “prove” themselves, which had the potential to create greater racial equality, sparked a loyal response. However, South Africa’s entry into the war was not as idealised as Anderson’s portrayal of nationalism and warfare in other regions. In South Africa tensions existed within Parliament as well as within those organisations opposed to South Africa’s racial policies over entry into the war. For many these tensions were eventually resolved but this was not always the case. The Afrikaner right wing organisation, the Ossewabrandwag, sympathised with the policies of Nazi Germany and carried out acts of terrorism within the country – South Africa was therefore engaged in a war on two fronts.

Other than terrorism, upheaval was evident in every sector of the home front – particularly due to the exodus of men to the front lines and the subsequent movement of women into industry and the Auxiliary Services. However the propaganda aimed at women was very much in line with conventional perceptions of their roles – the notion of Auxiliary itself placed the role of women during war as that of assisting men who were considered key. Combat served as the distinction between White men and Black men as well as White women. Women’s changing roles in wartime were portrayed by propaganda as a necessary but temporary aberration. Underlying this is my submission that the upheaval caused by this war, as with others, had the potential for social change, be it in areas of gender or race, and the state’s mobilization of Black men and White women for the war effort could have had the potential for change lasting beyond the war and beyond state control.

Chapter Three, War, deals with the period between 1942 and the end of the war in 1945. I have created this distinction, as it is apparent that there was a definite change of tone after the initial euphoria of the war had passed. This malaise, which was termed “war weariness”, led to radical changes in state propaganda and increasing encouragement by the government for citizens to throw their weight behind the war effort. In War I discuss the role played by White men and women as well as Black men during this period and the kinds of ways in which these groups were portrayed which was infused with contradiction and tension, exposing the ambiguities in racial and gendered roles.
Most of my primary sources are drawn from the monthly magazine issued by the Women’s Auxiliary Services, *The Women’s Auxiliary*. The magazine was itself a source of propaganda due to its origins in Auxiliary Services. I critically engage with this source to portray the way in which, despite the appeals made to women to adopt new roles, these were still placed within an existing pre-war structure. Simultaneously this structure was not unbreachable – by opening the doors to women and allowing them to engage in new opportunities, there always existed the possibility that the door, once opened, could not be closed. While providing a fascinating glimpse into the minds of women at this incredible time in world history, *The Women’s Auxiliary* as a key source is not without its limitations. Particularly glaring is the absence of the voice of Black women in this source as well as in much of the secondary material available. In *The Women’s Auxiliary* Black women were given the subservient role with the White women of the Auxiliary Services leading the way. The role of Black women during this war has been an ongoing theme in my research, a theme, which I have been unable to adequately address in this completed dissertation.

This dissertation does however place the gendered experiences of South African men and women within an international as well as colonial framework. It suggests that the Second World War was a period in South Africa’s history where there existed the potential for social change as the war not only laid bare existing tensions and schisms within South African society, it also forged unlikely alliances and presented new opportunities. South African society was in a state of flux where conclusions one could draw about gender were as myriad as the individuals involved in the war. During my attempt to interrogate gender, endeavours to pin it down led to it dissipating. In South Africa, and in many other parts of the globe, the era around World War II proved a high point of gender solidarity. The generation that came after this in postcolonial Africa, India and the West challenged gender roles as never before. The Second World War was a critical interregnum. To paraphrase Karl Marx, the old order was not yet dead, and the new could not yet be born. In interrogating gender roles from 1939 to 1945, the experience of modernity that Marx wrote about in another century, and to which writers like Berman return to analyse the twentieth century, is captured thus:
“All that is solid melts into air.” - Karl Marx.¹

List of Abbreviations

ANC – African National Congress
ATS – Auxiliary Territorial Service
CC – Cape Corps
CP/CPSA – Communist Party of South Africa
DCM – Distinguished Conduct Medal
FANY – First Aid Nursing Yeomanry
GI – General Infantryman
IMC – Indian and Malay Corps
NCO – Non-Commissioned Officer
NEAS – Non-European Army Services
NMC – Native Military Corps
OB – Ossewabrandwag
POW – Prisoner of War
RAF – Royal Air Force
RDLI – Royal Durban Light Infantry
SAMNS – South African Military Nursing Service
SAWAS – South African Women’s Auxiliary Services
SEALS – Sea, Air and Land Services
SWANS – South African Women’s Auxiliary Naval Service
UDF – Union Defence Force
WAA – Women’s Aviation Association
WAAS – Women’s Auxiliary Army Services
WAAF – Women’s Auxiliary Air Force
WAC – Women’s Auxiliary Corps
WADC – Women’s Auxiliary Defence Corps
WAMPC – Women’s Auxiliary Military Police Corps
WANS – South African Women’s Naval Service
WRENS – Women’s Royal Naval Services
Chapter One - Soldiers and Mothers

“‘It is a fine day, let us go out and kill something’ cries the typical male of certain races, instinctively. ‘There is a living thing, it will die if it is not cared for’, says the average woman, almost equally instinctively.” - Olive Schreiner

Olive Schreiner, from whom this quote originated, was a South African woman – one of the earlier proponents of feminism as is evident in her writings such as The Story of An African Farm, written when she was a twenty-one-year-old governess. Almost thirty years later other feminist thinkers heralded the publication of Women and Labour in 1911 – a work considered seminal in the context of international and South African feminism and which contributed much to the notion of Schreiner as an ardent campaigner for the rights of women:

By her own account, Schreiner decided as a “little child” that a woman owed it to herself to be financially independent, and much of her writing, inspired by a freethinking radicalism, was explicitly feminist in theme. Each of her three novels, though one was unfinished at the time of her death, dealt with the oppression of women in childhood, adolescence and marriage as she had observed or experienced in her own life.

The quote, with which I open the chapter, goes to the core of a number of themes that this dissertation will address. The most glaring theme captured by this quote is that of the gender roles allocated to men and women – roles that were both strengthened and yet, simultaneously weakened by the experience of war in the twentieth century. Two key qualifications of the men and women Schreiner refers to are significant – ‘typical’ and ‘average’, suggesting that although there may be men and women who feel differently to the allocated gender roles, they are the exception rather than the rule.

For the great majority of men and women of the twentieth century – and earlier – men took on the role of the fighters and defenders who fulfilled the unpleasant but necessary task of taking life, while women fulfilled the opposite function – which was if anything invested with as much, if not greater, nobility – as the bearers and nurturers of life.

By using the word ‘instinctively’ Schreiner moves beyond the socially constructed nature of gender roles placing them at the deeper level of biology. She thus gestures towards a well-established discourse by the turn of the nineteenth century linking biology to gender destiny. Men are the defenders and protectors due to their greater physical strength and rejection of the more feminine and softer traits of passivity and display of emotion, which along with the latter’s biological role in reproduction, make women the ideal caregivers. This form of reasoning becomes a convoluted interaction between nature and culture with the ultimate effect of entrenching gender roles. It creates a framework of appropriate behaviours of men and women through which all subsequent actions are seen. If Olive Schreiner’s views on male and female roles ended with this gendered portrait she would not be particularly worthy of singling out at the start of this thesis, which will focus on the Second World War in later chapters but which begins here with a series of arguments about women and war and the gendered roles embedded in war scenarios. Schreiner was an ardent feminist – and I will address her views on motherhood and waged labour for women later in this chapter.

Perhaps in South Africa because the notion of race retains such deep implications the phrase that stands out most is “…the typical male of certain races” which brings in an added dimension to the conventional notion of gender roles. The idea of people of other races and ethnicities not adhering to the proper modes of behaviour of civilised society – which in this instance are appropriate gender roles - was not unique to South Africa and could be found in any situation where interaction occurred between indigenous people and the dominant colonial power. Inevitably the former were found wanting by their colonisers in terms of the conventional social graces of the day, as well as in linguistic, class and religious senses, and this formed the basis of their subsequent treatment. An example of this treatment is to be found in the case of African American women serving in the Second World War in the Women’s Auxiliary Corps (WAC) who, upon asking for assistance with their luggage at a train station in Alabama, were told by the conductor: “I don’t handle baggage for Niggers.”

The southern part of the United States was noted for its polarised gender roles – the “Southern gentleman and lady” was an infamous and prevalent stereotype.

However, in this instance, an African-American woman due to her race was not considered a “lady” and the man was absolved of his role as “gentleman”.

In Evelyn Higginbotham’s discussion of race and gender in the United States, she demonstrates the way in which gender was inextricably linked to race and that this led to the perception of White women as being almost in opposition to that of Black women:

While law and public opinion idealized motherhood and enforced the protection of white women’s bodies, the opposite held true for black women’s.4

A similar process was evident within the colonial context in South Africa in the nineteenth century where Black women and, in particular, the sexuality of Black women, was perceived to be immoral and in opposition to the notion of civilisation hence the reason for the treatment meted out to Black women which stood in stark contrast to that of White “ladies”, the refined behaviour of the latter being one of the benchmarks of civilised society:

The black woman or young girl stood at the opposite end of the scale of civilisation, of order and control. In late-nineteenth century thought she was…the source of corruption and disease, her sexuality an icon for black sexuality in general, black sexuality in turn being an icon for deviant sexuality as a whole. This representation of black female sexuality had a strong South African component. The “Hottentot” woman, for example, during the nineteenth century became the epitome in European thinking of “primitive” sexuality…5

In the nineteenth century – and continuing in the twentieth century – race and gender, which also coincided with class in the case of Black women, brought with it a common perception of women where:

Woman was classed with the child and the primitive, and both femininity and savagery were seen to be pathological states and an arrested stage of development of the human species.6

For women of colour this was even more likely to be the situation – the idea of primitivism and savagery was enforced by a triple nexus of race, class and gender, the “triple oppression” of these women within the colonial context, which placed them at the furthest point in opposition to civilisation and accounts for the treatment meted

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out to African American women serving during the Second World War as well as Black women in South Africa. Their role in patriarchal societies, where White men stood at the apex of civilisation and control and White women were valued as “ladies”, placed Black women in a contrasting role. While considered female, they could never be considered “ladies” due to their race.

To return to Schreiner, the sentence “It is a fine day, let us go out and kill something” suggests a degree of callousness on the part of men toward killing and hence, war. The act of killing, as evident, in the quote, is a casual occurrence with little introspective emotion on the part of the killer. This is contrasted with the reverential attitude of the female speaker: “There is a living thing, it will die if it is not cared for.” This total contrast in perception of life is an indication of possibly the most ubiquitous set of gender roles over time and space – that of the mother and the soldier. The meanings of both and the way in which they are perceived change according to historical context – for instance the perception of the American soldier in Vietnam was in sharp contrast to the brave GI of World War Two. Similarly the idealised mother and housewife of much of the first half of the twentieth century was viewed in a different light in the radical sixties. Despite this however there remains in place an essential framework of “mother and soldier” that polarises men and women. I am heavily influenced here by the work of Jean Bethke Elshtain however her writing is largely based on studies in the United States. In this chapter, I adapt her work to the South African context with the additional dimensions of race and colonialism, which were – and to an extent still are – as significant in South African society.

In this chapter however, I argue that the dichotomy between mothers and soldiers was not as clear-cut as it may have appeared. The boundaries were – and to an extent still are - blurred and contentious, and highlight key arguments, both between feminists and conservatives, and amongst those within the feminist movement itself over the essential natures of men and women. It is a debate that came to the fore during the Second World War, as growing numbers of women were included in the Auxiliary Armed Forces and were conscripted into war industry and it is a debate that continues to be relevant today as is apparent in the current controversy over allowing women to engage in combat roles. Finally, it is a situation that affects both men and women as "the mother" and "the soldier" are often defined in terms of each other.
“The sexes became, to a degree, victims of the roles they had invented.”

The nineteenth century was a period of great transformation – which in a sense can be perceived as being similar to the “Computer Age” we live in now – developments in transportation and communication brought the world closer; the revolutions of the late eighteenth century in the United States and France had created a climate for political change. However the excesses of the French Revolution and the rapidity of change provoked a sense of insecurity particularly among the middle class professionals and the nineteenth century was a conservative reaction to this.

This is not to suggest that no social change occurred during this period. The nineteenth century was a period in which the suffragette movement reached its height, largely as a product of the adverse conditions brought about by the industrial revolution. Poor living conditions, poverty, disease and prostitution which directly affected the working class, led to a proliferation of reform movements, and brought with it the rise of the suffragettes:

The suffragette movements that developed in the industrial world in the second half of the nineteenth century were originally linked closely to the major social and political reform movements of that time, in which middle-class women played an active part – temperance, prison reform, “rescue work” among prostitutes, and, especially important in the United States, the anti-slavery campaign.

An ambiguity was evident in this wave of feminism – it was imbued with Victorian notions of morality and purity and the role of the Victorian middle-class woman as the guardian of this yet, simultaneously, these women were working in the public sphere – which had been taboo for women. The nineteenth century in the West was thus a period where women extended their role from the home to that of the public sphere, although the ideology behind this move remained the same. These middle class women were still perceived to be the receptacles of society’s morality, forming a counterpoint to the ills of industrial capitalist society. As well as being played out on the societal level, a similar process was evident in the home.

The nineteenth century was also a period of colonial expansion – the colonies brought with them a new definition of masculinity and race, with a subsequent impact on gender roles. According to McClintock control over the colonies by the metropole led to a resurrection of patriarchal authority with the White male as the embodiment of its power.\textsuperscript{11} In South Africa this was evident in the figure of the colonial administrator Theophilus Shepstone who perceived himself to be the “great white chief and father of the Zulu nation”. His construction as a patriarch of the Zulu nation impacted upon his role as administrator, making the two inextricable, and cementing his authority in Natal:

…Shepstone manipulated the invented traditions of fathers and kings simultaneously, constructing a racial hierarchy of power in which he could mimic allegiance to certain customs of Zulu chieftainship, while retaining for himself the “superior” status of father.\textsuperscript{12}

The convergence of patriarchy and race created a hierarchy where the White male stood at the apex, followed by the Black chief and women were relegated to the nether regions – here again a racial hierarchy was in operation as Black women held the very lowest position on the social ladder.

Between the White and Black women of the colonies there existed great distance – in South Africa the two came into contact due to the latter working as domestic servants in the employ of the former. The close proximity of the two, rather than creating a sense of common identification based on their shared womanhood, instead led to a proliferation of racial stereotypes, which were deeply entrenched, despite any evidence that may have been to the contrary:

Yet she [the wife of settler John Ross] perceived Africans generally and servants specifically as lazy, often stupid, lacking in initiative, grasping, careless and ungrateful.\textsuperscript{13}

In an account written by a settler woman in West Africa the gap between Black women and their White counterparts was highlighted:

“My mode of life was outwardly so different among from theirs that common womanhood failed to make a point of contact.” She pointed to a similar feeling of

\textsuperscript{12} McClintock. “Maidens, maps and mines.” p109-110.
difference among the African women, some of whom persisted in calling her Baba, which was expressive of this sense of difference.¹⁴

The term demonstrating the chasm between White settler women and Black women was that of Baba which means “father”. It suggested a perception on the part of Black women of the greater power of White women in society in comparison to their own. White women were equated with the power of men and of patriarchal authority which lay so far beyond the realm of Black women that the latter did not even perceive the common element of gender.

The role of White women in the home was extended to the colonial context – her position as the guardian of morality and purity within the home and even within domestic society, took on an added implication in the colonies – she was now the guardian of the race:

The white home became the arena in which white children were socialised not only into their gender roles, as little men and little women, but also into their roles as members of the ruling group…white women were custodians of “civilised values”, icons to the ideology of racial superiority, to be revered, protected and firmly controlled by their men.¹⁵

The position of White women as the benchmark of White civilisation lent itself to the notion of the defence of these women by White men against encroaches of primitive Black men. These women were the symbols of racial superiority and civilisation and an attack by a Black man was perceived to be an attack on the White race itself.¹⁶ Co-existing with this was the role of White men as the patriarchal defenders of the womenfolk. In Robert Morrell’s dissertation on White settlers in Natal, he writes of the emergence of the swart gevaar¹⁷ in the aftermath of the Bambatha rebellion of 1906 where men took up weapons in order to protect White women from the ravages of Black men:

White women provided a symbol of the most valuable property known to White man and it was to be protected from the ever-encroaching and disrespectful black man at all costs.¹⁸

¹⁷ Roughly translated, this means “Black Peril” in Afrikaans and refers to the perceived threat presented by Black men. It emerges in particular points in South African history.
White women in the colonies were therefore symbolic of an ideology of colonial and racial domination, and control of their bodies formed the physical point at which these struggles played out.

It is within this tumultuous context of race, class and gender, both internally and in the colonies that the control of sexuality and the severity of gender roles reached its zenith. The modern age brought with it great possibilities for the future yet the chaos wrought by change created a nostalgia for the past – an ambiguity that was embodied in gender:

Women are represented as the atavistic and authentic “body” of national tradition (inert, backward-looking, and natural)...embodying nationalism’s conservative principle of continuity. Men, by contrast, represent the progressive agent of national modernity (forward-thrusting, potent and historic), embodying nationalism’s progressive, or revolutionary principle of discontinuity.19

This was exemplified in the distinction between the public and the private, nature and culture.

According to Sherry Ortner, a universal in societies through space and time is the perception of women as inferior in comparison to men. This perception of inferiority often takes the form of exclusion of women from upper echelons of society such as religion or politics as well as the view of women’s activities as being of secondary importance to those of men.20 Simultaneously all cultures create a distinction between “culture” (acting on the environment) and "nature" (given by birth):

Every culture, or, generically, “culture,” is engaged in the process of generating and sustaining systems of meaningful forms (symbols, artefacts, etc.) by means of which humanity transcends the givens of natural existence, bends them to its purposes, controls them in its interest. We may thus broadly equate culture with the notion of human consciousness, or with the products of human consciousness (i.e., systems of thought and technology), by means of which humanity attempts to assert control over nature.21

Progress is the defining feature of civilisation and of modern society – the use of technology and belief systems to shape the environment – building cities, skyscrapers and highways to traverse long distances, cables to facilitate global communication, the nation state to hold together groups of people sharing certain similarities,

ideologies of democracy, capitalism, socialism and even fascism working with religion to help penetrate the mysteries of the world around. Culture is therefore perceived to be superior to nature – it is an attempt to assert domination over the natural world, the distinction between humankind and the beasts.

How then do women become associated with nature? According to Ortner, key to this are women’s bodies and their reproductive ability. Aspects of female physiology such as menstruation and childbirth, bringing with them pain, discomfort and even death, tie women more closely to biology than men, leaving the latter free to engage in more cultural pursuits while confining the former to their biological role to a greater extent.\(^\text{22}\) The biological role of bearing children becomes a social one of raising children. After giving birth she is additionally tied to her offspring by lactation. The bond between the two is then extended after weaning:

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\text{…children beyond infancy are not strong enough to engage in major work, yet are mobile and unruly and not capable of understanding various dangers; they thus require supervision and constant care. Mother is the obvious person for this task, as an extension of her natural nursing bond with the children…Her own activities are thus circumscribed by the limitations and low levels of her children’s strengths and skills: she is confined to the domestic family group; “woman’s place is in the home.”}\(^\text{23}\)
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In addition women are believed to psychically different to men – thinking in terms of the more concrete while men are perceived to be more abstract and distant. Once again this is related to the role of women in raising children – girls adopt the appropriate gender role due to direct interaction with the mother whereas boys’ identification with the father is based on a more abstract vision of “maleness” often due to the distance of the latter from childcare and the home.\(^\text{24}\) The biological, social and even mental functions of women are thus closely intertwined – the social role follows from the biological, thus linking them with the instinctual and the natural.

Although nature is to culture as woman is to man, this is by no means the only dichotomy falling under the auspices of nature vs. culture. Under the industrial revolution there was the rural vs. the urban, the working class vs. the middle class; under colonialism there was the savage vs. civilisation, Black vs. White. Culture can

be seen as the middle class White male, forming the epitome of civilisation in contrast to the “others” who are confined to the realm of nature – women, other races, the working class. The rise of industrialism and the growth of cities were representative of technological change and civilisation. The colonies represented the penetration of the White man into the “heart of darkness” bringing the light of civilisation to primitives. The middle class male was symbolic of culture, refinement and learning in contrast to the working class rabble. The public sphere, in which men worked, was the realm of civilisation – business, learning and technology – culture. The private sphere on the other hand was the realm of nature where women gave birth to and raised children.

It is within this context that the Victorian army became regulated and subject to greater discipline and isolation from the rest of society. This army in turn exerted a massive impact on two thirds of the globe and shaped military and other institutions (such as bureaucracies) the colonised world over. Prior to the emergence of the homosocial Victorian Army in Europe, women had played a key role in military life:

> Women have always been involved with the military...women’s involvement in wartime and peacetime armies is not simply a twentieth-century phenomenon. From classical and medieval times women have accompanied soldiers at home and abroad, performing vital work. From the eighteenth century as armies began to assume greater control over their support services so the role of non-combatants declined.\(^25\)

The distinction between the public and the private was fraught with ambiguity and tension. The home, although associated with nature, was not wholly perceived as negative. Similarly the cities and their connotations with civilisation were not regarded as wholly positive. The growth of capitalism and the rise of big business brought with it materialism and acquisitiveness in the public sphere:

> The innocence and simple virtues of country people were typically expressed through the simple, unaffected sentiment of women...The “light” and civilisation of city culture were symbols of the male capacity for abstract thought and intellectual genius. The negative side of urban life was often expressed in terms of exploitative domination and economic competition – metaphors of masculinity.\(^26\)

To counteract this, the home was perceived to be everything the public sphere was not – the receptacle of the morality of society. With the sexual division of labour and the


subsequent relegation of women to the private sphere, women became the guardians of this morality. The civilising mission of women lay not in the progress of culture but in their upholding of the natural and moral order:

Women lay down the first foundations of natural laws. The first founder of a human society was a mother of a family. They are scattered among men to remind them above all that they are men, and to uphold, despite political laws, the fundamental laws of nature...  

This idealisation of women extended largely to the middle and upper classes and the greater majority of working class women fell outside the ideal, as did Black women. In the colonies attitudes toward subordinate racial groups were modelled on similar perceptions of the lower classes in Britain and the two groups were given the same attributes of “irresponsibility, immaturity, excitability and emotionalism”.

This Victorian ideal meant that women were given the moral higher ground and the home became the place where men could restore their own morality after the corrupting effect of working in the public sphere:

'The perfection of womanhood...is the wife and mother, the center of the family, the magnet that draws man to the domestic altar, that makes him a civilized being, a social Christian. The wife is truly the light of the home.'

Christianity and morality went hand-in-hand with the civilising mission as was evident in the instructions given to converted African women by Christian missionaries on the Witwatersrand:

Sweep and clean the house every day. Keep your things and your family clean and good. If you have children teach them the Christian faith. Do not let them run naked.

The moral role of women in British society was extended to the colonies where they were given the task of teaching African women the civilising attributes of Christianity, cleanliness and the proper upbringing of the family. The sentence commanding women not to let their children “run naked” is particularly important, as clothing was perceived to be the distinction between the civilised Christian and the heathen. African mothers were also encouraged by Christian women’s organisations

27 Jordanova. Sexual Visions. p34.
such as the Anglican women’s society to police the sexuality of their daughters.\textsuperscript{31} This was in line with the contemporary situation in British society where public morality was equated with sexual purity and it fell to these African women to instil in their daughters so-called proper norms for moral behaviour – a morality that had been imported from the metropole.\textsuperscript{32} The Victorian perception of women restricted them to the role of wife, mother and guardian of the nation’s morality – albeit a role that was extended beyond the home to society and to the colonial world – and women “who failed to live up to this divine mission might be labelled a whore.”\textsuperscript{33} Far from being in opposition to civilisation, the identification of women with nature when associated with morality was a big part of the civilising mission.

For the Victorian woman the highest form of duty was as a mother – the nurturer of the next generation. In a society concerned with material excess and moral decay – associated with the capitalist male - the self-sacrificing, noble ideal of the mother figure who lived to raise her children and ensure the morality of her home was seen as a form of redemption of society. Motherhood was seen as the defining experience in the life of any woman and I would suggest was considered the key civic duty of women – their most important contribution to society:

Woman as mother seemed to offset man’s weak points. If he was selfish, she was self-sacrificing, risking her life to give life each time she bore a child. Where the male was acquisitive, the female was nurturing, giving of herself and her time to the household.\textsuperscript{34}

In a similar vein men were subject to gender stereotypes. In contrast to the role of the acquisitive capitalist was the figure of the noble soldier. Despite the pervasive nature of this stereotype – which continues to exert a powerful hold over the popular imagination today – prior to the regulation of the Victorian army, soldiering was perceived to be a low form of employment and the life of soldiers was seen to be a poor second to the ideal domestic vision of men as husbands and fathers.\textsuperscript{35} However, by the mid-nineteenth century, the soldier was venerated in a similar manner to the mother as a figure willing to sacrifice his life for his country and comrades:

\textsuperscript{31} Gaitskell. “Devout domesticity?” p259.
\textsuperscript{33} Adams. The Great Adventure. p7.
\textsuperscript{34} Adams. The Great Adventure. p6.
The capitalist was often pictured as selfish, putting private gain before public good. One antidote was the ministering mother figure. Another was the soldier, because the soldier, like a mother, put the good of others before his own life. In theory, his acts were essentially unselfish and in the interests of a cause greater than his own material well-being.  

For middle class boys in British and American private schools as well as military academies, masculinity was constructed in terms of military values – honour, duty and self-sacrifice as well as the placing of emphasis on the group above “selfish” individual material pursuits. The notion of unquestioning obedience was stressed as was “fitting in”:

'It [the school system] is inclined to destroy individuality, to turn out a fixed pattern; it wishes to take everyone, no matter what his tastes or ideas might be, and make him conform to its own ideals.'

In addition physical activities were given preference over intellectual pursuits as the former emphasised both the group and an acquiescence to higher authority whereas the latter was often viewed with suspicion and “‘clever men’ [were] seen as outsiders who ‘because of their cleverness are probably dishonourable and possibly cowardly.’” To raise a generation of soldiers it was preferred that men be little given to introspection which would make them inefficient killers and question authority.

A similar process was evident in the colony of Natal where the boys of schools such as Hilton and Maritzburg College were trained as cadets in preparation for their entry into the world of the military as is evident in a speech given at the unveiling of a memorial to the fallen of the First World War at Maritzburg College in 1924:

The boys of the College have always taken a high place in the cadet movement, in shooting, and in every form of physical training, and with such record it is not surprising that the school afforded a large number of recruits…They (the fallen) serve as examples of bravery and devotion to a great cause, and they help to cultivate the spirit of loyalty and sense of duty which must have its effect on the future manhood of the country…

It is clear that little emphasis was placed on academic pursuits – instead sport with its stress on physical fitness and teamwork against a defined opposition was given priority. The activities of these schools helped foster a link between the schools,

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voluntary organisations and finally, the army creating a “seamless web between boyhood and adulthood”.40

The emphasis on sport helped create team camaraderie and created a male-only world where women were relegated to distant roles:

Leading activities included rugby, polo, cricket, American football, hunting and shooting. Games provided physical exercise. But they also divided the leisured and privileged from the workers. They excluded women from a self-sufficient male milieu. And they gave meaning and sharpness to lives which often had little focus.41

To a large extent sport helped prepare men for a life in the military – other than fostering male camaraderie, bloodsports such as hunting accustomed men to the kill and the greater the number of hunting trophies the greater the physical prowess and the masculinity of the individual. And men in turn equated war with a game and the killing of the enemy with hunting, which desensitised men to death.42

The symbol of sport also led to a perception of the enemy as being reduced to that of an opposing team – it diminishes the reality of war, giving it the status of a game. In Natal for instance, the settlers were in perpetual conflict with Zulu communities north and south of the Tugela. Portraying the latter as members of a rival team British soldiers trivialised their conflict and the reasons behind it:

The metaphor of the team was particularly efficacious when a rival team could be invoked. In the colonial context, the Zulu army conveniently provided opposition. Admiration for the other team was frequently expressed: during the 1879 war the “dash, élan and fearlessness of Zulu warriors was widely admired”.43

Simultaneously the enemy was dehumanised – the metaphor of the team was effective in creating a simple dichotomy of “us” against “them”, essentialising the two groups and making unlikely any interaction beyond that of conflict and hostility. Within the colonial context the process of “othering” was even more pronounced – faced with people who appeared different socially, culturally and even physically, the settlers demonised the Zulu making the categories of “us” and “them” even more rigid.44

With the training of boys in schools and men in the military itself, two features stand out. The first is an idea of masculinity that meant a complete rejection of women – the Victorian conception of moral and physical purity meant that young men were to a large extent expected to be celibate as sexuality was a corrupting influence thus, as demonstrated by the literature of the time, “heroes are clean-cut, tough but sportsmanlike, they eschew money and women.” Therefore the concept of masculine behaviour at the time was a rejection of the twin evils of materialism and a loss of control, particularly in terms of sexuality.

At the same time the idealised figure of the mother played a great role in the psyche of the military man. Her role as the guardian of the home and the absence of the father from the home environment due to the latter’s role in the public sphere meant that the mother was a key component in the lives of her children. When boys were eventually sent away to public school to offset the female influence these schools subscribed to then same cult of motherhood – her reverence and idealisation. By holding on to the notion of mothers as pure but distant figures, men were often unable to form attachments with “real” women and often merely reinforced the all-male environment which continued in the army, leading in some cases, to overt demonstrations of masculinity. Many renowned fighting men often cited the importance of their mothers:

Distance from women could come from their inability to measure up to the idealized mother figure; from a rejection of sexual thoughts about women which, for mother-fixated men, could be incestuous; and from a fear that closeness to the mother meant the son was effeminate. A man might reject women and seek out males to reinforce his sense of masculinity. Perhaps some officers who idolized their mothers needed to affirm their maleness through killing.

The defence of the home, women and children has often been cited as the key reason motivating men to go to war and the medieval notion of chivalry enjoyed revival in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Men going off to fight saw themselves as knights in armour saving the damsel in distress and women became the objects of male chivalry. Despite women being the key pretext for fighting they still remained distant as the objects of chivalry, rather than as beings in their own right and for many men “Dying for a woman is a more satisfying imaginative resolution than living with

her.” The romanticism of knighthood and chivalry also signalled a turning away from the modern era to an idealized past and this refusal to acknowledge the effects of technology is perhaps a key reason that the men of World War One undertook suicidal charges over trenches and barbed wire and were mown down in their hundreds of thousands. It was also a means of asserting an individual role of honour and glory within the context of an anonymous inglorious death made possible by the technology of the twentieth century.

Within the colonial framework fighting in defence of women took on racial overtones – it was a defence of White women and civilisation against savagery. The all-male institutions of the commando and the army mobilised for what they perceived to be attacks on the virtue and purity of White women by Black men. From the school system to the army these men were kept isolated from the world of women, engaging in sport, hunting and military drill. However, it was these women – with whom they had little common ground – that formed the main pretext for their fighting. It was therefore not the real figures of women for which they mobilised but the idealisation of the mother, the sister and the wife and their representation of White civilisation in the “heart of darkness”.

By the twentieth century therefore as the civic duty of women was to bear and nurture children, similarly the civic duty of men was to fight for home and country:

The woman who, whether from cowardice, from selfishness, from having a false and vacuous ideal shirks her duty as wife and mother, earns the right to our contempt, just as does the man who, from any motive, fears to do his duty in battle when the country calls him.

In addition battle and war were the ultimate test of a man’s masculinity and became the defining and life-changing experience of his life as childbirth was for women. Both men and women thus found themselves placed within the confining roles of soldiers and mothers where little alternative was to be had. These were not simply placed upon them but both were active in constructing their respective roles and this emphasis on the difference of their experience served to alienate them from each other and little common ground was evident:

Some males and females came to see each other not only as different but as alien species, who thought oddly, acted peculiarly, and couldn’t be trusted. The sexes became, to a degree, victims of the roles they had invented.51

Men within the context of private schools and the military itself formed all-male groups based on sport, war and violence and, at the same time, women turned to each other for companionship and friendship. In Carol Smith-Rosenburg’s study of middle class women in nineteenth century America, she demonstrates the strong emotional ties women formed with each other based on their shared experiences:

The roles of daughter and mother shaded imperceptibly and ineluctably into each other, while the biological realities of frequent pregnancies, childbirth, nursing, and menopause bound women together in physical and emotional intimacy…a specifically female world did indeed develop, a world built around a generic and unselfconscious pattern of single-sex or homosocial networks.52

These female relationships were almost inevitable due to the taboo against the interaction between the two genders outside the confines of marriage, the separation of the spheres where men were confined to a world of school and the military and the similar confinement of women to biology and its social and psychic implications. Thus both men and women remained distant figures in the mind of the other.

“The Sacrifice of Youth in the Cause of Freedom”

In central Durban there is a war memorial which I pass every day – flanked by two stone statues of snarling lions a stone figure of a man wearing a greatcoat lies with his hat upon his breast and above this is a rendition of a figure being lifted up by two angels. The inscription reads:

Except a corn of wheat
Fall into the ground and die
It abideth alone.
But if it die
It bringeth forth much fruit.

The monument is dedicated to the fallen of the First and Second World Wars and on days of remembrance, wreaths are placed at its foot. It is indicative of a common theme – the glory of a life lost in battle fighting for freedom and the greater good.

In September 1945, after a heated debate in Parliament, which highlighted the schism within White party politics, South Africa entered the war on the side of the Allies. The men of the Union Defence Force – all of them volunteers – acquitted themselves well in East and North Africa fighting alongside their Canadian, Australian and British counterparts and, at the defeat at Tobruk, thousands of South African soldiers lost their lives and many more were taken prisoner. Their contribution to the war effort was recognised at a victory parade held in London in 1946, celebrating the defeat of fascism and the bravery of the men and women of the Empire.

The emphasis of the monument dedicated to fallen soldiers and the many like it, is not on the harsh reality of war – painful, inglorious and often messy death – or, in fact, an acknowledgement of the soldier as aggressor, but focuses instead on the role of the soldier as noble defender whose contribution lies not in victory over the enemy but in making the highest sacrifice of all – his life, be it for the nation or for his compatriots:

…he [Man] constructs himself as one who places highest value not on killing but on dying – dying for others, to protect them, sacrificing himself so that others might live.53

With the notion of heroic self-sacrifice comes that of youth. As I have mentioned earlier war became the test of manhood for the youth of the British and American public schools. Two features are key here – the first is the notion of age as corrupt – the old men as symbolic of capitalist excess and moral decay. The converse is that of youth – the young soldier sacrificing for public good, and life lost in the full bloom of youth retains its idealistic character and resistance to the decay of age.54 There is almost a sense of envy present on the part of the survivors towards those who have died:

They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old:  
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.  
At the going down of the sun and in the morning  
We will remember them.55

Simultaneously with the preference of a heroic death in the full bloom of youth came the desire to not be maimed in war, as this would be a blow to manhood. The

romanticism of a war wound paled before the reality and in John Steinbeck’s moving account of a wounded soldier in World War Two, the fears of the injured are captured. A character thinks:

My wife knows I was hurt. She doesn’t know how bad. She knows I’m going to get well all right and come home, but – she must be thinking pretty hard. I got to get that hand working. She wouldn’t like a cripple with a hand that wouldn’t work.\textsuperscript{56}

The irony of the above lies in the notion of war as the ultimate test of masculinity yet the strong possibility of debilitating injury brings with it a threat to that selfsame masculinity. In addition the perception of the soldier’s masculinity depended greatly on his wife – the quote does not merely suggest his fear of not being a “whole man” but instead gives a strong indication that he was more concerned with his wife’s reaction. His fear was further compounded by his wife’s recruitment into wartime industry, which challenged his pre-existing role as the breadwinner and indicated his uncertainty and insecurity about the changes occurring on the home front.\textsuperscript{57}

The fear felt by men who had been injured in the line of duty was a common one. A South African nurse, Captain Madeleine van Straaten, who was stationed at hospital in Bari, Italy and responsible for the care of injured German prisoners of war as well as Allied soldiers, described the feelings of a pilot who had had his legs and pelvis broken in an air crash:

The hospital ship \textit{Amra} was leaving, and he was due to go on it. The day before he left he said to me: “Sister, I don’t want to go home.” “Why not?” I asked. He said: “What am I going to do if my little girl says ‘Daddy, pick me up’ and I can’t pick her up?” They were so afraid of going home broken. It nearly broke my heart sometimes.\textsuperscript{58}

Here masculinity was linked to his role as a father and he perceived his physical injuries as weakness and an inability to be a strong male figure. Linked with this was the fear of the reaction on the part of is daughter to a changed and “no longer whole” father.

Towards the end of the war, the apprehension felt on the home front at the prospect of men returning wounded both physically and psychologically made itself felt in the

\textsuperscript{56} John Steinbeck. \textit{Once There was a War}. (London: Pan Books Ltd, 1975) p90.
\textsuperscript{57} Steinbeck. \textit{Once There was a War}. p90.
increasing numbers of articles written in publications such as the widely read South African war magazine, *The Women’s Auxiliary* where women were given advice on how to behave towards the men returning from the front lines. Despite the home front being a hub of social change from the onset of war with men leaving for the front lines, women taking up positions in industry, rations, blackouts and the omnipresent fear of enemy invasion, it was presented as a stable, unchanging world in comparison to the experience of men on the front lines:

> Apart from the normal alterations of Army life, the separation from our polite tea-cup level of entertaining, he may come back with a harsh view of the world which stood by while he and his like went in and fought. He may have suffered that strange neurosis which is associated with long captivity. He may come back longing to wallow in luxury, or despising it completely.\(^{59}\)

Women were expected to compensate for the effects of war on their husbands by providing a stable environment, allowing him to recuperate. The end of the war was not perceived to be the time when women could assert their newfound independence as breadwinners and household heads:

> What every husband desires when he returns is peace and security, and his wife alone can give him that, physically and mentally. At heart most women are “yes women,” and this is the one occasion when wives can fulfil the role of comforter. Their own worries must wait till he is at peace.\(^{60}\)

Thus to counteract the insecurity that men may have felt on returning to the home front after years away, which may have been compounded by physical or psychological injury, women were expected to maintain a deferential stance to soothe jangled nerves. The notion that women were naturally “yes women,” suggests that their role as comforter was in line with their natural inclinations. The changes made in the home for the duration of the war were therefore not expected to last beyond that period – there was a desire for a return to the pre-war status quo to compensate for the experiences of men on the front lines.

War provided the opportunity to test the individual’s masculinity but it was battle that became the rite of passage. Battle brought home the reality of war, challenging pre-existing archaic notions of knighthood and chivalry. It is perhaps the war poetry composed by the soldiers of the First World War which does much to adequately

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convey the horror of twentieth century warfare with its hallmark of mass, anonymous destruction and death. Men like Siegfried Sassoon and, in particular, Wilfred Owen – himself killed in the trenches of the First World War - whose *Dulce Et Decorum Est* became a classic in the annals of war protest poetry, challenged the idealisation of war. Owen’s *Anthem for Doomed Youth* defied the public school ideal of the glory of heroic young deaths in battle:

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What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?
-Only the monstrous anger of the guns.
Only the stuttering rifles’ rapid rattle
Can patter out their hasty orisons.
No mockeries now for them; no prayers nor bells;
Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs,-
The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells;
And bugles calling for them from sad shires.61
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Despite the experience of World War I which was a demonstration of war at its worst, the perception of war as the opportunity for individual glory and the myth of chivalry and knighthood retained as powerful a hold as ever and in Steinbeck’s description of American soldiers in London during the Second World War, a similar image is evoked albeit mediated by the author’s cynicism:

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Soldiers have paraded in London, men who marched like clothed machines, towering men, straight as their own rifles and their hands swinging – at home, the knights of this and that in wilted ostrich-plumed hats, in uniforms out of the mothballs again, knights who were butchers last evening, and clerks and tellers of the local bank, but knights now, out of step, shambling after their great banner, their tinsel swords at all angles over their shoulders, the knights of this and that.62
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Thus, despite the reality of war, the idealism and imagery of glory retained its hold on popular consciousness and was very much in evidence during the Second World War – and, to an extent, is still in evidence today.

As I have mentioned earlier, the experience of battle became the life-changing experience for those involved, shattering the glorification of war – if not for the public, at least for the soldiers in the midst of it. The extreme nature of battle – the fear, fatigue and omnipresent danger to life is said to be so far beyond the conventional realm of experience that there exists no adequate vocabulary to convey

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62 Steinbeck. *Once There was a War*. p48
the experience to those who were not part of it. For Steinbeck the experience in terms of the extremes of emotion, the physical discomfort and the constant bombardment to the senses by explosions and gunfire, led to a capsizing of norms of reality:

…all kinds of emphases change. Even the instinct for self-preservation is dulled so that a man may do things which are called heroic when actually his whole fabric of reaction is changed. The whole world becomes unreal…During this time a kind man is capable of great cruelties and a timid man of great bravery, and nearly all men have resistance to stresses beyond their ordinary ability.

At the end of the battle a haziness falls over the events itself – Steinbeck suggests that this was a kind of amnesia and an inability to talk about the battle itself.

This experience of battle, which cannot be shared with others on the home front, leads to a reinforcement of male camaraderie. It is a rite of passage that cannot be communicated to those who did not experience it – the participant has been changed forever and, while disillusioned about the idealistic nature of war, is aware of his own status as someone who has successfully survived the trial by fire and emerged as a member of an exclusive club from which noncombatants – often women – have been excluded. Thus battle, while destroying myths of war, at the same time reinforces a masculine identity based on shared experience, which is unable to be communicated to those who did not participate, and often a form of resentment is present when returning soldiers are presented with an idealisation of war, which they know to be false. Siegfried Sassoon’s *Glory of Women* reinforces a gap between soldiers and the women on the home front whose experiences were widely divergent:

You love us when we’re heroes, home on leave,
Or wounded in a mentionable place.
You worship decorations; you believe
That chivalry redeems the war’s disgrace.
You make us shells. You listen with delight,
By tales of dirt and danger fondly thrilled.
You crown our distant ardours while we fight,
And mourn our laurelled memories when we’re killed.
You can’t believe that British troops ‘retire’
When hell’s last horror breaks them, and they run,
Trampling the terrible corpses – blind with blood.
O German mother dreaming by the fire,
While you are knitting socks to send your son
His face is trodden deeper in the mud.

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64 Steinbeck. *Once There was a War*. p163.
65 Steinbeck. *Once There was a War*. p164.
Mothers and Soldiers

Two perceptions of women dominate – but are not solely confined to – Western thought. The division of women into two essentialised categories: the seductive temptress, or the mother-nurturer, life-giver and guardian of morality, can be traced back to early Judeo-Christian mythology. This bifurcated vision is however not solely a feature of the West. In India during the struggle for independence the role of the women within the private sphere took on deeper implications for the fight against the colonial authorities by Indian nationalists. The public sphere in relation to the private sphere was as the West to Indian culture. The public sphere was the arena of Indian men and the colonial authorities where Indians received Western education and training and adopted Western thought – here Western technology and principles were believed to be superior to that of the East and it was necessary for Indian nationalists to adopt this Western belief system to interact with the coloniser on an equal footing. The private sphere on the other hand was the realm of the spiritual – of Indian culture and religion, presided over by the Hindu woman. It was in the arena of the spiritual that the East demonstrated its superiority to the West and women were given the responsibility of maintaining the spirituality of the home, taking part in prayers, wearing traditional dress and inculcating the values and traditions of Hinduism in their offspring. It was essential that the private sphere remained impervious to colonial influence, as it was here that Indians believed their true identity lay. Thus the women who stood in contrast to the moral guardians of Hindu culture and tradition in the home were those who adopted Western belief systems. In the Indian context the role of women in the private sphere therefore took on the added connotation of resistance to colonialism.67

The dual perception of women as either seductive temptress or guardians of morality, became a distinction of race in the colonies of Africa, Asia and even the United States. White women were the receptacles of purity and Black women their opposite:

…an enormous division [existed] between black people and white people on the “scale of humanity”: carnality as opposed to intellect and/or spirit; savagery as

opposed to civilization; deviance as opposed to normality; promiscuity as opposed to purity; passion as opposed to passionless. The black woman came to symbolize…an “icon for black sexuality in general”.68

The historian of gender and empire, Anne Stoler, describes the changes apparent after the arrival of large numbers of European women to the colonies after the initial cohabitation of European men and indigenous women where a distinction was drawn between the passionless, moral European women “who were rarely the object of European male desire”69 and the indigenous women. The latter were perceived to be “inherently dangerous, passionate, and evil…”70 and their interaction with European men would lead to racial degeneration. Their “loose” sexuality was contrasted with that of the moral European woman and the role of the latter was to protect hapless European men from the tempting advances of these “dusky sirens”:

A man remains a man as long as he stays under the watch of a woman of his race.71

In the colonial world therefore White women were allocated the role of protecting European men from indigenous women and ensuring racial purity by preventing miscegenation and bearing the children of pure race.

It is with the view of women as the guardian of morality, mother and life-giver with which I am concerned for the purposes of this chapter as it is the role of life-giver, which it was argued makes women inherently pacifist and places them in opposition to their male counterparts – soldiers:

Wars are nothing short of rituals of organized killing presided over by men deemed ‘the best’…Women are the bearers of lifeloving energy. Ours is the task of deepening that passion for life and separating from all that threatens life, all that diminishes life, becoming who we are as women.72

This perception of women – shared by both men and women – was used by patriarchal society to confine women to the private sphere away from the corrupting influences of the public sphere – government, commerce – and they were defined almost exclusively in terms of their reproductive role.73 It is here that there appears a similarity between the restriction of women to the private sphere and the public

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70 Stoler. “Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power.” p78.
71 Stoler. “Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power.” p80.
school and subsequent military school training of young men in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As I have mentioned earlier in this chapter, young men were expected to pay no heed to the material and capitalist world of their fathers, turning instead to embrace a world filled with archaic notions of chivalry and glory, hoping for a heroic death where life would not entail the corrupting influence of the public sphere. Thus just as the domestic environment was the private sphere of women, so too did the public school and military form a type of private sphere for men, shielding them from the capitalist age.

The heart of the emphasis on the reproductive role of women is childbirth – literally, the creation of life. The experience of childbirth – the discomfort, the euphoria, is itself a rite of passage for women. It connects women who have undergone the same experience and isolates those who have not. Part of this stems from the inability to adequately communicate and express the experience, both to those women who have not undergone it and, especially to men. Like the experience of battle, childbirth is gender specific:

…mothers find themselves…frustrated in their attempt to express the burdens and joys of mothering to others (most often men). Women are excluded from war talk; men, from baby talk.74

The world described by Carroll Smith-Rosenberg in her writing on the close-knit relationships formed by middle-class women in nineteenth-century America, highlights the bond shared by these women based on their common experiences such as pregnancy, childbirth and nursing – their biological role as mothers.75 This social grouping excluded men due to the separation of the world of the public and the private:

It was a world inhabited by children and by other women. Women helped each other with domestic chores and times of sickness, sorrow or trouble. Entire days, even weeks, might be spent almost exclusively with other women.76

It was here that the experience of childbirth could be shared among women who had experienced the same. In a sense these groups functioned in a similar manner to organisations of ex-soldiers taking part in reunions and relating war stories to other men who had either been there or experienced similar events. It was socialisation

74 Elshtain. Women and War. p225
within gendered groups based on the experiences that defined them – mothering and soldiering.

However, not all women are included in “baby talk” or all men in “war talk” either. Being a member of either soldiers or mothers necessarily involves the rite of passage, battle or childbirth respectively. Both bear tremendous ideological significance. The perception of war as a male rite of passage is evident in recruiting slogans such as “The army will make a man out of you” and men who do not participate remain outsiders, perhaps questioning their own masculinity:

> Although only a minority of men actually serve in the military…all men are marked by the warfare system and the military virtues. We all wonder: Am I a man? Could I kill…Would you think more or less of me if I had undergone the baptism of fire?77

In a similar vein the experience of childbirth is often perceived as synonymous with femininity – the historic rejection of women who are barren, the present concern with the ability of women to juggle a career and raise children and the modern catchphrase “the ticking biological clock” all reflect a deep rooted sense of what it means to be a women. In some instances this may be even stronger than the “soldier complex” – the popularity of war may fluctuate but the biological drive to propagate the species remains constant, although the social context may be subject to change.

The experience of childbirth and battle, even as they enforce the distinction between the genders78, bear certain similarities to each other. The first, as I have mentioned earlier, is an inability to communicate the experience. This may be due to the lack of an adequate vocabulary to express the experience or may simply be a form of protective amnesia – a common belief is that many women do not remember the act of giving birth with any great clarity; a certain haziness prevails as with soldiers in battle:

> The next day [after battle] the memory slips farther, until very little is left at all. A woman is said to feel the same way when she tries to remember what childbirth was like…Perhaps all experience which is beyond bearing is that way. The system provides the shield and then removes the memory, so that a woman can have another child and a man can go into combat again.79

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78 At present women are still not allowed combat roles in the military, despite the expansion of their duties, so the experience of battle in a formal sense is still a male domain.
79 Steinbeck. *Once There was a War.* p164.
Motherhood, like war, has behind it a history of social construction – it does not exist in a vacuum but within a complex set of beliefs, which vary over time and space: 

Mothering is a social relation, much like fathering, judging, or ruling, whose meaning and organization must be understood within a complex social whole.80 

While the act of giving birth is an experience unique to the individual, it is at the same time a cultural and societal construct. For instance, the act of giving birth in a maternity ward, doctors, epidurals, natural childbirth, prenatal classes, even postpartum depression, are features which are common to the Western experience of childbirth. In other cultures different factors come to the fore such as the use of midwives instead of doctors. However the common element is the combination of a unique experience within an already existing societal framework.

In addition to the physical experience of childbirth comes the ideology of being a mother. The word “motherhood” has certain connotations, which are deeply hegemonic – the notion of caring, loving and nurturing, which I spoke of earlier is one of the most enduring features of being a mother. By completing the rite of passage of childbirth, the new mother has entered into this world and is expected to conform to certain norms and standards of behaviour. In addition mothers in society are given a certain elevated, idealised status to which women are expected to adhere.

The status of the mother is very much dependent on the context – although the ideology of motherhood appears timeless and crossing all boundaries. For instance, in the colonial context of which Ann Stoler writes, the offspring of the union between European men and indigenous women were perceived to be the harbingers of racial degeneration – these mothers were not revered. On the other hand the reproductive role of European women in the colonies was symbolic of the purity of the race and the imperial power:

Whites had to guard their ranks – in qualitative and quantitative terms – to increase their numbers and to ensure that their members blurred neither the biological nor political boundaries on which their power rested.81 

81 Stoler. “Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power”. p74.
European women played a key role in this and the reproductive role of mothers became ideological as well.

Not only were certain forms of motherhood elevated in the colonies above others, the same occurred in the metropole, however, the focus shifted from race to class. Olive Schreiner indicts the idealised vision of motherhood, which she perceived to be a middle class phenomenon, as is evident in the scenario she posed of a middle class male idealist being served by a working class mother:

\[
\text{Does he exclaim to her, “Divine child-bearer! Potential mother of the race! Why should you clean my boots or bring my tea, while I lie warm in bed?…Henceforth I shall get up at dawn and make my own tea and clean my own boots, and you just the same!”}^{82}
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Schreiner’s vision of motherhood was different from the conventional idealisation – which discriminated against both class and race. Based on her own early experiences with a mother she believed to be emotionally withdrawn, Schreiner spoke of a mother’s love as being based on a “selfish animal instinct”\(^{83}\) placing the role of the mother closer to the world of nature and the instinctual. Simultaneously she did not believe that women were to be defined by their role as mothers – it should not serve to exclude them from the public sphere or prevent them working outside the home. She launched a savage indictment of middle class women for being integral to the ideology of the mother, portraying them as immature, spoiled and actually unsuited to the role of mothers:

\[
\text{The women of old, even if their husbands were wealthy, worked in the fields…But the modern middle-class woman has servants and governesses and all sorts of single women to do her work, and then she sits and howls that she hasn’t everything she wants, and that she’s badly off, because she has to bear children. It’s this kind of woman we want to do away with, and turn into a working woman…}^{84}
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At the same time Schreiner acknowledged the importance of motherhood, elevating it to a level above that of fatherhood. She recognised the bond between mother and infant based largely on biology and the greater sacrifice, which mothers invested in their children:

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\text{…man who, in an instant of light-hearted enjoyment, begets the infant…and the woman who bears it continuously for months within her body, and who gives birth to}
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\(^{82}\) First and Scott. *Olive Schreiner*. p272.
\(^{83}\) First and Scott. *Olive Schreiner*. p47.
\(^{84}\) First and Scott. *Olive Schreiner*. p216.
it in pain, and who, if it is to live, is compelled, or was in primitive times, to nourish it for months from the blood of her own being."  

The idealised ennobling experience of motherhood bears similarity to the experience of soldiers. Like motherhood, being a soldier, a warrior, has a belief system emphasising certain norms of behaviour behind it, which makes it greater than the individual. Particularly in times of war, when patriotic feeling is at its zenith, a soldier becomes an idealised figure of nobility and righteousness – fighting the good fight and defending home and country. The recruitment of soldiers uses the same idealisation but the experience of the reality of war and the endurance of its rite of passage – battle, creates a disjuncture between the social construction and the reality as is evident in Hemmingway’s *A Farewell to Arms*:

I was always embarrassed by the words sacred, glorious and sacrifice and the expression in vain. We had heard them, sometimes standing in the rain almost out of earshot…and had read them…There were many words that you could not stand to hear…Abstract words such as glory, honor, courage…

According to Elshtain, being a soldier or a mother entails participation in something which is greater than the individual – its social construction and its ideology forces the individual into a particular mould which is not of their own creation but is the means by which their experiences are read:

…soldiers and mothers frequently talk about war and mothering as a force beyond or greater than themselves, an event or a structure of experience and events ‘that has no author’…War and mothering have been worlds that *enfold* men and women, worlds with their ‘own logic, connections and incongruencies’.

The notion of sacrifice is another element held in common by mothers and soldiers. Previously I wrote of the “sacrifice of youth in the cause of freedom” which entailed literally the sacrifice of one’s life in defence of country and regiment. Another form of sacrifice is evident – the experience of war and of battle, the rite of passage that is the hallmark of masculinity, leaves a lasting impression on those that have undergone it. This can be negative in the extreme such as the psychological scars of war – the “shellshock” of the First World War, now known as post-traumatic stress disorder.

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For mothers, sacrifice does not necessarily entail the sacrifice of life (although this may be the case due to the hazards of giving birth, particularly in the past), nor does it entail psychological scarring. However mothers are expected to sacrifice for their children, materially, emotionally, even in terms of time. Over the past few decades there has been a shift in society over the feasibility of women remaining home as full-time wives and mothers. Challenges by feminists combined with economic necessity now make it, in a sense, permissible for women to work outside the home without being required to spend all their time raising children. Prior to this however, women, particularly middle class women were expected to find emotional fulfilment in being mothers and a societal expectation of a lifetime commitment to children meant a sacrifice on women's part in terms of an alternate lifestyle, and a parallel can be drawn with the soldiers:

Most women do not forfeit life itself but they forfeit a version of what their lives might have been, as do male combatants who are forever changed by what they have been through.  

Patriotism and duty have been and are intrinsic to the ideology of being a soldier. “Doing one’s duty for God and country” is often – particularly in times of war – a key motivation for men enlisting. It serves to create a climate where sacrificing one’s own life for others is not only appropriate but is, in fact, desirable and is thus the means by which men enthusiastically sign up for war – the influence of culture and society in this instance being greater than the strongest biological instinct which is to live. By this, I do not imply that all soldiers have a “death wish” but that they are impelled to place themselves in a situation where death is a very real possibility. This coercion may be an external one such as the drafting of eligible men. While this is direct external pressure, indirect pressures also play a large role such as that exerted by the civilian population. For instance in the First World War, men who refused to fight were handed white feathers by women as a symbol of their “cowardice”. For many of these men however, the pressure is an external one, occurring as a result of the internalisation of many of the values held by their society and inducted by the schooling system – as I have discussed earlier. It is a matter of duty and failure to comply brings with it a sense of shame and failure.

89 Elshtain. Women and War. p222.
91 Elshtain. Women and War. p222.
The notion of duty is not solely confined to soldiers but is a feature of the ideological concept of motherhood as well. In the past it has been the patriotic duty of women to bear children – this is the point where the constructed boundary between the public and private sphere reaches its inevitable stage of collapse for motherhood has been subject to great state intervention and does not exist in the idealised vacuum of the private sphere as was believed. This, however, I will discuss in greater detail in the following section dealing with patriotic motherhood. For now, it is sufficient to note that being a good mother is a matter of duty – like being a soldier it is subject to both external and internal force. The latter comes in the form of the state in terms of social welfare where the correct rearing of children is subject to state intervention and failure to be a “good” mother has many negative repercussions, the harshest of which is the removal of the child. 92 This indictment of a mother’s parenting skill comes not only from the authorities but also from those around her. To be labelled a “bad mother” is to be made a pariah. However, like soldiers too, mothers have internalised the requirement of being “good mothers” as duty. It is even evident in the latter part of the twentieth century where the growth of single parenting and the large numbers of women engaged in wage labour brings a corresponding sense of guilt of not being a good parent in a way that is far more extreme than fathers in similar positions:

Uniting the two…is duty and guilt. The soldier and the mother do their duty, and both are racked by guilt at not having done it right or at having done wrong as they did what they thought was right.93

Perhaps the greatest distinction cited between soldiers and mothers – which has often been used to make the two adversarial – is that one creates life while the other takes it. Mothers are viewed in an almost wholly positive way – the perpetuators of life and defenders of all that is sacred to life i.e. love and nurturing. It is a feature held both about mothers and by mothers.94 Used to justify the confinement of women to the “higher morality” of the private sphere, this view was interestingly also adopted by early feminists and formed one of the few areas of convergence for patriarchy and the early feminist movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.95

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93 Elshtain. Women and War. p222.
94 Refer to quote on page 24 (footnote 72).
In contrast to this the role of the soldier is to kill the enemy – it is a world of war and violent death. It is hardly possible to find greater contrast to the image of a mother and child than a battlefield strewn with dying and wounded men. However, even within this great disparity there lies an element of commonality. The ideological construction of the noble warrior is not a taker of life but a preserver of it. Along with the justification of war by the countries involved as “fighting for freedom” comes the equally powerful rhetoric of defending the homeland. The enemy is portrayed as the aggressor and the soldier as the righteous defender of women and children. In addition to this the idealised soldier is expected to take no pleasure in killing. It is considered an appalling but necessary task to kill to save a wounded comrade, a battalion under siege or civilians in the line of fire:

Men’s experience of war is defensive, a story of aggression held (for the most part) in check, a tale of trying to protect, to save, to prevent.96

This was particularly the case on the part of the Allies of the Second World War where the presence of a clearly defined aggressor in the form of Hitler and the threat he presented with his quest for Lebensraum (or, for the Americans, the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour) created a justification for a “noble war” – a desire to rid the world of the evils of fascism.

Analysis of photographs and visual propaganda provides an important insight into the minds of those responsible for their creation.

96 Elshtain. Women and War. p224.
(Photos taken from Vera Lynn Unsung Heroines-The Women who Won the War and Don Shiach The Movies, respectively)

(Photos taken from S.M. Gilbert “Soldier’s Heart: Literary Men, Literary Women, and the Great War” and http://www.nga.gov/cgi-bin/nimage?399+0+0 respectively)
The photographs illustrate different and often contradictory circumstances. Top left is a photograph of a mother and child in Britain taken during an air raid where the mother was fearfully protecting her infant child as she looked to the source of the danger. Adjacent to this is a scene from the Steven Spielberg film Saving Private Ryan set during the Second World War where Tom Hanks’ character is carrying a wounded comrade. Bottom left is a poster for the Red Cross where an idealised vision of a nurse is portrayed holding a wounded soldier, as a mother would cradle a child. Finally, adjacent to this is a painting of the Madonna and Child reproduced from the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C.

These four pictures portray people in vastly different roles – a mother, a soldier, a nurse and the Madonna. However, I perceive a great similarity in the way in which they are constructed. All are shown carrying and protecting a weaker individual, be it a child or a wounded soldier. The common theme is of saving lives. However, the similarity that the three photographs bear with that of the religious icon of the Madonna and child lend an added significance to their role – one of religion and Christian duty. The actions of mothers protecting children, soldiers protecting comrades and nurses saving lives are larger than that of the individuals concerned – it is portrayed as their defining features, suggesting in this instance that their activities have been divinely ordained. The way in which the mother, the soldier and the nurse have been portrayed in the photographs whether consciously or subconsciously by their creators, and their great similarity to the conventional representation of the Madonna and Child present the possibility that the Christian image and the roles of the mother, soldier and nurse during war are related. All are part of a larger narrative interwoven with Christianity, duty and the protection of the helpless, weak or injured – it is a narrative of preserving life rather than taking it, thus creating a common thread running through these photographs despite their differing subject matter.

It can be seen therefore that the initial juxtaposition of motherhood and soldiering is not as clear-cut as first assumed. If one holds true to the idealised vision, both are involved in the preservation of life. Mothers who harm their children and soldiers who take pleasure in killing are the exceptions rather than the norm – they are considered psychologically disturbed as they detract from the societal perception of the mother and the noble warrior:
The war lover on a killing binge was someone who had ‘lost it’ just as the defensive mother who batters her child has lost it, having gone from protector to attacker.97

**Patriotic Motherhood**

In the London *Morning Post* during the course of the First World War a letter appeared signed “A little mother”. It was subsequently reprinted by the Propaganda service and went on to sell more than seventy-five thousand copies. The letter is significant as it evokes several themes that go to the heart of the relationship between motherhood and patriotism:

[The voice of the] mothers of the British race…demands to be heard, seeing that we play the most important part in the history of the world, for it is we who ‘mother the men’ who have to uphold the honour and traditions not only of our Empire but of the whole civilized world…We women, who demand to be heard, will tolerate no such cry as Peace! Peace! where there is no peace…There is only one temperature for women of the British race, and that is white heat. With those who disgrace their sacred trust of motherhood we have nothing in common…We women pass on the human ammunition of ‘only sons’ to fill up the gaps…We gentle-nurtured, timid sex did not want the war…But the bugle call came…We’ve fetched our laddie from school, we’ve put his cap away…We have risen to our responsibility…Women are created for the purpose of giving life and men to take it…We shall not flinch one iota…[Should we be bereft, we shall] emerge stronger women to carry on the glorious work our men’s memories have handed down to us for now and all eternity.98

The extended quote above makes use of several of the conventional perceptions held by and about women. The first is the view of women, and mothers in particular, as the guardians of virtue, protecting the “civilized world” from moral decay and safeguarding the home against the corrupting influence of the public sphere. The sentence, “We gentle-nurtured, timid sex did not want the war,”99 implies that war is a male domain and antithetical to women due to its emphasis on violence and death rather than the nurturing, life giving qualities attributed to women. However, reading the letter in its entirety suggests that the construction of the essential natures of men and women is built on a very unstable foundation.

Common-sense wisdom would have it that motherhood and war are essentially adversarial, thus indicating that mothers, to fulfil their designation as the preservers of life, would be opposed to war, adopting a pacifist status. However “The little mother”

placed the duty of mothers very much in line with the patriotic idealisation of war. Not only was the “little mother” not pacifist she actually adopted a belligerent tone: “We women…will tolerate no such cry as Peace! Peace!”¹⁰⁰ War – and the support of war - became a patriotic duty. For the women symbolised by “the little mother” war was only part of the sphere of men when it was initiated – at that point it remained something alien to women as it was against their essential natures. However, once war was declared, the propaganda machine was put into action and patriotic fervour was at its height. It was at this point that women – not immune to the torrent of patriotism – brought the full force of their morality as mothers to the war effort.

Their duty as mothers became part of their wider role as members of a nation.¹⁰¹ To give birth and nurture a child did not preclude the sacrifice of a son’s life in the service of the country. One of the most powerful images created by “the little mother” is: “We’ve fetched our laddie from school, we’ve put his cap away…We have risen to our responsibility…”¹⁰² The term “responsibility” suggests a greater duty than the conventional perception of mothers in the private sphere, protectors and caregivers. The duty now became one to the nation, greater than that to the home. Mothers now assumed responsibility for the nation and race where the sacrifice of a child came in service of a greater good – the ideals which the nation claimed to be defending – freedom, democracy and the home.

The use of the ideal of defending the home front was particularly relevant here as it related directly to the mother’s sphere of influence. Apart from the higher – and perhaps more abstract – ideals of nation and democracy, came the more concrete idealisation of the home. An appeal to a defence of home and family was the most powerful motivation for soldiers. Although it may extend to fighting to preserve a certain way of life, a great majority of the propaganda promoting the war effort made its appeal to the idealisation of home and family held by the soldier – providing a strong motivation for those soldiers fighting away from home who perhaps retained a stronger romanticisation of the home front due to the discomfort of their present

¹⁰¹ I hesitate to use the word “citizen” here as most women around the world were only given the right to vote at the end of the First World War and were therefore not citizens per se. In South Africa, as in many societies colonized by the British, the majority of women only gained full citizenship at the end of the twentieth century.
Mothers thus, along with their own encouragement of war, provided the motivation for getting men to fight.

Due to their position on the home front, often far removed from actual fighting, it was easier for women to display greater belligerence, embracing a greater patriotic fervour and espousing an idealisation of war to an extent that men in the midst of the harsh reality of war, could not. Letters were written to husbands, sons and brothers on the front lines encouraging an orgy of killing in defence of an ideal, distancing themselves from the battle-weary soldiers, immersed in the reality and their own definition of the “noble warrior”:

The defensive warrior, trying to save and preserve, if necessary sacrifice himself, rather than kill-kill-kill, is sickened by the ferocity of bellicose noncombatants...

For men, the common experience of war in terms of shared danger and the omnipresent threat of death, often served to unite those across enemy lines and create a sense of remoteness from those civilians encouraging bellicoscity:

…I am the enemy you killed, my friend.
I knew you in this dark; for so you frowned
Yesterday through me as you jabbed and killed.
I parried; but my hands were loath and cold.
Let us sleep now...

The patriotism of women extended not only to actual war but also to the interactions of their country with those of others – most notably during imperialism. "The Little Mother” made reference to this with “…uphold[ing] the honour and traditions not only of our Empire but of the whole civilized world…” A distinction was made between “the civilized world”, the West, and the rest. The British Empire was portrayed as the epitome of civilisation and the women of the Empire as being responsible for the civilising influence – of bringing their morality and “superior” way of life to the people subjugated under imperialism. The growing number of European women in the colonies has been linked to the greater rigidity of racial boundaries:

European women are not only the bearers of racist beliefs but hardline operatives who put them into practice. European women, it is claimed, destroyed the blurred

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103 Elshtain. Women and War. p224.
105 For many the First World War has been considered a war fought over imperial ideals. Whereas the Second World War had a clearly defined aggressor on the part of the Allies in terms of fascism, World War One was largely a conflict over colonies between the imperial powers.
divisions between colonizer and colonized, encouraging class distinctions among
whites while fostering new racial antagonisms, formerly muted by sexual access.\textsuperscript{107}

However, according to Stoler, to suggest that the enforcement of racial division was
principally due to the arrival of large numbers of European women in the colonies and
the subsequent tightening of “moral” standards, is to ignore the way in which the
objections of women to the “loose morality” of the colonies was only given attention
when it coincided with a political shift in the same direction.\textsuperscript{108}

Nupur Chauduri, on the other hand, suggests a more active role played by European –
specifically British – women in the colonial context. The responsibility of these
women in maintaining a Eurocentric way of life in India in support of their husbands
and the Empire, meant that these women ostensibly displayed little interest in
indigenous culture – as it detracted from the imperial project and was a potential
threat to their own superiority. However, on returning to the metropole they created
an interest in Indian cuisine and clothing, disseminating Indian culture through all
segments of British society. Indian clothing and jewellery became the height of
fashion and recipes for Indian dishes were published in periodicals. This had the
effect of sharing the imperial experience with the working classes who would,
otherwise, have had little contact with the rest of the Empire.\textsuperscript{109} This demonstrates
the different facets of British women under imperialism depending on the their
context:

…many of these wives knew that once they returned home, the special context for
which they had to be overtly ethnocentric by displaying a certain indifference to the
surrounding culture would no longer bind them. At home, no longer directly
involved in the imperialistic enterprise, they were free to transmit a culture that
theretofore they seemingly had rejected.\textsuperscript{110}

Significantly this also serves to illustrate the way in which colonialism and
imperialism was not simply the imposition of a powerful culture on a weaker one –
instead the two interacted, allowing movement across cultures. Despite India’s
dominated status, Indian culture had a pronounced effect on British society.

\textsuperscript{107} Stoler. “Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power”. p66.
\textsuperscript{108} Stoler. “Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power”. p67.
\textsuperscript{109} Nupur Chaudhuri. “Shawls, Jewelry, Curry, and Rice in Victorian Britain” in Western Women and
p241-242.
\textsuperscript{110} Chaudhuri. “Shawls, Jewelry, Curry and Rice”. p242.
The point however is that women played a part in the wider arena of state politics in a way that the notion of them being restricted to the private sphere does not make allowances for. Their association with morality was brought into the public sphere and the argument made by Stoler regarding women in the imperial context and the printing of thousands of copies of “A Little Mother” by the propaganda office share a key feature – both make use of the common perception of women – guardian of morality and nurturing mother, to further a larger political aim, be it to encourage strict racial division under imperialism or to build up support for the war effort. Women were not simply passive bystanders to this process either. It is instead their own awareness of their role that worked in tandem with the wider political environment.

This is apparent in what can be termed the great irony of “A Little Mother”: “…Women are created for the purpose of giving life and men to take it…” 111 Here, there is almost a tone of determination to adhere to the prescribed gender roles of the mother and the soldier – one gives life and the other takes it. Despite this “A Little Mother” was an appeal to mothers to send their sons off to war – where death is a very real possibility – as part of their patriotic duty. No contradiction was seen between this encouragement of belligerence and their role as life-givers. It was, in fact, seen as part of the ideal of motherhood and those who could not meet the challenge were viewed as “[a] disgrace [to the] sacred trust of motherhood”. 112 The concept of motherhood as held by women, takes on different meanings in different contexts. The catchphrases may be the same - “life-giver, nurturer” but, at the same time, they may be used to justify behaviour, which is antithetical such as support for war. And it is here that the mother of the nation took precedence over the mother of the individual.

Thus far, I have discussed the way in which the concept of motherhood served an abstract purpose – the constructs of motherhood were used to further the aims of state, nation and race. Motherhood and the state interacted on a more concrete level as well to fulfil similar goals. Having its roots in the early attempts made by imperial states to encourage certain women to give birth over others, the eugenics project in Nazi

Germany went to extremes to define appropriate motherhood. The German state actively involved itself in reproduction to persuade “pure” German women to have more children while simultaneously preventing so-called “inferior” races from doing the same.113

From 1933, the government passed the first in a series of anti-natal laws “ordering compulsory sterilization of those considered to be of ‘inferior value’…”114 Following the sterilization law came a law allowing for abortion based on eugenics115 in 1935.116 Similarly incentives such as marriage loans, tax rebates and child allowances were used to encourage proto-natalism - the bearing of children from “superior” stock.117 Although motherhood had been subject to state intervention in the past, notably due to the growth of social welfare in the nineteenth century, the Nazi state directly intervened in the reproductive capacities of women and motherhood was determined by the state. Thus to be a mother in Nazi Germany was to be a direct participant in a political and racial agenda. Similarly, it was the duty of German women considered “inferior” not to procreate. The perception of women as being naturally closer to all things related to life – so essential to the view of motherhood – was criticised, as it would lead to their inability to carry out their duty, which was to eradicate the weak – a form of social Darwinism.118 Here, motherhood worked on a more concrete basis with the state – in terms of actual reproductive capacity - to further its national and xenophobic programme.

A similar process was evident in fascist Italy during the interwar period. The growth of welfare services as well as the desire to propagate the race led to a steady decline in the influence of mothers along with a simultaneous increase in state intervention in

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115 Eugenics refers to the study of genes determining the qualities that are passed from generation to generation. In this instance eugenics took on a racist cast where it was believed that the qualities of various races could be passed along in a similar manner. Thus to improve the qualities of a population it was therefore considered appropriate to allow only those containing “superior” genes to procreate. Bock. “Equality and Difference in National Socialist Racism”. p269.
117 Bock. “Equality and Difference in National Socialist Racism”. p279. Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution stated that those members of a species most equipped to survive and adapt through a process of natural selection would pass their genes on to succeeding generations. This was adapted to the races, which were ordered on a hierarchical scale. Social Darwinism suggested that those races highest on the scale were naturally stronger and hence more equipped to survive at the expense of the weaker or “inferior” races.
motherhood. This was particularly evident in the case of illegitimacy where the survival of the infant was more precarious:

…while propaganda insisted that, by nature, women were fulfilled only in motherhood, government social services cast doubt on whether women were naturally the best nurturers, especially when the women were unwed, delinquent, or simply impoverished. And while propagandists idealized biological destiny, medical professionals and social workers silently undercut the control traditionally exercised by female kinship and community networks over childbirth and infant nurturing.\(^{119}\)

In addition, abortion was illegal and the state provided free medical care and some financial aid to expectant mothers who were without the traditional support structures of family or a spouse. This was done to prevent the abandonment of illegitimate children thus ensuring a higher survival rate.\(^{120}\)

In the spirit of protonatalism, mothers who had given birth to large numbers of children were honoured in a special ceremony held on the Italian Mother’s Day on December 24\(^{th}\). Prolific mothers were given prizes on a day chosen for its religious and maternal significance as well as the relationship between motherhood and war:

The dictatorship…associated Italian motherhood not just with the Mother of God but with the Virgin’s chastity, the joyous birth of Jesus, and the awful sacrifice of her only son.\(^{121}\)

Simultaneously childless men and women were denounced as being unpatriotic for failing to fulfil their duty to propagate the race and were given an almost criminal cast:

Society today despises deserters, pimps, homosexuals, thieves. Those who can but do not perform their duty to the nation must be put in the same category. We must despise them. We must make the bachelors and those who desert the nuptial bed ashamed of their potential power to have children.\(^{122}\)

Like Nazi Germany therefore the bearing of children was viewed as a patriotic duty. However, Italy did not take the hard line racist slant that existed in Germany. Both were keen to propagate the “race” and the pressure exerted on mothers was one of nationalism. The duty of mothers went beyond the individual to the nation – bearing children, in terms of quantity in the case of Italy and those regarded as “pure” in the case of Germany, was a service to the state on par with the sacrifice of soldiers in war.

Eugenics and notions of racial superiority were by no means confined to the Axis countries. In the early twentieth century the Western powers were deeply implicated in studies on racial difference. According to Saul Dubow, the extreme path taken by Nazi Germany in the form of the Holocaust, disguised the way in which other countries had adopted similar notions of race.\textsuperscript{123} South Africa was the focal point for this interest in racial distinctions due to the new discoveries in the sciences dealing with human development:

Raymond Dart’s famous discovery of \textit{Australopithecus} in 1924, the controversial “missing link” between humans and primates, had placed South Africa on the evolutionary map. The debates about human origins that followed bore distinctly nationalist overtones for it amounted to the claim that Africa rather than Europe or Asia was the source of human evolution.\textsuperscript{124}

The diverse racial population of South Africa provided the ideal avenue of study. From a cataloguing of racial difference, came the classification of the races and the notion of racial determinism. The greatest contrast was perceived to exist between the Bushman and the White male as is evident by Jan Smuts’ view:

We see in the one the leading race of the world, while the other, though still living, has become a mere human fossil, verging to extinction. We see the one crowned with all intellectual and spiritual glory of the race, while the other still occupies the lowest scale in human existence. If race has not made the difference, what has?\textsuperscript{125}

Smuts’ distinction between White men and the Bushman also appears to be one of nature vs. culture and savagery vs. civilisation. Social ills such as crime, poverty or alcoholism were believed to be due to genetic and racial traits. Scientific racism and the notion of social Darwinism defended the notion of White supremacy, be it in the form of imperialism or in the subjugation of indigenous people by the South African state, due to the latter having attained the pinnacle of civilisation. Fears of “pollution” by races deemed inferior, made a strong case for the segregation of Black from White.\textsuperscript{126} It was a small step to the idea that those accorded the least status be prevented from procreating. In a statement that had strong echoes of the eugenicist attitudes of, H.B. Fantham a leading supporter of eugenics and racial purity suggested

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{124} Dubow. \textit{Illicit Union}. p13.
\item \textsuperscript{125} Dubow. \textit{Illicit Union}. p51.
\item \textsuperscript{126} Dubow. \textit{Illicit Union}. p135.
\end{itemize}
the segregation and sterilisation of “epileptics, idiots...habitual criminals...the ‘feeble-minded.'”127

Most disturbing to the proponents of racial purity were those people who threatened the clear demarcation between races – in South Africa these were termed the Coloureds, and were believed to embody the worst elements of the races.128 Miscegenation was believed to lead to a dilution of racial purity, eventually culminating in “the decline of the white population.”129 In a way that is analogous with Stoler’s work on the colonial context, the responsibility for maintaining racial purity fell to White women.130 It was here once again that motherhood moved beyond the biological and the social to the ideological and the political.

For the Allied powers in the Second World War, patriotic motherhood took on a similar form to World War One and “A Little Mother”. In the United States in particular, mothers were given a gold star for every son lost in war. An organisation was formed called “The Gold Star Mothers of Future Wars” where women anticipated the glorious deaths in battle of sons not yet born.131 The more gold stars accrued by a mother the greater her celebrity status as a woman who made the greatest sacrifice in service of her country. To an extent, parallels can be drawn between “Gold Star Mothers” and the ceremonies used to reward prolific mothers in fascist Italy. Both were being rewarded for patriotic motherhood – one for fulfilling her role as a giver of life by bearing many children who were likely to be used in the next war and the other for subverting her role as the same to serve the greater good. The common link to both was the notion of sacrifice and the utilisation of the conventional role of the mother in the home to that of the state:

Women equally with men have a passionate love of mother-country....Though we loathe slaughter we find that after men have done their best to kill and wound, women are ever ready to mend the broken bodies, soothe the dying and weep over nameless graves!...God made two, a man and a woman, to rule the home – the state is but a larger home.132

Of course, the actual participation of men in war did not preclude the participation of women in terms of their encouragement of men.

129 Chisholm. “Gender and Deviance.” p301.
130 Chisholm. “Gender and Deviance.” p301.
The South African Experience

In South Africa the official journal of the South African Women’s Auxiliary Services, *The Women’s Auxiliary*, which was published on a monthly basis, made use of the powerful relationship between soldiers and their mothers in a series of letters titled “The Letters of a Young Airman to His Mother”. A letter appeared in each issue written by a young man, Hugh, who had joined the Royal Air Force in England at the outbreak of World War Two. Most of the letters related his experiences of war, his comrades and his feelings about the role he was playing. He often made attempts to reassure his mother about the dangers he faced:

> You don’t have to worry about me and my flying. I feel I have got sufficient sense to avoid unnecessary risks and I don’t take the chances I have seen some other fellows take, because I think they are signs of bad flying.\(^{133}\)

At the same time he brought up the themes I have considered earlier in this chapter. It was during war that he felt most alive and all else appeared to be an exercise in mediocrity. In addition he alluded to the concept of duty and the role of men in playing their part for their country – it is with this in mind that he felt it incumbent upon him to engage in action against the enemy and possibly sacrifice his life:

> I want to return to South Africa if I come through the war…I have no love for official ways and a life governed by petty things. Add to that my outlook on life. I have never had any time for the men who did not take their chance and play their part in the last war. At the same time I do not expect a man to be a hero; but he must not be a coward and he must retain his self-respect by doing his duty…Only by taking part in operations against the enemy can I come up to my own standards of living and be worthy of all that I love and respect.\(^{134}\)

Two months later, he once again referred to duty but, in addition to his duty to his country and to his comrades, equally important is his duty to his mother, which coincided with the previous two:

> We have all got to be true to our own standards of conduct, and I hope to be worthy of you and my friends. I want you to know that I have no fear of what is ahead. I have had a wonderful training, with much more experience than most fellows, and I have every confidence in my ability to cope with actual flying unless my luck leaves me.\(^{135}\)


\(^{134}\) *The Women’s Auxiliary*, July 1941, p15.

The use of the device of “The Letters of a Young Airman to His Mother” was by no means an isolated event – other articles appeared from pilots and soldiers to their mothers as well. The relationship between soldiers and their mothers was a complex and intriguing one. The letters of the airman were used to reassure his mother – and other mothers in similar circumstance – of his safety yet, simultaneously, it made known his desire to do his duty – a duty which encompassed country, comrades and his mother. In addition to confirming his safety he made it clear that he was not shirking this duty and rejected men who did. This desire to assume the mantle of the “noble warrior” for his mother went hand in hand with the mediation he created through his letters between the actual experience of war that he was undergoing and his mother’s perception of it. As such, “The Letters of a Young Airman to His Mother” followed a similar pattern as is apparent with the other Allied countries, making clear the integral nature of mothers to the idealisation of war, so necessary to create patriotic zeal for the war effort.

Conclusion

For much of the recorded history of humankind specific roles have been allocated to men and women. Man has been the hunter and defender of the home. In modern times, this role has been replaced with the role of the soldier. Women have been the mothers and wives, essential to the harmony of the home. These roles have been created and recreated in differing socio-economic contexts. These generally hegemonic but increasingly contested roles of men and women - men as warlike and women as the polar opposite, nurturing, have their roots in biology. The great majority of men are naturally stronger than women thus suiting them to the more strenuous demands of war. Only women, on the other hand, can bear children, ideally suiting them for the reproductive role and the raising of children in the home. Furthermore, up until recent advances in human cloning and genetic engineering, since women and children have been seen as essential for the propagation of the species, their lives are given greater value than that of men.

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136 Documentation Centre – Department of Defence Archives. The Women’s Auxiliary, April 1941 and February 1942.

137 Although both men and women are necessary for reproduction, women are perceived to have a more fundamental role in the process as a woman carries the child for nine months and the dangers inherent in pregnancy restrict her movements in a way that cannot be applied to men. In addition, speaking in a
These physical differences over time and in most human communities were extended to mental differences as well. Men were socialized and framed around aggressive behaviour due to their proximity to war whereas women were encouraged to be pacifist and gentle creatures. Eventually the biological cast took on a more social nature. Men and women were deemed essentially different – the nature of men making them more suitable to the public sphere of state, business, politics and war and the nature of women restricting them to the private sphere of the home where their role was to be the guardian of the morality of the family and their primary concern was taking care of husband and children.\textsuperscript{138} The ultimate distinction between men and women came to be embodied therefore in the figures of the soldier and the mother, the two were claimed to be the very antithesis of each other due to the latter’s role in giving life and the role of the former in taking it.

During the Victorian era a certain romanticism pervaded the space of the mother and the soldier. The escalating changes initiated by the Industrial Revolution and the growth of capitalism placed an even greater burden on the home and the figure of the mother as the guardian of the morality of the family – the home became the eye of the storm to which men could retire from the forces of change wreaking havoc in the public sphere. The idealisation of motherhood however was one that was applied to White middle class women – Black women and working class women fell outside the spectrum. In similar vein there was a growing move to embrace the era of chivalry in an idealised past and the vision of the noble soldier was born – the converse of the corrupt, accumulative capitalist. This image was fostered in the private schools and military academies where the glorious sacrifice of youth in the midst of battle was the greatest aspiration. The school and the military academy became a private sphere of its own, built on an all-male camaraderie where women were relegated to the distant, idealised figures of mothers. To die in battle therefore was to die in defence of the ideal of the home and the mother.

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{138} This strict allocation of roles was a largely bourgeois phenomenon. For the great majority of the working class a single income was insufficient to support a family. In addition in households headed by single women, work was a necessity. However, the ideal of the public and private sphere and the roles of men and women accordingly, retained a strong hold.}
To be a soldier became the means by which masculinity was tested and the ultimate test of masculinity for men was battle. Similarly, for women, the experience was childbirth. Both share a certain resemblance – childbirth and battle are extreme experiences in the lives of the individuals undergoing them. They are the point where life is at its most fragile and the threat of death is omnipresent. Both are life changing and invoke the twin concepts of sacrifice and duty. Soldiers may sacrifice their lives in battle or risk physical injury and are almost invariably subject to emotional trauma. Women who become mothers sacrifice alternatives of what their lives may be and mothers may be expected to give all of themselves in the raising of children. The societal expectations of mothers and soldiers mean that although the experiences of the individual may be unique, they are placed within a larger framework and the notion of duty is the means by which they are expected to conduct themselves in a manner appropriate to their roles as mothers and soldiers.

In this chapter I have interrogated the claim that the key difference between mothers and soldiers is that the former creates life. The ideal of the “noble warrior” is defensive – a soldier who takes no pleasure in killing and is more likely to sacrifice himself for his comrades, hence saving lives. In addition the notion of patriotic motherhood where women wholeheartedly embrace the sacrifice of their sons in battle interrogates the idea of the inherent pacifist nature of women. Furthermore, the utilisation of motherhood by states, be it for the use of propaganda as in the Allied countries or the more extreme use of propagation of the race as in the fascist countries during the Second World War, puts paid to the idealised distinction between the public and the private spheres. Mothers themselves played a role in the construction of this, adopting the state as the larger version of the family and the encouragement of the sacrifice of their sons as a sign of their patriotism – a duty that superseded their role as the bearers of life.

Finally therefore, this chapter demonstrates that the relationship between mothers and soldiers is not wholly one-dimensional where the two are believed to exist as dual opposites. Both are constructed, changing over time and space – particularly during war - but with a very basic framework of sacrifice and duty remaining intact. And both have a complex relationship with each other, not easily contained by a simple dichotomy. In South African society as with the rest of the world I have shown that
the dichotomy of mothers and soldiers was fraught with tension, ambiguity and contradiction, which constantly changed to meet the needs of a shifting society – the greatest shifts occurring during war.
Chapter Two - Mobilization

A strong appeal was made to the women of South Africa calling for their support at the time of war as was evident in a stirring piece titled *A Call to the Women of South Africa* penned by General Smuts and appearing in the inaugural issue of the monthly auxiliary service magazine *The Women's Auxiliary*:

I call to the women of South Africa to take their place beside their men folk, and not to rest content until they have taken the hammer and the wheel, the pen and the plough from the hand of every man who is ready to hold the gates against the foe.

I should like to see every woman, who frees a man for service, proudly wearing her uniform, both W.A.A.S. and W.A.A.F.,¹ as a symbol of her faith in the justice of our cause and contributing of her best until victory is achieved.²

Smuts’ words were very much in line with speeches made by other Allied leaders such as that of Winston Churchill, particularly in terms of the use of the idea that they were engaged in fighting a righteous war as well as the recognition given to women for their endeavours. The speech is stirring and emotive, appealing to patriotism, duty and righteousness and parallels a speech given by Winston Churchill to British men and women on July 14, 1941:

In this war, so terrible in many aspects and yet so inspiring, men and women who have never thought about fighting or being involved in fighting before have been proud to emulate the courage of the bravest regiments of His Majesty’s armies, and proud to find that, under the fire of the enemy, they could comport themselves with discipline and with composure. It is that quality, universally spread among our people, which gives us the foundation from which we shall prosecute to the end this righteous war for the freedom and future of mankind.³

Although the war situation in Britain differed significantly from South Africa in terms of the more active role played by women on the home front in civilian defence due to the frequent air raids and the threat of German invasion, there were common themes such as the war presenting the opportunity for women to play their part in a way they would never have thought possible previously and the idea that their contribution would make a significant impact on the outcome of the war itself. Sacrifice, courage

¹ Documentation Centre – Department of Defence Archives. *The Women’s Auxiliary*, September 1940, Issue 1, p5. The abbreviations W.A.A.S. and W.A.A.F. denote the Women’s Auxiliary Army Services and the Women’s Auxiliary Air Force respectively which, at the time of Smuts’ writing, were placed on a full-time basis.

² *The Women’s Auxiliary*, September 1940, Issue 1, p3.

and poise in the face of danger were the contributions expected from women for the duration of the war.

The appearance of Smuts’ quote in the inaugural issue of *The Women’s Auxiliary* suggested that it was aimed at a specific audience of women who had already, to some extent, become involved with war work. They were largely White, middle class and supportive of South Africa’s fight against Nazism. Smuts’ quote however is significant for this chapter where I address the mobilisation of women and men – both Black and White. The Second World War came to South Africa less than a decade after White women had been enfranchised, and propaganda initiated by the state called for new activities for women in the military and in industry – areas and activities which were socially unacceptable for women in the pre-war era but were now essential for the war effort and based on their new roles as citizens. This chapter demonstrates the way in which these new roles were modelled on hegemonic and “natural” notions of femininity, which were adapted for the purposes of the war.

Other than the mobilisation of resources and industry, was the mobilisation of manpower itself – men were subjected to propaganda based on Christian duty, honour and defence of the home against the foreign invader. Despite their status as second-class citizens, African, Indian and Coloured men were also given the opportunity to play their part in the war, hoping that the fight for democracy abroad would bring about similar changes at home. However, participation by these men was not straightforward – the war exposed tensions in politics, society, race and gender relations, which I will address in the following pages. Inherent in the appeals made by propaganda to feelings of nationalism and the hegemonic roles of men and women, which were discussed in the previous chapter, were contradictions based largely on the contrast between the fight for freedom and democracy which was how the Second World War was portrayed on the part of the Allies, and the lack of freedom domestically. Key to this is Benedict Anderson’s definition of the nation – however, I argue that although appeals were made by propaganda to nationhood, South Africa was not a nation – the mobilization for the war highlighted fragmentation within South African society over race, ethnicity and gender, many of the people mobilised were in fact not considered citizens. I demonstrate that complicating this process was South Africa’s status as a member of the Commonwealth and her relationship to
Britain, which affected the way in which many South Africans responded to mobilisation.

In this chapter therefore I address the mobilization of the various segments of South African society, the appeals made by propaganda to these various groups and the kinds of expectations under which they contributed to the war. However, unlike the way in which propaganda presented society, South Africa was not unified. The upheavals caused by war exposed tensions and contradictions which had always been there but were now plainly visible – old alliances were destroyed and new ones created, the new opportunities given to Black men and White women, while within a restricted framework, suggested fresh possibilities after the war. I suggest that the opportunities presented by mobilisation were not always under the control of the state. In this chapter I argue therefore that South Africa stood at a crossroads after 1939 and the experiences of war determined the way forward.

Propaganda

With the preparation of war in terms of the physical such as troops, weapons, food, medical aid, came a degree of mental preparation – people had to be encouraged to throw their support behind the war effort and often, the hardship, discomfort and sacrifice this entailed. Patriotism is often a feature of being a member of a nation and often comes to the fore during periods where the nation is pitted against an obstacle. During the Second World War, this was fascism in the form of Nazi Germany, and the perception of fighting a “just war” in defence of freedom created a strong sense of patriotism and much of South Africa was united behind the government’s war policy.\(^4\) In addition to this, as in all countries involved in the war, the government set up the apparatus of disseminating propaganda to raise patriotic fervour to a fever pitch and drum up all the support it required. Appearing in the oral, written and visual form propaganda was integral to the war effort.

\(^4\) A country at war is not always enough to ensure support by the citizenry – the U.S. government’s role in the Vietnam war was largely condemned by Americans due to a lack of clear motivation for U.S. involvement. This however is a fairly rare occurrence and was not the case during the Second World War where the people of countries on both sides of the conflict were to a large degree active and willing participants.
Propaganda may be defined as:

…a systematic attempt by an interested individual (or individuals) to control the attitudes of groups of individuals through the use of suggestion and, consequently, to control their actions.5

The notion of propaganda is based on the idea that people within a nation are motivated by a particular set of social values. On a statistical level people’s attitudes fall within a normal curve with very few placed at either extreme and the greater majority falling near the middle. Although social attitudes may differ between individuals there is an apparent uniformity based on membership within a nation – the propagandist, thus rather than changing an infinite number of individual attitudes is instead given the task of changing a “norm”.6 When considering the norm two aspects require further discussion – hegemony and the nation.

According to the influential Italian theorist, Antonio Gramsci, civil society, representing the majority of people, and the state, representing the interests of the ruling class, exist in a state of opposition and interaction:

Civil society is a site of consent, hegemony direction, in conceptual opposition to the state (political society) which is a site of coercion, dictatorship, domination. Civil society is therefore, in Gramsci, at once the political terrain on which the dominant class organizes its hegemony and the terrain on which opposition parties and movements organize, win allies and build their social power.7

Although it is clear that there is a sense of domination by the ruling class, which imposes its hegemony on the masses in terms of its sense of the “norm”, there is simultaneously a perception on the part of Gramsci of the way in which people themselves are not simply imposed upon but contest this notion of the norm and develop their own meanings and understandings which may, in fact, be in opposition to the norm.

Gramsci's work on hegemony is illuminating even at the start of the new millennium – as mass communications and a "network society" emerge in an iniquitous and hierarchical "global village", as evident by the work of Manuel Castells. Gramsci's

5 Leonard W. Doop. *Propaganda – its Psychology and Technique.* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1939) p75-76. This source, written before the onset of the Second World War, gives an indication of the way in which propaganda was perceived as well as the way in which it operated during the Second World War.
era of focus (the 1920s and 1030s) provides a useful theoretical entrée to analysing the hegemonic "work" of warfare and its related institutions.

To consider an example from the Second World War that I have discussed earlier, the vision of the ideal woman as the pure, chaste, nurturing mother, confined to the private sphere, was a Eurocentric middle class construction, which did not apply to working class or Black women. At the same time it remained an idealised vision of being a woman to which all women were expected to aspire. Simultaneously changing circumstances led to a change in the norm – while the hegemonic, idealised vision of women remained largely intact, the war and even colonialism before that, extended the sphere of middle class women from the home to society and the colonies beyond that. The morality accredited to White middle class women became the means by which the purity of race was protected in the colonies and even the taboo against women working in the public sphere fell away during the war due to the greater need to serve the nation – it was however as wives of soldiers that women entered the work force as their contributions were perceived to lead to a speedy victory and the return home of their men.

During the war, propaganda was the means by which the state either emphasised or created some kind of social change to a set of norms existing in society by making it appear that these changes – like the pre-existing norms themselves – were a product of the majority opinion rather than an imposition from above:

The “normal” exercise of hegemony in what became the classic terrain of the parliamentary regime is characterized by the combination of force and consent variously balancing one another, without force exceeding consent too much. Indeed one tries to make it appear that force is supported by the consent of the majority, expressed by the so-called organs of public opinion – newspapers and associations…

Propaganda is disseminated through the media of communication – newspapers, posters, radio and television. It is no coincidence that after Adolf Hitler’s assumption of power in Germany in 1933, a Ministerium fur Volksaufklarung und Propaganda [Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda] under the leadership of Joseph Goebbels, was created – which assumed absolute control over the means of communication within Germany – radio, music, books, newspapers. For Goebbels

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8 Gramsci. *A Gramsci Reader*. p261.
“the organs of public opinion are the keyboard on which he produces the hymn of Nazi nationalism.”

On all German radio stations an hour was devoted every night to a feature titled *The Hour of the Nation* where German music was played and speeches were made exalting the Nazi state and German nationalism.

This introduces the notion of nationalism and the nation – although Germany is an extreme example of the way in which propaganda operated, all countries involved in the Second World War used propaganda to create or strengthen public support for the war – propaganda that was linked to their role as citizens within a nation. According to Benedict Anderson the nation may be defined as:

…an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign.

People envisage themselves as being members of a nation – as part of an imagined community. Despite being acquainted with only a very small percentage of the total number of members of a nation, an individual perceives a bond to exist between them all due to their being confined to a specific territorial area and sharing a set of common assumptions.

To consider Benedict’s definition of the nation, it is “limited” due to its occupation of a fixed territory “beyond which lie other nations”. The nation appears to be defined in relation to other nations – a sense of “us vs. them” – where people share a common space and a fairly common belief system, which distinguishes them from other nations. The distinction between one nation and another also allows for the possibility of conflict:

…regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings.

It is in this light that one can understand the support given to the war effort in South Africa by women – who had been considered second-class citizens – and men of African, Indian and Coloured origin – who were not defined as citizens at all. The

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13 Anderson. *Imagined Communities*. p15.
14 Anderson. *Imagined Communities*. p16.
15 Anderson. *Imagined Communities*. p16.
nation gives the appearance of an entity to which one is naturally tied rather than it being a political, economic and social construct:

Something of the nature of this...love [for the nation] can be deciphered from the ways in which languages describe its object: either in the vocabulary of kinship (motherland, Vaterland, patria) or that of home...Both idioms denote something to which one is naturally tied...in everything “natural” there is always something unchosen.16

It is this notion of being a member of a nation towards which propaganda is aimed. Simultaneously, while being inextricably linked to hegemony and the nation, propaganda is not an unchanging phenomenon. Like hegemony and the perception of the nation it has its roots in a historical past, yet caters for the needs of the present circumstances:

Each incident of propaganda is...historically based; yet, each act of propaganda also takes place at a specific time in history and is a product of its time. It is highly unlikely that the propaganda of Adolf Hitler would have worked in Germany during a time of prosperity. Time, both past and present, shapes the internal dynamics of the model.17

In addition to the belief of being a member of a nation and the patriotism this entailed – patriotism at which propaganda was often aimed – countries such as South Africa and Australia also had a tie to Britain due to being former colonies with large populations of British descent. An autobiography written by an Australian infantryman who served in Italy during World War II describes his motivation for fighting – loyalty to the British Empire:

If we had thought about it we would have realised that there was no possibility of our being together for long once the fighting started. We would have realized also that the odds were strongly against each one of us surviving the war unless we were disabled. We did not think about such matters. It did not strike us as extraordinary or unfair that our generation should be called upon to fight. As volunteers we were there of our own free choice anyhow. Neither did we believe in our hearts that our country was threatened and that we were fighting for Australia's existence. Even when the Japanese came in we did not think that. But we knew England's position was very serious and that we should help her as our fathers had done. It was the order of things.18

Here, his motivation to fight was not so much for country but for Empire, the motherland, which transcended the boundaries of the geographical nation, yet at the same time there was in existence the idea of being a member of an entity – he still

16 Anderson. Imagined Communities. p131.
acknowledged the element of loyalty as being a key motivation: “We were to be loyal to our friends, our family, our school, our people.”19 “Our people” is important as it suggests that it was not merely for Australian people that he was fighting but for the people of the British Empire with whom he perceived a common boundary that transcended the nation state.

The words of Gullett were echoed in South Africa, particularly by those of British ancestry:

Although the spirit of republicanism was still alive and growing, most of the English-speaking youth still regarded Britain as the mother country. They were loyal to the Empire and proud of belonging to the Commonwealth, and they responded with emotion to Britain in the dark days before El Alamein… “We were greatly influenced by Britain in the Eastern Cape, and after all we were part of the British Empire.”20

For the great majority of English-speaking South Africans there was very little conflict over supporting Britain during the war, suggesting that these South Africans were most likely to respond to calls to join the war effort in areas where they were most heavily concentrated such as Durban.

The relationship between Britain and the settler countries was one of almost paternalism as is apparent in a speech given by Winston Churchill to New Zealand forces at Tripoli:

Far away in New Zealand…all hearts are swelling with pride at your deeds. It is the same throughout our small island of Britain, which stood alone for a year championed only by its children from overseas, and against dire odds…On behalf of His Majesty’s Government, on behalf of all the peoples of the homeland, I give you our expression of earnest warm-hearted thanks…”

Britain was portrayed as the proud parent and the settler countries as the children coming to the aid of a parent in need. The tie is almost a familial one and based on the ancestral links the settler populations still hold with the motherland.

19 Gullett. Not as a Duty Only. p11.
This is in contrast to countries with large indigenous populations, which came under colonial conquest such as India. The subcontinent used the Second World War as a means of gaining independence:

…it [the Indian National Congress] advocated non-cooperation with the British and in World War II refused to support Britain without being promised Indian independence.

Here support of the British went hand in hand with the aims of nationalism. It was a qualified support and was extended only if India would be granted independence from British rule and become a sovereign nation state – which was eventually achieved in 1947.

Propaganda operated in relation to nationalism and hegemony during the Second World War. I would like to consider a case study in the United States during the Second World War where women were recruited for wartime work, as it bore certain similarities to the propaganda strategies employed in South Africa. Prior to December 7, 1941, the ideal place for women in the United States was believed to be the home and the ideal occupation was that of wife and mother. With the United States’ entry into the war, this image had to be shifted to accommodate the need for women workers in industry and the Auxiliary Services. The important themes of the propaganda aimed at the recruitment of women were patriotic duty, the importance of work over their previous idleness and the temporary nature of war work. In addition the opposition of us vs. them – Americans vs. Germans – and the emotions evoked by this was presented in propaganda films such as The Hidden Army where “fictional German leaders [called] American women ‘decadent playgirls’ because they would not work like German women”. A sense of nationalism and patriotism was appealed to where American women were given the task of “proving the Germans wrong” by rising to the occasion. Ultimately the aim of propaganda was to move women from the home to the factory in response to the needs of war production and the exodus of men to the war theatres of Europe and, particularly, the Pacific:

The propaganda purpose was to achieve maximum production of wartime materials, to recruit women to the workplace; the related purpose was to get women to perceive

22 Whereas South Africa, unlike Australia and New Zealand, has a smaller settler population and a very large indigenous population, it is similar to the two countries as the White settlers were in complete control of the government and were the implementers of war policy.
civilian defense work as glamorous, exciting, and a patriotic duty. This was based on
the myth that women could assume men’s roles in a time of crisis although their true
mission in life was to be wives and mothers.25

The dominant perception of women as being confined to the private sphere and to the
roles of wives and mothers still remained very much intact. It was however adapted
to the needs of the war – the notion that the working woman would not be a
permanent feature of American society and that the status quo would resume after the
end of the war was embedded in the idea of the temporary nature of war work. It was
only the exceptionalism presented by the war that afforded the new opportunities for
women to engage in waged labour – an exception that was to last only for the duration
of the war, after which, women were expected to return to the activities that suited
them best. This was emphasised in the use of metaphors for women’s work which
were drawn from domesticity as is evident in the propaganda film Glamour Girls of
1943:

A woman is shown operating a lathe “as easy as a juicer in her kitchen,” and another
uses a drill press “as if it were a sewing machine.” An African American woman is
learning how to weld while the voice-over says, “This woman is taking to welding as
if it were a washing machine in her own home.”26

In a memorandum drawn up by Major P.T. van der Walt and Sergeant V.J. Clapham
at the end of 1943, an indictment is made at the failure of South Africa’s propaganda
efforts during the war.27 The memorandum was written during the malaise known as
“war weariness” which accounts for the failure of propaganda at that point in time.28
Although concerned with its failure the memorandum demonstrates the way in which
war propaganda was set up in South Africa from the onset of the Second World War.
“The National Advisory Committee on Government Policy” consisting of six
members was established in 1940 under the leadership of Mr S. Cooper of the Argus
Company. An additional representative drawn from another newspaper was Mr E.B.
Dawson of the Sunday Express who was also the vice chairman of the committee.
This initial committee was replaced in 1942 by “The Defence Recruiting and
Publicity Committee” under Colonel Werdmuller – a body which unlike the previous
one, was almost solely composed of military personnel.29

27 Sentrale Argies Bewaarplek/Central Archives Depot. BNS 1/1/266 C17/73.
28 I discuss “war weariness” in greater detail in the following chapter.
29 BNS 1/1/266 C17/73. p1.
Under “The Defence Recruiting and Publicity Committee” the first campaign was “Avenge Tobruk” which was allocated £22 000. This was followed by the first propaganda campaign organised by the South African government, civilian personnel and the military entitled the “Fighting Services” campaign, which was given a budget of £9 000. £3 000 was allocated to the campaign for the Women’s Auxiliary Services, W.A.A.S. and W.A.A.F. under which the propaganda film “Service” fell.30

Several criticisms were aimed at “The Defence Recruiting and Publicity Committee” – the first being that the only element of propaganda with which they were concerned was that of recruiting, suggesting that the lack of personnel had become a pressing problem as the war progressed.31 In addition the actual people responsible for creating the propaganda – “the artist, the copywriter, the layout-man, the creative worker…” – were not represented on the committee.32 This was perceived to be partly responsible for the overall failure of propaganda to have any significant effect on South African society. However, greater blame was placed on the “spasmodic” nature of propaganda campaigns:

Defence Recruiting publicity is spasmodic. Between each scheme there is a lull, frequently of several months duration, during which no attempt is made to sustain public interest. The public mind consequently goes to sleep, and each new scheme has an unnecessary burden placed upon it, inasmuch that it has virtually to start from scratch.33

Further factors were the constrained time period under which propaganda campaigns were set up which affected the creative aspect as well as the last minute changes, leading to “frequently shocking consequences to the campaign in its final form”.34 There was an allusion to the negative way in which these campaigns were received by the public – suggesting that propaganda was not simply imposed on the general population but that the latter played an active role in determining its form and content. It was due to the inadequately conducted propaganda campaigns and their subsequent inability to have any significant impact on the populace that reforms were required –

30 BNS 1/1/266 C17/73. p2.
31 BNS 1/1/266 C17/73. p2.
32 BNS 1/1/266 C17/73. p2.
33 BNS 1/1/266 C17/73. p3.
34 BNS 1/1/266 C17/73. p4.
propaganda campaigns had to change to appeal to the people. Part of this change dealt with way in which propaganda alienated large segments of the population:

Not a single advertising agency in the country employs creative personnel trained to produce special material adjusted to the linguistic and psychological requirements of the Afrikaans section of the community. Almost invariably an Afrikaans advertisement is a translation of an English advertisement. This is bad advertising at any time, but today, under the prevailing political conditions, it is an error of the first magnitude.35

In addition to the neglect of Afrikaans speaking people was an even more perceptible neglect of other racial and ethnic groups in South Africa. According to the memorandum a feasible solution was to develop a more extensive system in order to better disseminate propaganda “which will enable the Government to reach the minds of all of our ten million people with speed, ease and clarity”.36 This was seen as important for the duration of the war as well as after its end in order to avoid “undesirable military, political and economic consequences”, which were not made explicit.37 Simultaneously, in a contradictory manner, propaganda was presented as “public opinion” which ignored its constructed nature and the way in which the selfsame public did not readily accept it.38 It is thus within a context of tension and contradiction that propaganda or “the science of creating and transmitting public opinion” operated in South Africa.39

The failure of propaganda leads to a reconsideration of Benedict Anderson’s notion of the “imagined community”, where the fragmented nature of South African society was a major obstacle to the creation of the image of a unified nation40. In an analysis of Anderson's work in relation to global culture Barker argues:

He [Anderson] does [not] deal adequately with the various ways in which divergent social groups use media products and decode them in different ways. Thus, Anderson overstates the unity of the nation and the strength of national identities which covers over differences of class, gender, ethnicity and so forth…cultural and national cultural identities are not coterminous with states.41

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35 BNS 1/1/266 C17/73. p5.
36 BNS 1/1/266 C17/73. p7. Emphasis in original.
37 BNS 1/1/266 C17/73. p6.
38 BNS 1/1/266 C17/73. p6.
39 BNS 1/1/266 C17/73. p6.
40 I will discuss this in greater detail in the following section.
Barker explains the failure of propaganda where schisms in South African society led to a less wholehearted support of the war effort – schisms of race and ethnicity were in contrast to Anderson's vision of the "imagined community".

To return to Smuts’ quote – itself a form of propaganda – with which I opened the chapter, there are a few significant points worth mentioning as they deal with key themes related to the perceptions of women serving during the Second World War, both in South Africa and in the wider international arena – a vision of women which was perpetuated by the media of propaganda. Integral to this is the word “auxiliary” which was given to the branches of the Defence Force that were created for women. Auxiliary implies a supplementary or supporting role, a form of “backing up” or assisting the main branches of the Armed Services as it were. A number of branches were created in a similar vein to the American and British counterparts to supplement the work of the Navy, Army and Air Force, the creation of which I will discuss later in the chapter.

Smuts invocation: “I call on the women of South Africa to take their place beside their men folk…” [emphasis added] bears true to the notion of the Auxiliary services. It was the patriotic duty of women to take up support roles. In the Auxiliary services these ranged from transporting food supplies to radar operators and aircraft mechanics. In the civilian sphere it involved women taking up previously male roles on farms and in industry. The common element of the support roles played by women is that it was of a non-combatant nature.42

The notion of support is evident in the phrase, “…who frees a man for service…” which was a common one used in World War Two propaganda, enlisting the aid of women. It was not confined simply to South Africa either as is apparent in the reproduction of the British recruiting poster below. The conventional wording was “freeing a man to fight” and suggested that for every woman who joined a branch of the Auxiliary services or responded to the call to work in manufacturing munitions or

42 The issue of allowing women into combat is still one of great contention. Despite the integration of women into the main body of the Armed Services throughout many countries and the gradual expansion of their roles within the military which places them increasingly dangerous situations on par with their male counterparts, the actual issue of combat is sensitive and only a small percentage of countries with Armed Forces which include women, allow them to take on combat roles.
working the land, a man was freed to take his rightful place in combat. Women were thus given an integral, albeit somewhat secondary role, in the war effort.

Embedded within Smuts quote, and in fact within almost all forms of propaganda, was the notion of the temporary nature of war work. No war is expected to last forever and the changes wrought by the war effort were expected to last only as long as the duration of the war.43

The mobilisation of women for the war was, in a sense, based upon the way in which women had been a part of society previously. For Afrikaner women this was in the area of social work – the work of women in the home was extended to the public sphere, which became an extended home and was the means by which Afrikaner women entered politics:

Women from varied political persuasions all “exalted women’s capacity to mother and extended to society as a whole the values of care, nurturance and morality”. Maternalist politics “extolled the virtues of domesticity while simultaneously legitimating women’s public relationships to politics and the state, to community, workplace, marketplace…”44

There was no movement to overturn the perceptions of gender in terms of the characteristics attributed to men and women – instead women were to bring their

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43 I will be returning to this theme in my final chapter on the aftermath of the Second World War.
attributes and their domesticity to the public sphere. This is evident in metaphors using housework which were employed to describe the role of women in political life:

It seems to me that the need to work certainly exists; when a woman, an ordinary normal woman, notices disorder, she wants to tidy up. Disorder doesn’t bother men as much; unconsciously they suffer from a disordered condition, but they don’t manage to deal with this…

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There appeared to be in operation the notion that women could bring their brand of morality into the public sphere and play this role in politics in a way that men could not – as it was in the arena of the moral that women held the higher ground.

The interwar period also saw an opening of various opportunities for waged labour for women in secondary industry and as white-collar workers. However these job opportunities did not challenge the perception of women – they worked very much in line with the characteristics given to women:

Women workers became clustered in particular areas of employment, which could be seen as extensions of their domestic roles and did not conflict with established views about their “natural” abilities. Thus in the professions, they were concentrated in the “nurturing” realms of teaching and nursing; in business, in service and supportive roles as secretaries and sales women; in industry, in food processing and textile concerns, and, of course, in domestic service.

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The mobilisation of women during the war included them participating in new activities in industry and the Auxiliary Services which had been the previous domain of men however, the rationale behind it remained the same – the new activities of women in war were linked to their “natural” qualities as caregivers which was evident in military nursing as well as supporting men by carrying out non-combative duties on the home front thus contributing to victory and the speedy return of men from the front lines.

Even in the realm of the suffragette movement, women were not radicalised. Enfranchising women was not seen as an important issue in the South African Parliament in the 1920s – even men like Smuts who favoured extending the vote to White women was not vehement about it: “If it [the Bill to extend the franchise to White women] does not win this session, it may win the next session, or the session

after.” For Parliament it was infinitely preferable to extend the franchise to White women over Black men and in 1929, extending the vote to White women formed the basis of Hertzog’s re-election campaign, which returned him to power. The enfranchising of White South African women coming a decade later than the enfranchisement of women around the world, was not due to any particular commitment on the part of Parliament to women’s rights but to allay the threat of enfranchising an overwhelming African majority. For Hertzog it was merely a means of achieving an end and he did not believe that the enfranchisement of White women would cause any major social upheaval in gender roles.

Hertzog’s beliefs were well founded – the entire suffragette campaign never presented a threat to gender roles:

Most suffragettes and anti-suffragettes were in basic agreement: they did not want to upset the existing division of labour between the sexes. Arguments for and against were riddled with naturalist assumptions about male and female identity. Both sides built on an essentially biologist view of gender, which ascribed gender identity to certain inborn differences between men and women…the socialisation theories of gender difference developed by modern feminists did not form part of the currency of the debate.

It is with the suffragette movement in South Africa in mind and its inherent conservatism that women were mobilised for the Second World War. Since the aims of the suffragettes were not radical, the waged labour done by women fell within the “natural” abilities of women and even the entry of women into politics was based on the perception of their essential natures as mothers and moral guardians, it is safe to assume that Parliament believed that allowing women new forms of work in the Auxiliary Services and in industry for the duration of the war – as was being done all over the world – would be unlikely to have lasting repercussions or create social upheaval. The mobilization of women thus proceeded from existing roles of women in the public sphere, which were themselves based on earlier essentialised differences between men and women.

Smuts’ call to the women of South Africa to join the war effort was supported by the other media of propaganda as well. "Women were explicitly and implicitly seen as

White women – but Black women were also targeted as part of the whole in these campaigns. The recruiting film by the S.A.W.A.S.\textsuperscript{50} Command 13 entitled Service provides a visual mode of expression for the ideology behind the recruitment for women and I will now quote and discuss certain key scenes in the film as laid out by the script.\textsuperscript{51}

*The Call To Serve*

Shot 1: SCENE at the cottage gate. Jack fully equipped is leaving to join his ship. Mother walks down the path arm in arm with her boy. AUNTIE and EVE follow behind. AUNTIE tries to be cheerful and keep up all their spirits. EVE says:-

*When you are far away at sea, we will do our bit with the S.A.W.A.S.*

Shot 3: Sun is streaming in on the verandah of a little home built in the old Dutch style. GRANNIE with her knitting in one hand stands inside the stable door to wish the young airman good luck. KOOS with ANNE at his side has obviously called to say Good-bye. ANNE says:-

*I'll keep the home fires burning while you fight.*

GRANNIE replies:-

*Of course we both will. We'll join the S.A.W.A.S.*\textsuperscript{52}

First, the film was aimed at an audience of White South African women of both middle and working class status.\textsuperscript{53} In addition it appealed to both English and Afrikaans-speaking women. The dominant theme was of men who were related to these women in some form, going off to fight overseas. The women, in their desire to contribute to the war effort along with their men folk, would in turn join the South African Women’s Auxiliary Services. A comparison was made between the home, concerning the work of the S.A.W.A.S., and the rest of the world where the men were going to make their contribution by engaging in combat. The description of the scenes here closely corresponded to the gender roles that I have discussed in the previous chapter. The association between the two become stronger in the following scenes.

*A Gift to Wish Him God Speed*

Shot: Gifts on table, soldiers filing past. An Auxiliary offers one man a pullover. He pauses to examine the card which bears the message:

*“With Best Wishes from Mrs Jones”*

He gives a bashful grin and an almost imperceptible shake of his head as he replies:-

*Can I have one from a Miss?*

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\textsuperscript{50} South African Women’s Auxiliary Services

\textsuperscript{51} *Service – The Film of the S.A.W.A.S. Command 13.* Documentation Centre, Department of Defence Archives, DR 12/44/I.

\textsuperscript{52} *Service.* p1.

\textsuperscript{53} Shot 2 – the quote of which I omitted - is a scene with a “wealthier home” when compared to Shot 1.
He gets what he asked for and moves on with every appearance of satisfaction.\footnote{\textit{Service}. p3.}

Here, conventional gender roles form the basis for this scene. Members of the Auxiliary service engaged in knitting, a traditional female past time. In addition the young soldier was not keen to accept a pullover from a “Mrs Jones” - a married and possibly older women, but instead wished for a pullover knitted by a single woman. This ties in to an article appearing in the monthly magazine \textit{The Women’s Auxiliary}, which described the actions of the S.A.W.A.S. where soldiers looking for specific women they have met at any one instance were able to turn to the S.A.W.A.S. to track them down. This role of the S.A.W.A.S. was almost that of a “dating service” where soldiers were able to arrange meetings with prospective wives:

One soldier wrote back from up north asking S.A.W.A.S. to find a wife for him. His wife had died and he wanted a mother for his children. The S.A.W.A.S. found the right woman.\footnote{H.H. Huxham. “He Wanted a Wife – the S.A.W.A.S. Found Her” in \textit{The Women’s Auxiliary}, August 1942, Issue 24, p25. Documentation Centre – Department of Defence Archives.}

In addition a letter – one of many – from the British naval ship H.M.S. Queen Elizabeth, requested young women with which to correspond and meet socially:

As can be expected, we hear very little form home, and that brings me to my real purpose in writing. We should like to correspond with some of your girls between the ages of 18 and 25, and would greatly appreciate it if you could do something for us.

We hope to be with you at some time or other, and I know that we shall be made as welcome as have been previous ships that have had the good fortune to visit you. You may rest assured, sir, that if our hopes are fulfilled, we shall do everything in our power to give those girls who do correspond with us a jolly fine time…\footnote{Huxham. “He Wanted a Wife.”}

Moreover the film \textit{Service} made a strong appeal to duty – it was the duty of South African women to free their men to fight by joining the respective Auxiliary services in service to their country:

\textit{Beach Scene}

\textit{Shot:} BETTY, JOAN and three other girls coming up form the water. BETTY says:- This is our last idle morning. We are joining up to-morrow to help win the war.

\textit{Shot:} The scene is the yard where the cars are parked. Close up of a car, a girls’ bent over form is seen. She straightens herself and looks up from her job of cleaning and oiling. She turns round a broad grin on her face, which we see has a big black smear on it. We recognise JOAN.\footnote{\textit{Service}. p13-14.}
In this scene an attempt was made to reconcile the notion of women working at previously male-dominated tasks such as repairing vehicles. The notion of women being idle prior to the outbreak of war, and their subsequent sense of accomplishment achieved by carrying out their duty, was represented by the character “Joan”, where satisfaction at playing her part in the war effort was signified by her smile. The smear on her face caused by her work on the car, united the formerly male task with her own femininity, perhaps working in a propaganda film to create a sense of acceptance on the part of the viewer for the new roles adopted by women in a time of need.

Propaganda also worked by demonising and “othering” the enemy – which, in the case of Nazi Germany, was an emphasis on the brutality of German society and the repression of the German state. By drawing attention to the lack of freedom in German society, propaganda suggested that the duty of women to the war effort on the side of the Allies would prevent a German victory, as the triumph of Nazism would herald a great step backward for women. Hence the very way of life and liberty of women was, if anything, under a greater threat than that of men. This functioned in a similar manner to the perception in African society that Nazism was a worse prospect than the loss of rights under the South African state – which I addressed earlier in the chapter. Equally, their role in the war would create a sense of respect on the part of men for their achievements. The part they played in war would therefore further their cause on two fronts – by preventing the loss of progress they had already made and also, by actually augmenting their status:

Psychologically, women know that by the victory of the Nazis they would lose everything. They would become once more – perhaps for a thousand years – hard-driven chattels and despised playthings. This is their war, in a stronger and even deeper sense than it is man’s. They, too, must fight to the last ounce; and they must nerve man to fight it by proving to him that the home he is risking his life to defend is kept by a woman he can, and must, respect.58

In a similar vein to the way in which propaganda attempted to reconcile the role of women with their duty in war, appeals were made to men to join the war effort. Propaganda was entrusted with a key role in recruiting men as South Africa’s recruitment policy to send men over her borders depended on voluntary enlistment

rather than conscription. Here, the dominant theme of duty was closely linked to that of masculinity. A strong visual image, both in South Africa and abroad, was of soldiers going off to fight whilst their loved ones at home look on and wave goodbye. Here the conventional division of the public and private spheres were refigured as the frontline and the home front. The image of their loved ones was the raison d'être men fight – it was portrayed as a defensive war where a soldier was fighting to protect his way of life, home and family against the invader. This functioned in a similar manner to the way in which the notion of men braving the corrupt public sphere in order to provide for the home - being called upon to sacrifice their own morality so that the women and the home maintained an isolated sense of purity. In this instance the sacrifice may have been their own lives but it served the greater good of preventing the contamination of Nazism in the home. Fighting for their country and the patriotism it entails, thus involved a substitution of the smaller home of the individual soldier for the greater home of the country.

As I have mentioned in the previous chapter, war was also portrayed as the ultimate test of masculinity. The duty to country, family and comrades was viewed as paramount and pressure was exerted on those who failed to meet the obligations by slogans such as You Can’t Appease Your Conscience, suggesting a sense of moral failure on their part. Previously I wrote of “The Letters of a Young Airman to His Mother”, a series of letters written by a pilot, Hugh, to his mother on a monthly basis and published in The Women’s Auxiliary. Hugh is symbolic of the ideal way in which men were expected to behave during war – unflinching in the face of danger and unwavering in terms of duty, while simultaneously holding in contempt those men who did not do the same:

I have never had any time for the men who did not take their chance and play their part in the last war. At the same time I do not expect a man to be a hero; but he must not be a coward and he must retain his self-respect by doing his duty…

The function of this article and others like it was another means of creating a sense of the norm – the soldier embodying all the ideals of duty and patriotism and the deviation from the norm - those who were perceived to be aiding the enemy by failing

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59 See The Call to Serve, Shots 1 and 3 – footnote 25.
60 I discuss this distinction between the public and the private sphere in the previous chapter.
61 South Africa’s Yesterdays. p303.
62 Documentation Centre – Department of Defence Archives. The Women’s Auxiliary, July 1941, Issue 11, p15.
to carry out their duty and enlist, or those who were simply cowards and failed to live up to their role as men.

The recruiting posters of men in war created an idealised vision of manhood in South Africa – strong, broad-shouldered, White men in uniform. This bore remarkable similarities to the posters of the other Allied countries as well as the Axis powers. Other than patriotism, a feeling of heroism was also evoked and figures in uniform may be seen appearing on hilltops waving flags or steadily trudging through enemy fire – never wavering from the ultimate aim of victory.
Below the South African posters – one a recruiting poster for the Medical Corps and the other a poster from a musical – are two reproductions of German propaganda posters. There is a great similarity in the physical portrayal of masculine soldiers.
This idealised vision of the soldier evident in both Allied and Axis countries suggested a definition of masculinity which was contrasted with the portly figure in the picture on the bottom right, which represents Britain. Masculinity appeared to be very much a physical definition which was portrayed as a feature of the soldiers of the particular country in which the posters originated and was contrasted with the demonised enemy who personified the less masculine attributes of corpulence and a lack of physical strength. There was thus a sense that masculinity was confined those who shared similar political beliefs and fought on the same side, be it the Allies or the Axis powers.

War was portrayed in an alluring and sensationalised manner as evident by the slogan: “Don’t be left out of the greatest adventure of all time!” The notion of soldiers as embodying the ideal vision of masculinity and hence being most attractive to women was indicated by: “Was there ever a girl who didn’t prefer a man in uniform?” Implied within this was the sentiment that to be a “real” man and to be acknowledged by women as such, was to don a uniform and go off to fight. Women were thus implicated as providing an additional motivation to fight and similarly exerting a greater sense of pressure on those not swayed so easily by the propaganda machine.

In Australia in the case of the infantryman Henry Gullett however, propaganda fell short before patriotism, duty and history:

They [parents and teachers] saw history – as we ourselves saw it through their eyes – as a continuing military struggle in which every kind of freedom had continually to be defended. We understood that we were a free and, by comparative standards, a happy people because the men of our race had always been ready to fight and die. We know all about Hastings and Crecy, the Armada, Waterloo and Gallipoli…So when we were mustered together in our platoons and battalions it was quite unnecessary to subject us to propaganda calculated to strengthen our willingness to fight or to fortify our resolve to go on with it to the end. That had all been done before in our childhood.

Gullett referred to a history of men fighting which was not confined to Australia – actually the only battle in the list he cited in which Australian men participated was

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63 South Africa’s Yesterdays. Peter Joyce, ed. (Cape Town: Readers’ Digest Association of South Africa, 1981) p306. See previous chapter where I discuss the schooling system and the portrayal of war as another team sport and an adventure, ignoring the harsh reality.

64 South Africa’s Yesterdays. p306.

65 In the following chapter I discuss the failure of propaganda in its initial form during war weariness and the different appeals made to compensate for this.

that of Gallipoli during the First World War. However he was influenced by the recounting of a history of past heroics and glory by parents and teachers of great battles fought by the British. It was inculcated in him from childhood and it was to this glorious past that he turned when called up to fight, believing that he was following in a just and honourable tradition in the footsteps of his forefathers. For Gullett it was this history rather than propaganda that provided the motivation to fight. However propaganda itself drew on both the historical and the contemporary and in that way created a connection between the past and World War II.\(^67\)

An interesting feature of propaganda in South Africa was the appeal to family. South Africa was portrayed as a huge family with Jan Smuts and his wife at the head. Mrs Smuts was known to all as “Ouma”\(^68\) and the soldiers in military service and the women in the Auxiliary services were viewed as her children as is evident in a letter written by her and published in *The Women’s Auxiliary* at the beginning of 1942:

> We know that you, our boys and girls on active service, will always be a credit to South Africa and add lustre to her name whatever betides, and though there is often anxiety in our hears, yet we are glad that you chose the path of duty and honour when South Africa called and thus made it possible for us to hold our heads high and look the whole world in the face because we have nothing to be ashamed of.

South Africa thanks you and is proud of you, her boys and girls. And Ouma also thanks you and loves you and blesses you, her beloved children, who are fighting as bravely and heroically as their ancestors for the liberty and freedom, not only of South Africa, but of all Africa – aye, of the whole world. God bless you and keep you strong!

Much love from

**OUMA**\(^{69}\)

The invocation of the family added a personal touch to the conventional motivation of honour and duty – to which “Ouma” also referred. The letter detoured from the anonymity of posters and films and the warm tone of the letter made it appear that each individual was being spoken to and that “Ouma” was aware of all they endured in service of their country and appreciated it. Couched in the notion of the family is of course, all those who were not members of the family – those who did not heed the call to serve. The feeling of exclusion was thus another means by which pressure was exerted by propaganda in all its forms.

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\(^{67}\) See footnote 17.

\(^{68}\) Ouma means grandmother in Afrikaans.

“Ouma” Smuts in much of the South African literature – both primary and secondary – dealing with the Second World War, was portrayed as a mother figure. Prior to the World War II however, she was a figure very much in the background – it was the war which brought her to the fore where she took on the persona of the “ouma” of the nation – a role to an extent either self-consciously or unconsciously modelled on that of her American counterpart, Eleanor Roosevelt.

From the outset, Sybella Margaretha Krige – or Isie as she was affectionately termed – was a somewhat unconventional woman. When she turned seventeen in 1887, her beau Jan Smuts wrote her a letter of congratulations making much use of imagery, which was in line with his own fervently religious beliefs. He was however somewhat disturbed by her belief system:

…he was deeply perturbed about a poem she wrote in which she stated categorically that she had often tried to be a Christian “but I cannot, cannot be, so no hope to live in heaven through eternity I see”. This prompted the youthful Smuts to confront her point-blank: “Isie, you are a Christian, are you not?” To reassure her he wrestled with her doubts, expounded the promise of Eternal Life and assured her that she was indeed a Christian.\(^70\)

She was one of only a handful of South African women who attended college in the nineteenth century. She was a student at Victoria College along with her husband-to-be Jan Smuts and reference was made to her disdain of fashion and frivolity – an attitude, which remained with her as she assumed her duties as wife of the Prime Minister:

…she was disinterested in the pursuits and the pastimes of the fashionable and the frivolous, so [too] was she unconcerned with personal adornment. But during the war she did often wear the circlet of diamonds enshrining a “V” in sapphires topped by a ruby Red Cross that Sir Ernest and Lady Oppenheimer gave her in appreciation of her untiring war effort.\(^71\)

During the South African war at the beginning of the twentieth century, Isie remained an ardent Afrikaner nationalist and anti-British as a result of the South African War, and is believed to have disagreed with her husband’s political views on many occasions. However, British imperialism was very much in the background with the


rise of Nazism at the onset of the Second World War. It was at this time that Isie Smuts came to the fore. As President of the Gifts and Comforts Fund, she was very much a “hands on” person sewing bags to be filled with toiletries, making speeches and touring alongside her husband as he inspected the Union Forces.\textsuperscript{72} To White South Africans, particularly the troops stationed outside South Africa’s borders, she was something of an icon. On tours with General Smuts, she interacted with them, representing a link with their homes and mothers. This is emphasised by the title by which she was referred – “Ouma”.

Isie Smuts thus represented many of the contradictions inherent in South African society, which became apparent during the course of World War II – the private woman who was thrust into the limelight, the educated woman who questioned worldviews such as religion, the mother figure of South Africa, and the Afrikaner nationalist who supported the British and played a major role in the war effort. In addition to demonstrating her own complexities and contradictions, the Second World War brought to the fore many conflicts within South African society, politics and the state.

\textbf{Schisms}

The proclamation signed by Sir Patrick Duncan, Governor-General of South Africa on September 6, 1939 marked the entry of the Union of South Africa into the Second World War; just three days after the Allied Forces had declared war on Germany.

\textsuperscript{72} Bryant. \textit{As We Were}. p30.
The intervening three days were a period of conflict in the Cabinet and the final decision to enter the war on the side of the Allied Forces was a hard fought one.\footnote{J.S.M. Simpson. \textit{South Africa Fights}. (London: Hodder and Stoughton Limited, 1941) p34.}

A schism was apparent between the Prime Minister of the Union, J.B.M Hertzog, and five other members of the Cabinet who desired the adoption of a neutral position, and the remaining seven members headed by General J.C. Smuts who wished to enter the war in support of the Allies.\footnote{Simpson. \textit{South Africa Fights}. p30.} After a heated debate in the Union Assembly, the Smuts coalition won the day and the proclamation was introduced announcing to South Africa and the rest of the world, her entry into the war.\footnote{Simpson. \textit{South Africa Fights}. p33-34.} The debate in Parliament was significant of a long-term problem – the animosity felt by Afrikaners toward the British, which still ran deep only a generation after the South African War, making many, more sympathetic to the German cause. Smuts however made an appeal to the contrary:

> The Union should carry out the obligation to which it has agreed, and continue its co-operation with its friends and associates in the British Commonwealth of Nations.\footnote{Simpson. \textit{South Africa Fights}. p32.}

Hertzog was relegated to the opposition and Smuts assumed the role of the Prime Minister of the Union.\footnote{Simpson. \textit{South Africa Fights}. p34.} However, Smuts acknowledged the difficulty in obtaining wholehearted support for the war – a situation that had the potential to tear the country apart:

> I have spoken about our choice in the war. That choice with all its overwhelming responsibility was relatively easy for the English-speaking Afrikaners to make, their hearts agreed with their heads.
> On the contrary, for Dutch Afrikaners the choice was a crisis which hit deep, causing the tragic division among us.\footnote{Crwys-Williams. \textit{A Country at War}. p54.}

The schism in Parliament during the Second World War was by no means the first – despite the appearance of a united front South African White politics was deeply divided and had been so for much of the country’s history. The creation of the Boer Republics in the Transvaal and the Orange Free State in the nineteenth century and

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the ensuing South African war against British forces helped forge a sense of Afrikaner identity, which was in opposition to that of the British.⁷⁹

Years prior to the Second World War in a case of extreme irony, Parliament was once again split during the 1933 elections – here it was Hertzog’s support of English-speaking South Africans which stood in opposition to D.F. Malan’s desire for sole Afrikaner control of the country which caused the tension:

In the 1933 elections, however, Afrikaner nationalism was split again, due mainly to opposition to Hertzog’s policy of co-operation with English-speaking South Africans. The Afrikaner Broederbond favored Malan, Hertzog’s opponent, who favored exclusive and total Afrikaner control…⁸⁰

The split within Parliament after the outbreak of war in Europe on September 3, 1939, followed a pattern of dissent within White politics – dissent that the war once again brought to the fore.

Conflict and tension over extending support to the Allies was by no means confined to the South African Parliament. A similar process of vacillation was evident on the part of the Communist Party of South Africa. In a report delivered by J. Morkel at a Communist Party conference in March 1940, the quandary in which the CP found itself is clear:

The Party, therefore, while declaring opposition to the war, stated that at the moment the struggle was in South Africa against the Nazis. This undoubtedly weakened the line of struggle against the war, since it meant a passive acceptance of the Smuts Government and its war policy. But the dilemma – support Smuts and the war or oppose the war and support the pro-Nazi, anti-Trade Union, anti-Colour Nationalists…⁸¹

The dilemma was compounded by the Soviet Union’s signing of a non-aggression pact with Germany and the CP’s refusal to support the war brought it into conflict with the South African government.⁸²

The CP also launched a fierce attack on those African, Indian and Coloured people who responded to the government’s call to throw their weight behind the war effort,

condemning their support of a government, which oppressed them. In a somewhat patronising manner, they were not given agency for their decision – it was seen by the CP as an irrational product of years of oppression:

…But for certain prominent non-Europeans to come forward and beg the Government to give the non-European a chance to serve in this war is a scandal. Surely these people must be so demoralised and degraded under the oppression in South Africa that they have lost all sense of self-respect.83

However, Germany’s invasion of the Soviet Union led to the CP making a 180-degree turn:

Soviet Russia has been attacked by the Fascist Axis without the slightest justifiable reason. The Soviet Union is today not only defending the home of Socialism, but is fighting for the cause of freedom of all other nations and peoples. The Communist Party of South Africa calls upon the working-class and all democratic and freedom-loving people to give them unqualified and wholehearted support to the Soviet Union in its struggle against the Nazi aggressors.84

Prominent Party men like Rusty Bernstein signed up for war service85 and an alliance of strange bedfellows was formed between the CP and the South African government.

Despite the Communist party’s less than complimentary view of Black support for the war, there was much tension and contradiction within political organisations such as the ANC over their role in the war. Initially the ANC opposed joining the war effort unless they were extended equal political rights as citizens of the country.86 Following this, the ANC changed its attitude, encouraging Africans to support the war and requesting that the Government arm its Black troops “in order that they may play their rightful part in the defeat of Fascism”.87 Despite no concessions being made on the part of the government, the ANC continued its support of the Allies.

One of the reasons put forward for the entry of African men into the war was that it was their duty as men to fight for the defence of the country:

…I If there is danger, we as full-blooded men do not wish to sit around like women and children with our arms folded while others defend our country. Our loyalty is

83 South African Communists Speak. p152.
84 South African Communists Speak. p162-163.
85 Bernstein. Memory Against Forgetting. p171.
beyond question. Since war has broken out every African that has held a meeting has expressed its unswerving support to the King and to His Government in the Union.\(^\text{88}\)

Here, participation in the war was linked to masculinity and contrasted to women and children on the home front. The duty of African men lay in taking their position alongside White men and if necessary dying for the “principles of Christianity, democracy, and human dignity…”\(^\text{89}\). In addition there was the belief that victory of the Nazis would be far worse than the current discrimination, which they faced – joining the war effort would thus be a support of the lesser of two evils:

If Hitler wins this war, we are going to suffer as much as the white man. So let us do our bit to prevent it.\(^\text{90}\)

Inherent in this was the belief that their efforts during the war would demonstrate their capability, loyalty and good citizenship, which could have the effect of giving them political, economic and social equality.

Women like the activist Helen Joseph were also contributors to the war. Prior to her signing up there was the sense that her life had little meaning before and was itself contradictory:

The contradictions of my life continued; I was beginning to make a small personal stand on the question of discrimination against Indians, and at the same time I was enjoying myself enormously in the white community as a grass widow, a life of night clubs, parties, bridge.

But once again I changed my life. One morning I read of the call for university women to join up as welfare and information officers…I telephoned to tell my husband, and within a few days I was on my way to Pretoria and the WAAF.\(^\text{91}\)

There was the perception that the war gave her a sense of purpose and it also helped resolve a contradiction. During her time as an information officer she gave lectures to fellow women on liberal issues:

Our first official mandate was “to inculcate a liberal and tolerant attitude of mind”…I lectured on a wide range of subjects: local and parliamentary institutions, Nazism, democracy. I studied all sorts of subjects: the franchise, division of land, housing, malnutrition, education – and the discrepancy between what was being spent on White and non-White education.

How could I help but come at last to the realisation of the inequalities of this land?\(^\text{92}\)

\(^{92}\) Joseph. Tomorrow’s Sun. p36.
Her work in the war played a role in the activism for equal rights, which she was to engage in after the war – it helped resolve the contradiction between the White middle class woman and the campaigner for equality. At the same time there was a sense that the mobilisation initiated by the government was not solely within the government’s control – her lectures on democracy led to her questioning the situation in her own country. At the end of the war she did not return to a pre-war existence but began a new life as a result of this mobilisation – she divorced her husband and embarked on a life of political activism:

The end of my marriage had nothing to do with the political convictions that had grown in me during the war, but I think their development might well have caused a break at a later stage, for I doubt that Billie would have gone all the way with me.93

The opportunities afforded her by the war created a permanent change in her life and her mobilisation did not simply cease in 1945.

The schisms, contradictions and tensions evident in the main political groups of South Africa had an effect on the way in which men and women were mobilised for the war effort. In addition to their loyalty to South Africa were various conflicting loyalties of race and political affiliation. However, many of these schisms were resolved in favour of a support of the war effort – CP members like Rusty Bernstein joined the war, the ANC actively advocated participation in the war. It was only those opposed to the Allies who were unmoved by calls to support the Allies.

Thus despite Smuts’ parliamentary victory, not all of South Africa stood behind her entry into the war on the side of the British – whereas some groups were uncertain over the role they should play, others were vehemently opposed to extending any support to the Allies and, in fact, favoured the Axis powers. The Ossewabrandwag was a deeply national socialist organisation founded in 1938 in the Orange Free State. Originally designed to promote Afrikaner culture, it acquired a nationalist character, which became extreme during the course of the Second World War and was virulently anti-British. Even prior to the outbreak of the war, the leader of the Ossewabrandwag, Dr H.J.H. Van Rensburg, had met Adolf Hitler at the Olympic Games in Berlin in 1936 and the belief of the organisation was that an alliance with

93 Joseph. Tomorrow’s Sun. p36.
the Germans would lead to the formation of an Afrikaner republic independent of Britain:94

Hitler’s Mein Kampf shows the way to greatness – the path of South Africa...Hitler gave the Germans a calling. He gave them a fanaticism which causes them to stand back for no one. We must follow this example because only by such holy fanaticism can the Afrikaner nation achieve its calling.95

The increasing acts of sabotage carried out by the organisation moved Smuts to state, “We are fighting this war not only at the front, but internally as well,”96 and the government banned Union Defence Force officers and civil servants from joining the organisation.97 Despite this, although many Afrikaners were ardent supporters of Smuts’ decision to enter the war, a large number perceiving themselves as patriots, remained ardently opposed to the war effort and some actively intervened to hamper it.

Regardless of this less than whole-hearted support, the outbreak of war – a war fought against the clearly defined enemy of fascism – provoked a feeling of “fighting the good fight”:

We have fought for our freedom in the past. We now go forth as crusaders, as children of the Cross to fight for freedom itself, the freedom of the human spirit, the free choice of the human individual to shape his own life according to the light that God has given him. The world cause of freedom is also our cause and we shall wage this war for human freedom until God’s victory crowns the end.98

It is in this light that other South Africans volunteered to play their part, hoping that freedom achieved abroad would have similar repercussions at home. More than a hundred and twenty thousand South Africans of African, Coloured, Indian and Malay descent volunteered for full-time military duty, although restrictions were placed on the activities in which they could engage.99

96 South Africa’s Yesterdays. p307.
97 Readers’ Digest Illustrated History of South Africa. p349.
98 South Africa’s Yesterdays. p304. I will return to this quote in my final chapter on the aftermath of the Second World War.
99 South Africa’s Yesterdays. p303.
(Picture taken from J. Phelago “The South African State and African Political Response to Participation in the Second World War (1939-1950)”)

Native Military Corps

Vuka Afrika Landela Tsoga Afrika Latelang
The picture on the previous page is of a recruiting poster for the Native Military Corps (NMC). It portrays an image of a Zulu warrior in the background creating a link between the duties of men in the NMC with a heroic, glorious, warrior past. This appears ironic when compared to the photograph on the following page which is of Black men training with assegais – the traditional Zulu weapon which was useless in modern warfare and made the link with the past seem incongruous, a representation which is strengthened by the juxtaposition of the gas masks and the assegais. The use of the latter was due to the vehement opposition to the arming of Black men for the war.

(Photo taken from Ian Gleeson The Unknown Force)

Notwithstanding South Africa’s declaration of war against Germany and the patriotic fervour sweeping the land, albeit with some exceptions, the country was ill prepared for war. With no real permanent military force, few weapons and an industry not geared to wartime production, much work had to be done. In spite of fears of conscription and the subsequent rush by many men to get married in order to be ineligible, Smuts decided that raising volunteers would be a better option. The main portion of the fighting force was drawn from the almost 200 000 White men who volunteered for active duty. This was in addition to the Permanent Force of 3 350, the Active Citizen Force of 14 600 and the Seaward Defence Force of approximately 970. Furthermore, 120 000 South Africans from the other racial groups volunteered.

101 South Africa’s Yesterdays. p302.
The first group of Black men recruited for the war were the Coloureds, as part of the re-established Cape Corps (CC), which had been in operation during the First World War. These men were initially trained as drivers for transport sections of the Defence Force. Training began in 1940 in centres at Bultfontein and later, Ladysmith. Ex-soldiers who had served with the Cape Corps during the First World War were employed to train the new generation of men. Following the successful recruitment of Coloured men, a similar process was initiated for the recruitment of Indian and Malay men under the auspices of the Indian and Malay Corps (IMC). Their training was for similar, non-combatant tasks as that engaged in by the CC:

The training curriculum was based largely on the model of the Cape Corps, with the accent on driving, maintenance (especially running repairs), and convoy work. A number of medical orderlies, stretcher-bearers and hygiene personnel were also trained.

Fears of the shortage of labour, which may have resulted – particularly in mining - should Africans have been recruited, led to a delay in the creation of an African corps within the Defence Force. The Director of Native Labour wrote to the Defence Department reassuring them that the needs of labour would not be jeopardised should a force of 150 000 African soldiers be raised:

He also argued that as the war progressed, unemployment among blacks would become more severe and that, above all other considerations, the black citizens of the country should be given the same rights to volunteer for military service as had been afforded the Coloureds and Indians.

Four battalions were created allowing African soldiers to take on security duty within South Africa, hence freeing White men to take up combat roles overseas. The Native Military Corps (NMC) was created to extend the scope of the activities of these African servicemen and they were trained in a similar manner to their Coloured and Indian counterparts for roles ranging from drivers to stretcher-bearers and cooks. The eagerness of these African men to serve was evident in the initial number of thirty thousand volunteers by the end of the first years – a figure that practically tripled by the end of the war. Simultaneously with the creation of the NMC came the creation of a directorate within the Union Defence Force which was named the Non-European

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Army Services (NEAS) and which bore the responsibility for overseeing aspects of the various Black corps. \(^{106}\)


The photographs above suggest the “civilising mission” of military service. The men came in as “raw material” – undisciplined, poorly clothed, unable to drill properly. After the training period they were transformed into a disciplined force – smartly turned out in uniform and standing in perfect order. It is implied that military service creates a certain kind of man and promotes a certain form of masculinity in line with the norms of civilisation – disciplined, regulated and in uniform.

Along with troops came the need for weapons and South Africa was in a pitiable state with regards to military hardware:

In September 1939 the country’s tiny Defence Force boasted just two home-made armoured cars; two First World War tanks; 63 obsolete HAWKER Hartbees aircraft (most of them unserviceable), two modern bombers; six Hawker Hurricane fighter aircraft; and SAA’s Junkers airliners; the training ship HMSAS General Botha (an engine-less Bessel moored at Simonstown); 70 decrepit field guns with enough ammunition for one good day’s shooting, and a small-arms factory at Pretoria. \(^{107}\)

With the aid of Iscor and the workshops of the South African Railways and the mines, industrial production was converted to the manufacture of war equipment – armoured cars, tanks and munitions. The new minesweepers and patrol-boats given the task of patrolling the hitherto unprotected miles of coast had their origins in the trawlers and whalers. The Seaward Defence Force received equipment for similar purposes,

\(^{106}\) Gleeson. The Unknown Force. p112.
\(^{107}\) South Africa’s Yesterdays. p303.
particularly with regards to the possibility of submarine attacks.  Much of this was accomplished within the first six months of the outbreak of war and by 1945, South Africa’s military production was formidable.

On the civilian front, thousands of women applied for first aid training at the Red Cross or the St John Ambulance Association and private organisations like the Women’s Aviation Association offered their services. In addition apprehensive citizens stocked up on food and emergency supplies. People considered key to the war – “reservists, nurses, artisans”- were not permitted to leave the country. In all areas of South African life, therefore, the nation prepared for war.

**The Home Front**

*If South Africa’s worth living in it’s worth fighting for...on the home front, too.*


The home front was as affected by the war – changes were evident in all walks of life ranging from fashion where suits and dresses were made without pocket flaps, frills, pleats and buttons in an attempt to conserve material, to the erection of barbed wire barricades on Durban’s South Beach in an attempt to ward off possible German naval attacks. Fears of Japanese air raids prompted black outs in coastal areas and conservation was in evidence in all forms ranging from old car tyres – which had become a criminal offence to destroy – to old light bulbs, newspapers and most important, petrol, which was rationed.  

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108 *South Africa’s Yesterdays.* p303.
109 *South Africa’s Yesterdays.* p302-303.
In terms of the war itself, propaganda was at its height with slogans such as “Careless talk costs lives” and “Don’t talk about ships and shipping”. Similarly pamphlets were distributed to counter the influence of the right-wing organisation, the Ossewabrandwag, as well as any Nazi influence, which was believed to have penetrated the country.\textsuperscript{111}

Civilians played their part too. 11,2 million pounds was raised in aid of the National War Fund. “Penny Plane” boxes were placed in places of work and workers were expected to contribute a penny for every Axis plane shot down. This all served to create a sense of patriotic fervour and citizens felt part of the war effort. Nor were women ignored – knitting became an essential activity with women contributing socks, gloves, and other items of clothing for troops on the front lines.\textsuperscript{112}

On the work front a similar pattern emerged to that which had occurred in Britain and the United States – the growing numbers of women working in industry to counter the gap left by men who had enlisted. The conversion of South African industry to the manufacture of munitions and other war material – which I have discussed earlier in this chapter – created opportunities for women to “play their part”. In an article appearing in \textit{The Women's Auxiliary}, six married women were interviewed in a

\textsuperscript{111} \textit{South Africa’s Yesterdays}. p306.  
\textsuperscript{112} \textit{South Africa’s Yesterdays}. p306-307.
munitions factory of a Johannesburg gold mine and the aim of the article was to
demonstrate the compatibility of war work with the raising of a family.¹¹³

All these women were ardent supporters of the war effort. Three worked previously
in the various branches of the Auxiliary Services but one was discharged for health
reasons and the other when she married – for them, working in the munitions factory
was another means of contributing. For some of them, remuneration was also
important as they were either single parents or the key wage earners in their family,
suggesting that they would in fact have been involved in other forms of wage labour
were the country not at war.¹¹⁴

Mrs Eckhout was a member of the W.A.A.F. involved in processing aerial
photographs. She subsequently left after meeting and marrying a member of the
South African Air Force. For her, work was essential as she had been single-handedly
supporting her infant son. However, she longed to be back at work at the job she
found most rewarding, with the W.A.A.F.:

Mrs Eckhout likes making bombs but would rather rejoin the W.A.A.F. and do the
work she loves…Bomb-making is a fine war effort, too, she feels, but her heart is in
the W.A.A.F.¹¹⁵

Mrs Bygate, a grandmother, on the other hand, had an invalid husband of whom she
had to take care as well as numerous grandchildren and five sons in the army. For her
working in the munitions factory was a patriotic duty to “get the boys home again”.¹¹⁶
Like Mrs Bygate, Mrs Glendenning had seven sons in the military and after
volunteering to drive an ambulance for the W.A.A.S. she was discharged for medical
reasons and then started work in the munitions factory.¹¹⁷

The key theme running through the stories of these women is the lack of male
breadwinner, be it for health reasons or due to them being stationed overseas on active
duty. This made the work appear to be due to economic necessity. In addition a
strong thread of patriotism ran throughout their narratives. However, the patriotism

¹¹³ Documentation Centre – Department of Defence Archives. “They Run Jobs – and Families as
here was not based on abstract ideals of country and duty but was rather closely connected to their proximity to war by virtue of having their sons, husbands and, in one instance, daughter, away on military service. Patriotism here assumed a more concrete basis and did not detract from the perception of the inextricability of women and the family. They were not simply emancipated and put on equal footing with men by virtue of being wage earners and the key breadwinners of the family but instead, their efforts were placed within a framework of supporting men and hence making their contribution to the war effort – a feature which was common to the rationale behind the Auxiliary services:

All these women have the active, energetic outlook that comes from a congenial job and – might I say it? – a clear conscience. They are all out for the war effort, running homes and war jobs and making a success of both. These are the kind of women this country can do with – the energy and vitality of them all, old as well as young is being converted into the weapons of war that will help South Africa to finish its part of the job, and, as Mrs Bygate said “bring the boys home again”.118

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Women Heed the Call

*South African women have never shirked their duty in times of crisis. They will not do so now. And when the aeroplane will have dropped its last bomb, the cannon discharge its last shell, and the rifle fired its last shot, we shall still be there, ever ready to comply with the demands that will be made on us to assist in the rehabilitation of those who have sustained losses...The greater role for women and...the S.A.W.A.S. lies in the new post-war world.*

Mrs J.J. Pienaar, Principal Commandant of S.A.W.A.S.¹¹⁹

(Photo of J.J. Pienaar taken from *The Women’s Auxiliary*, September 1940, Issue 1)

The South African Women’s Auxiliary Services (S.A.W.A.S.) was given its official status after the outbreak of the Second World War at a Conference in Pretoria in November 1939. It had its origins in the voluntary organisation, the Women’s National Service Legion, formed at the end of 1938. It was decided that an organisation be formed under the leadership of Mrs J.J. Pienaar – wife of the Administrator of the Transvaal¹²⁰ - based along similar lines and incorporating the existing women’s organisations. The Women’s National Service Legion in turn merged into this new body. With the outbreak of war in September 1939 and its subsequent effects on the South Africa government, the organisation was given a new status. Given official recognition by the government, it became affiliated to the Union of South Africa’s Department of Defence.¹²¹

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¹²⁰ Bryant. *As We Were*. p63.

¹²¹ Edith O’Connor “The South African Women’s Auxiliary Services”. Documentation Centre – Department of Defence Archives, Box 10, DR 12/44/II, p1.
It was at the inaugural conference in Pretoria, held in November 1939 and attended by the Prime Minister, that the name was officially adopted. In addition the duties and mandate of S.A.W.A.S. were laid out and the decision was taken to adopt a uniform and badge. The uniform was to be:

…beech brown in colour and of military design…Its use is permissive but is worn by most officers and many Auxiliaries. Royal blue stripes on the epaulettes of the tunic indicated rank. A badge is worn by all Auxiliaries, while the Senior Officers wear, in addition, a collar badge. The overcoat, hat, tie, gloves, shoes and bag are dark brown and the shirt tussore or cream.\textsuperscript{122}

The description and hierarchical nature of the uniforms - specific features for specific ranks - suggested the strong military influence on S.A.W.A.S. In addition actual military ranks were adopted.\textsuperscript{123}

S.A.W.A.S. was engaged in a number of activities under the auspices of the war effort, much of which were morale boosting, such as the organisation of entertainment and meals for troops. They also created the Hospitality Scheme where visiting international troops on leave were given free accommodation in private homes all over the country. In addition meals were arranged at private homes as well.\textsuperscript{124} All of this was on a voluntary basis and depended largely on civilians eager “to do their bit” for the war effort.

A key part of S.A.W.A.S. activities was the donations made to the S.A. Gifts and Comforts organisation in the form of knitted clothing, toiletries, sport equipment and games.\textsuperscript{125} Mention of this was made in the S.A.W.A.S. propaganda film Service:

\begin{quote}
Shot: At least nineteen work parties are held weekly. We make comforts for our Springbok soldiers up north.
A table on which are laid out pullovers, service bags, hussifs and handkerchiefs. Hands lift up the articles and display them before the camera, include forage caps and glory bags.
Shot: Between lectures university girls sew and knit.
SHOT of University students in caps and gowns outside the Senate Room sewing comforts and knitting. ANNE is in this picture. She is attaching a card with the words on it:-
“Good luck Springbok, I hope the socks will fit.”\textsuperscript{126}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{123} South Africa’s Yesterdays. p314. This situation was similar to the Women’s Auxiliary Services in other Allied countries. In many instances South African women actually modelled themselves on the activities of British women – which I discuss in greater detail in the following chapter.
\textsuperscript{126} Service. p3.
The image of women who were university students knitting and sewing suggested that their education did not exclude from participating in the conventional female occupations for the duration of the war. The idea here was of not creating upheaval – retaining a stable gender role where tertiary educated women desired no more than to comfort the soldiers who were off fighting, even if that entailed making little use of the skills they had developed at university. However, the war itself provided new opportunities for White women, particularly in “essential” areas such as medicine:

…the expanding higher education for white women was huge, and although many graduates were destined for marriage or “womanly” professions, such as teaching, a small number began moving into previously men-only professions, such as medicine and law, pushing back the boundaries that previously limited women’s life and widening the career options for other women to follow.\textsuperscript{127}

Simultaneously at the University of the Witwatersrand “full clinical training [was offered] in its medical and dental schools to non-European students” who, after the first three years of study in South Africa, had to complete their medical degrees in tertiary institutions overseas.\textsuperscript{128} The opening up of opportunities for women and Black South Africans may have been due to fears of losing large numbers of trained professional White men on the front lines.

Although S.A.W.A.S was an organisation where the overwhelming majority of its members were White women, a small number of women drawn from the other racial groups were also included:

Head-quarters decided, too, that Groups of Non-European women should be formed by S.A.W.A.S. in order to assist these women to prepare comforts for their men on active service. To-day\textsuperscript{129} 44 groups of Cape Coloured Women War Workers, 74 Groups of African Women War Workers and 5 Groups of Indian Women War Workers are functioning successfully under S.A.W.A.S. care and guidance.\textsuperscript{130}

In the monthly S.A.W.A.S. magazine \textit{The Women’s Auxiliary}, brief mention was made of the contribution of Black women to the war effort. The image invariably presented was of Black women under the leadership and tutelage of the White officers

\textsuperscript{128} Bryant. \textit{As We Were}. p112.
\textsuperscript{129} The time of writing is July 1944.
\textsuperscript{130} O’Connor. \textquote{“The South African Women’s Auxiliary Services”}. p7.
of S.A.W.A.S. being encouraged to support their men folk in North Africa by knitting and sewing:

This section of Unit 2, Command 14, has sent the seventh wonderful parcel of comforts to the Native troops...It is a great pleasure demonstrating at these classes, for the Africans are keen. The work is of a high standard, and the Native children are nearly as good knitters as their mothers.\(^\text{131}\)

Although the tone adopted was of a patronising nature, it appeared that these women were making a contribution to the war effort which was appreciated by the Black men on the front lines as was evident in the following excerpt from a letter of thanks written by a soldier:

In my few lines I thank you for the present of pair socks which I was issued to-day, having your surname. But I being very pleased for the above issue I have received to-day, I gladly praise the work you have done. I should be pleased to have some more presents from you, and I even now I am waiting for more.\(^\text{132}\)

However, it was in recruiting women for the Auxiliary services that S.A.W.A.S. made its biggest contribution. They were responsible for the formation of various volunteer units such as the Women’s Auxiliary Air Force, Women’s Auxiliary Army Service, South African Women’s Naval Service and South African Women’s Military Nursing Service and bore the great task of recruiting large numbers of women for these organisations.\(^\text{133}\) Two of these women’s volunteer organisations, the Women’s Auxiliary Military Police Corps and the South African Women’s Naval Service are interesting case studies for the roles and perceptions of women in the Auxiliary Services.

**Women’s Auxiliary Military Police Corps (WAMPC)**

The WAMPC officially came into existence in May 1942\(^\text{134}\) and, rather than the conventional notion of the military police as strict enforcers of law and order, the duties of the women’s auxiliary police were given a more social spin. It was perhaps


\(^{132}\) *The Women’s Auxiliary*, November 1942, p23.

\(^{133}\) *South Africa’s Yesterdays*. p314.

best put by a recruiting advert appearing in a Transvaal newspaper in 1943 entitled “Mothers Them All”:

The work of a member of a W.A.M.P.C. covers a wide field. She looks after the wellbeing of Army girls travelling on duty or on leave. She is the safe and reliable source of information for any member of the W.A.D.C. whilst out of Camp in strange surroundings. Her training and experience, extremely valuable to women interested in social welfare, will stand her in good stead in peace as well as in War.\textsuperscript{135}

The role of a member of the women’s military police thus seemed to be that of a guide for the other women’s auxiliary services and a means on integrating them into life outside the services. She played the role of a mother-type figure for the young recruits, which was in contrast to the more traditional policing role of her male counterpart. In addition, her duty was closer to that of the welfare worker. Whereas, in the case of men in the Armed Services, charges of desertion and the dereliction of duty would be treated with the utmost severity, W.A.M.P.C. was used to determine the causes behind similar cases in the Auxiliary Services with the aim of almost justifying rather than punishing them:

Cases of desertion and absence without leave are also investigated by the W.A.M.P., who combine these investigations with welfare work in discovering the reasons for these irregularities and mitigating them where possible.\textsuperscript{136}

The implication was not only of the inequality of treatment of male and female recruits but, more significantly, of the suggested difficulties women may have experienced with military service causing them to desert or go AWOL – a concession which was not granted to men. This theme is further in evidence in a more in depth discussion on the duties of the W.A.M.P.C. appearing in a later article. Female recruits were given an almost childlike persona, and the W.A.M.P.C. was presented as the mothering figure to smooth over their transition into military life:

In many cases the woman [who has been absent without leave] has left her camp or overstayed her leave because of some personal or domestic worry which seemed enormous to her at the time. After a time she realises that she is a “deserter”, and is frightened to go back. Often she is quite relieved at being traced by the W.A.M.P.C.s. She comes before an officer, who gives her a sympathetic hearing. Official machinery is put in motion to solve her problems…\textsuperscript{137}

\textsuperscript{135} “Women Military Police are Social Guardians”, in The Star, March 28, 1943. Documentation Centre – Department of Defence Archives, Box 27, DR H/WMP/4/3/2.

\textsuperscript{136} “Women Military Police are Social Guardians”.

\textsuperscript{137} “Successful First Year of Service by Women Police” in The Star, August 12, 1943. Documentation Department of Defence Archives, Box 27, DR H/WMP/4/3/2.
The women of the W.A.M.P.C. received extensive training in the use of self-defence, “pistol theory,” first aid, police discipline and other essential skills. They were so successful that, by the end of the war, there was talk of initiating a women’s civilian police force of which former members of the W.A.M.P.C. could be part. It was believed that their assistance would be invaluable in the instances where male police were inappropriate such as in the case of female criminals or juvenile delinquents.

South African Women’s Naval Service (WANS)

The WANS came into existence relatively late into the war in August 1943, under the leadership of Lt Brenda Elizabeth Skyrme and were influenced by similar organisations in the United States and Britain – the term used for the latter was WRENS (the Women’s Royal Navy Services). Like their American counterpart, membership was restricted to White women however British and South African citizens were accepted. In addition, prospective members had to have written consent from either husbands or parents.

Once the selection process had been completed and recruits accepted, they had available three categories of employment - in the communications, clerical and technical branches. Jobs ranged from basic switchboard operators to stores administration, accounting to engine maintenance and “anti-submarine attack teaching”. Recruits engaged in a variety of training courses in areas of mining operations, harbour defence, nursing and security and members were stationed in Pretoria – the centre of the military – and along the coastal ports of Durban, Port Elizabeth, East London, Saldanha Bay and Walvis Bay.

138 Women in the Auxiliary Services were not allowed to carry firearms.
139 “Meet the WAMPS” in The Star, June 1943. Documentation Centre – Department of Defence Archives, Box 27, DR H/WMP/4/3/2.
141 Its members were termed SWANS.
142 Laver. SWANS. p10-11.
143 Laver. SWANS. p7.
144 Laver. SWANS. p8-9.
145 Laver. SWANS. p36.
146 Laver. SWANS. p48-52.
Robben Island was a key station for the SWANS and their contribution here as watchkeepers was seen as significant as women were believed to be more suitable for monotonous work, thus allowing their male counterparts to engage in more active roles:

WANS apart from saving man power are more suitable for this type of employment. Males if fit for a more active sphere of operations find the work very boring and it has been found from experience that their morale is seriously affected when employed on these monotonous watchkeeping duties.\textsuperscript{147}

Lt Andrew McGregor who was stationed at Robben Island at the time, indicated in a report that although the SWANS were not as competent as their male counterparts in instrument maintenance, nonetheless went on to give exuberant praise of their efforts in harbour defence:

In this report I stressed the tremendous contribution of the Swans to the ensuring of the safety of our harbours, pointing out that they were the only “female personnel”…in all the Allied navies that had been entrusted with such responsible work – anywhere in the world – and wonderfully well you did it. And how much you appreciated your sporting ability…Then your prowess in arranging concerts, parties, dances, etc., was most noteworthy and appreciated.\textsuperscript{148}

Like their parent organisation S.A.W.A.S., much of the SWANS’ skill appears to be concentrated on morale boosting social activities in addition to the various technical, clerical and defensive aspects.

Despite their non-combatant role, the various branches of S.A.W.A.S. made a significant contribution to the war effort on a social as well as military basis so much so that their Commander-in-Chief Smuts acknowledged their efforts as early as 1942:

One of the most gratifying features of our war effort since fateful days of 1939 has been the efficient and selfless response made by women from all walks of life. Without them we could not have done half of what we have done.\textsuperscript{149}

Although relegated to secondary roles in comparison with men, these women threw themselves wholeheartedly into activities designed, among other things, to boost morale – a key ingredient in any war – while remaining true to conventional notions of gender roles. The perception of women as caregivers and nurturers was explicit in the area of military nursing.

\textsuperscript{147} Laver. \textit{SWANS}. p61-62.  
\textsuperscript{148} Laver. \textit{SWANS}. p69.  
\textsuperscript{149} \textit{South Africa’s Yesterdays}. p314.
The Florence Nightingale Syndrome

For military nurses, Florence Nightingale and the example she set in the Crimean War in the nineteenth century made her a legendary figure and one they were most keen to emulate. In an article appearing in The Women’s Auxiliary in 1944, the virtues of Florence Nightingale were expounded:

…she had to fight prejudice before she could become a nurse. A hundred years ago, when Miss Nightingale was in her early twenties, a “nurse” meant a coarse old woman, ignorant, dirty and brutal, tippling at the brandy bottle and indulging in worse irregularities. To be a nurse was scandal enough: for women to nurse soldiers at the front was unheard of.

By strict method, stern discipline, rigid attention to detail, ceaseless work and the fixed determination of her will, Florence Nightingale removed these prejudices, just as she brought order out of the chaos…

The military nurses of the Second World War saw themselves as the inheritors of this tradition – of bringing care, comfort and healing to the injured men, providing a centre of calm efficiency in the midst of the chaos of war.

Unlike the Auxiliary Services, the South African Military Nursing Service had its origins in the First World War. Hastily set up after the outbreak of war in 1914, the unit was placed under the leadership of Mrs E.R. Creagh who had prior experience of nursing under the wartime conditions of the South African War. The first generation of nurses of the unit served on a variety of fronts and a delegation was sent to Europe following a critical shortage of nursing staff. They served with distinction and many received high accolades from the European powers.

Following the cessation of hostilities, the decision was taken to form a permanent reserve of nursing staff in the event of war. The Defence Nursing Council was established to determine the numbers of nurses forming the core of the South African Military Nursing Service, which would:

…consist of at least one Matron-in-Chief, 12 Matrons, 50 Nursing Sisters, 200 staff nurses, 200 V.A.D.s – supplied by the Red Cross and St. John, 30 cooks and 12 masseuses.

150 Documentation Centre – Department of Defence Archives. “Modern Florence Nightingales – the SAMNS in the Field” in The Women’s Auxiliary, October 1944, Issue 50, p35.
152 Searle. The History of Nursing. p363.
However twenty years later and the outbreak of the Second World War, it was found that the organisation had deteriorated consisting only of seventeen members held in reserve. Thus the S.A.M.N.S. had to be once again built up from nothing.153

About 160 nurses were called up for duty, however, this proved an insufficient number and, with the increase in hostilities brought about by Hitler’s invasion of France, the preconditions for volunteering such as age limit and marital status were suspended to increase the number of nurses. In addition these women were expected to be able to serve anywhere in Africa. As with the Auxiliary Services, they were given full military rank and incorporated within the Defence Force hierarchy. Furthermore, to compensate for the shortage, nurses were brought in from Canada and the British naval nurses. Finally, by 1942, the number of nurses in the S.A.M.N.S. had increased to a more respectable total of 2 600.154

The nurses of the S.A.M.N.S. were sent to posts in North Africa such as Egypt and Tripoli and as far as Italy. In addition to tending the wounded, the conditions on any front line were difficult:

After a day which began at 7 a.m. and ended at 8 p.m. with three hours off, and then having to collect wood to make a fire under a boiler for a hot bath, many of the nurses felt only too ready to tumble in to bed.155

Despite the conditions of nursing and the difficulties experienced in travelling to various hospitals in war-torn areas, many of these women found their contribution to the war effort rewarding and life changing.156

Great pride was taken in linking their efforts with those of their predecessor Florence Nightingale. Fuelled with a sense of patriotism, these women appeared to feel a sense of honour to participate to such a great extent in the war effort, although giving their work a less important status than that of male soldiers:

…Little enough risk compared with that of the men one might comment – yet 100 years ago no young woman was allowed to help her country’s war effort to this extent. To-day our girls go forward animated by the same flame that inspires men. Yet “Patriotism is not enough”. There is more to it than that. Humanity, the inner

153 Searle. The History of Nursing. p363.
155 “Modern Florence Nightingales” The Women’s Auxiliary, October 1944, Issue 50, p35.
156 “Modern Florence Nightingales” The Women’s Auxiliary, October 1944, Issue 50, p34.
knowledge of youth and strength at a time when their country needs it most, adventure, courage, and a strong sense of duty, drive our nurses into field hospitals. The lamp is still held aloft – by modern Florence Nightingales…

Whereas military nursing worked very much in harmony with conventional female roles albeit in a new context, for male nurses military nursing was the means by which their work in the profession was recognised and perceived to be in harmony with their masculinity:

Their work in armed forces and in battle site hospitals, all sites which share claim on appropriate masculinised activity, has helped to bolster their struggle. By facing death within a fighting corps and demonstrating courage under fire, male “nurses”…in war contexts have often fulfilled rather than challenged hegemonic notions of masculine behaviour.

Men at Arms

Irrespective of race, creed or politics...a soldier has only one thought; my country is at war, whether rightly or wrongly so, and it is my duty to defend it...

- Major-General Dan Pienaar

The leaders of South Africa were once again at odds after the outbreak of war, over where to send the troops. A split was apparent between those who argued that the troops stay in the country defending its borders, and those, once again headed by Smuts, who wished to send the troops north to defend British East Africa against the Italian onslaught. The reasoning behind this was provided by one of the South African heroes of the Second World War and an ardent supporter of Smuts, Dan Pienaar:

There are too many people who talk about boundaries. War knows no boundaries; it is no use sitting on the Limpopo, or any other boundary, when troop-carrying planes can land the enemy in the middle of our country. We must, if necessary, go to meet them. Let us ignore the petty politicians and stand together on bigger principles.

Smuts’ supporters won the day and, after an intensive seven-month period during which the Union Defence Force underwent reorganisation, three Active Citizen Force

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157 “Modern Florence Nightingales” The Women’s Auxiliary, October 1944, Issue 50, p35.
160 South Africa’s Yesterdays. p304.
battalions sent men for training to become the core of the First South African Infantry Brigade, under the command of (then) Colonel Pienaar.\textsuperscript{162}

Italy was perceived to be the greater threat to South Africa than Germany,\textsuperscript{163} and the First Brigade was sent for an initial three month training period in Kenya following which, further training in the arid area between Kenya and Abyssinia, designed to physically and psychologically prepare them for the conditions when engaging the Italian troops in Abyssinia.\textsuperscript{164} The departure of these men to engage the enemy was marked by a stirring speech by their commander-in-chief Smuts:

\begin{quote}
We have fought for our freedom in the past. We now go forth as crusaders, as children of the Cross to fight for our freedom itself, the freedom of the human spirit, the free choice of the human individual to shape his own life according to the light that God has given him. The world cause of freedom is also our cause and we shall wage this war for human freedom until God’s victory crowns the end.\textsuperscript{165}
\end{quote}

Three key points are worth mentioning about the above quote as it formed the basic pretext for which these men – all of them volunteers - went to war. The first was the link with the past heroics of South African warriors. Here, images were evoked of South Africa’s conflict-ridden history prior to the Second World War – colonialism and the numerous wars with the indigenous inhabitants which, extended from the sixteenth century to the twentieth, the South African war and the bitter enmity between English and Afrikaner which was to be overcome for this greater evil of fascism, and the First World War where Jan Smuts himself served as Minister of Defence.\textsuperscript{166} An image of a heroic and glorious lineage was thus formed in the minds of the listening men of tales of ancestral bravery and throwing the perceived yokes of oppression to reach the point at which they stood. Their duty thus became one of following the footsteps of their forefathers in order to preserve a heritage.

Explicit in the quote were the references to Christianity and the way in which Smuts positioned South Africa’s role in the war in relation to it. The adjective used by Smuts was that of “crusaders” which once again drew upon past imagery of glorious victory against the “heathen” forces standing in opposition to Christianity. It also had

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{164} Pollock. \textit{Pienaar of Alamein}. p36.
\textsuperscript{165} \textit{South Africa’s Yesterdays}. p304.
\textsuperscript{166} \textit{South Africa’s Yesterdays}. p288.
\end{flushright}
the added effect of delineating a clear distinction between the forces of good and evil – so essential to the use of propaganda. The Allies of which the South African forces formed part were designated the forces of good “fighting the good fight” against the forces of evil as symbolised by the fascism of Italy and Germany. In addition the use of Christian imagery invoked the concept of the martyr - dying for the cause. This introduced the self-sacrifice of one’s life in service to higher ideals\textsuperscript{167} and brought to mind the very real possibility of death in battle, which was given overtones of glory.

Associated with Christian duty was the notion of “fighting the good fight” which dealt with freedom – held to be one of the highest ideals\textsuperscript{168}. A key reason used by the Allies for the waging of war against the Axis powers was that of a defensive war against the forces of fascism, which was deemed to be a great evil antagonistic to human liberty. The use of a clearly defined aggressor as represented by Germany and Italy presented the most lucid reason to encourage these men to fight in order to uphold the ideals of freedom, honour and glory – elements of which were present in Smuts’ speech.

In addition to the First Brigade, the South African Air Force had been in conflict against Italy from the inception of South Africa’s declaration of war on her on June 11, 1940, and they later worked in conjunction with the ground forces in Abyssinia and Somaliland.\textsuperscript{169} Another form of warfare brought to bear on the Italians was the Armoured Car Corps. Once again drawn from the Active Citizen Force, there was an initial difficulty in finding the required number of recruits and by the end of February, 1940, only thirty-five men had enlisted, however numbers increased as Germany took its European onslaught to a new level with the invasion of France.\textsuperscript{170} Forming part of the Tank Corps was the addition of three motorcycle companies, which had less success than their armoured car compatriots due to the difficulty of the desert terrain where the conflict was centred.\textsuperscript{171}

\textsuperscript{167} I deal with this theme in my previous chapter.
\textsuperscript{168} I will discuss the theme of freedom and liberty as it relates to South Africa, later in this section.
\textsuperscript{169} South Africa’s Yesterdays. p304.
\textsuperscript{170} Klein. Springboks in Armour. p5-6.
\textsuperscript{171} Klein. Springboks in Armour. p9.
After the East African campaign South African forces were also deployed in North Africa against the German forces in what was termed “The Desert War”. Their main foe being the legendary German General Erwin Rommel, the South African troops here had less success than their comrades in East Africa and were dealt a heavy blow when they were forced to surrender the fortress at Tobruk to the Germans in 1942. Apart from the heavy casualties, more than ten thousand South Africans were made prisoners of war along with another twenty-five thousand Allied troops.172

The Second World War on the part of the Allies, was a war that was ostensibly fought for freedom and human liberty – the words of Pienaar and Smuts demonstrate that this was embraced by the South African state. In addition, as I have mentioned earlier, large numbers of volunteers from the other racial groups in South Africa had offered their services to the war effort. However, for those of African descent, these were restricted to non-combatant roles. Despite being exposed to the same omnipresent dangers on the front lines, Blacks were engaged in roles “such as driving, digging trenches, cooking and carrying the wounded.”173 An interesting feature of the tasks in which Black volunteers engaged is their similarity to those performed by White women in the Auxiliary services.

**Conclusion**

The declaration of war against Germany by the Allies on September 3, 1939, followed Hitler’s conquest of Poland. A similar declaration on the part of South Africa was not as straightforward. Enmity towards the British following the South African war at the turn of the twentieth century and a desire to adopt a state of neutrality in the conflict led to a split in Parliament between a faction headed by J.B.M. Hertzog who desired neutrality and one headed by Smuts who supported the British. After an intensive Parliamentary session the existing cabinet with Hertzog at its head was dissolved and Smuts replaced him as Prime Minister of the Union of South Africa. War was subsequently declared on Germany on September 6. This chapter has demonstrated that the schism within Parliament was one of many within South African society – the call to mobilise exposed contradictions and tensions within political parties such as

172 *South Africa’s Yesterdays*. p310-311.  
173 *Readers’ Digest Illustrated History of South Africa*. p352.
the Communist Party and the African National Congress who were torn between fighting for freedom and equality on the home front and the threat presented by fascism. After initial vacillation the two eventually threw their support behind the war effort, perceiving Nazism as the greater evil.

Despite the declaration of war, logistically South Africa was ill prepared – her Armed Forces, and military hardware were in a deplorable state. Current industrial production in the mines and railways and the industrial giant Iskor were converted to manufacturing munitions and armoured cars. To solve the manpower problem, the propaganda machine went into full gear to aid the already high patriotic fervour. Large numbers of men volunteered for active service as conscription was discarded as an option for men serving outside South Africa.

Propaganda came in the form of posters, films and radio and made appeals to the men and women of South Africa to lend their support to the war effort. For men it was inextricably linked to the notion of masculinity and defending the home, family and a way of life against the aggression of fascism. Appeals were made to South Africa’s historical past and the lineage of men who had fought against various foes to reach that point in time, ranging from the frontier wars to the South African War and the First World War. Thus for men, enlisting and going off to fight was linked to the notion of a glorious and heroic past. In addition the image of defending the family and home was widened to encompass the bigger ideal of defending the country.

Propaganda in all its forms made appeals to women to join the Auxiliary services. Films such as that by the South African Women’s Auxiliary Services entitled Service emphasised the nature of women’s war work which would be that of “freeing men to fight” – an image evident in propaganda in the United States and Britain as well. By taking over non-combatant roles and moving into positions in industry and agriculture, women would allow the men currently engaged in these occupations to enlist. Another feature of the propaganda aimed at women was of the temporary nature of war work. The societal upheaval caused by the war and its impact on the work performed by men and women was expected to last only for the duration of the war. During that time, it was permissible and, in fact, considered their duty, for women to engage in “non-traditional” occupations such as fixing engines and working
as wireless and radar operators. It was suggested that the victory of fascism would be a step backward in the struggle for equality and women would experience a tremendous reduction of status.

Two other interesting features of the use of propaganda in South Africa were its particular emphasis on Whites. The overwhelming majority of the posters and other media were particularly aimed at the White sector of the population – both English and Afrikaans speaking. This is not to imply that men and women of other races were not involved in the war effort. Men from other race groups were accepted into the Defence Force but in a largely subsidiary role and were not allowed to carry weapons. Women of African, Indian and Coloured descent were also recruited into groups by S.A.W.A.S. in order to supply knitted articles of clothing, toiletries and other goods to their men on the front lines. However, in the monthly S.A.W.A.S. publication *The Women’s Auxiliary*, their roles were given much less attention and were often portrayed as largely being due to the efforts of the White women from the Auxiliary Services.

A second feature of propaganda in South Africa was the appeal made to family. The men and women in the Armed and Auxiliary Services of the Union Defence Force were portrayed as a family with Jan Smuts and his wife at the head. Smuts’ wife was conventionally addressed as “Ouma” meaning grandmother, and in her speeches and writings to the men and women of South Africa, she often addressed them as her children. This reinforced the image of the country as a larger version of the family, hence giving a more personal motivation for involvement in the war effort. “Ouma” herself was an embodiment of the contradictions and tensions within South African society – an Afrikaner nationalist, the war placed her in the British camp. In addition her role as the mother of the nation was an attempt to create an image of an extended family however, as I have demonstrated in this chapter, the notion of family did not necessarily include all the people in South Africa but was largely aimed at White men and women.

The South African Women’s Auxiliary Services, S.A.W.A.S., was formed to harness the efforts of women towards the war effort. In addition to various morale-boosting activities, it made its greatest impact in the recruitment of women for the various
branches of the Auxiliary Services. In this chapter I made mention of two in particular – the Women’s Auxiliary Military Police Corps and the South African Women’s Auxiliary Naval Service. The former were largely involved in activities of an almost social welfare nature as their jobs entailed taking under their wing new female recruits in the Auxiliary Services and investigating instances of desertion and absence without leave. The difference in treatment meted out to men and women for similar offences suggests the perceived inherent incompatibility of women with the military as the punishment they received depended to a great deal on the social and personal reasons of the defender as determined by the W.A.M.P.C. In this light the role of the W.A.M.P.C. served as that of an intermediary between the recruit and the military system – the image conventionally used is that of a mother-type figure. However, the capability demonstrated by the W.A.M.P.C. raised the possibility of the creation of a civilian women’s police force at the end of the war.

The SWANS came into existence relatively late into the war. They assumed a variety of roles in the technical, clerical and communications branches of the naval services and were stationed along the coast of South Africa. A large proportion of the duties allocated to them were those believed to be too monotonous for men who could better serve by engaging in combat roles. Part of this was due to the prevailing belief that women would better excel at the more monotonous work than men and the SWANS thus fitted into the category of aiding the more essential roles of men.

Unlike the other Auxiliary Services, the South African Military Nursing Service had its origins in the First World War. Heavily influenced by the pioneering work of Florence Nightingale in the nineteenth century who made nursing a respectable profession and a patriotic duty, the women of the S.A.M.N.S. were stationed in the war theatres of Europe and North Africa. In addition, to alleviate an initial shortage, nurses from Canada and Britain served in the Union. I suggest that to an extent nursing presents the smallest break from the conventional gender qualities given to women drawing as it does, upon images of caring and nurturing. The image of a nurse in her pristine white uniform amidst the dirt, blood and noise of battle suggests purity and the calm amidst the chaos of war – an image very much in line with the Victorian idealisation of White middle class women. This is in contrast to the image of male military nurses where their activities on the battlefield was very much in line
with their masculine roles and, in fact, gave wider recognition to and acceptance of male nursing

On the home front, citizens were affected by the war in terms of rationing, paranoia about the German influence – arising largely from the activities of the Ossewabrandwag - and the raising of money for the National War Fund. Part of this was due to propaganda extolling the notion of duty and patriotism and part of this was also due to the patriotic fervour, which occurs whenever a country is faced with a common foe. For many South Africans not involved in the Auxiliary or Armed Services, this was their contribution to the war effort.

A study carried out of a group of women working in a munitions factory on the Witwatersrand, demonstrates some interesting themes. The first was the distinction between men serving for the more abstract ideal of country whereas for these women, their contribution to the war effort had a more personal motivation – having members of their family in the services created a desire to help out by “doing their bit” as well. For one woman her contribution would help bring “the boys back home” sooner. In addition, although in most cases these women were the primary wage earners in their family, they equated their role with that of S.A.W.A.S. – assisting men who were facing the greater risk in battle.

The great majority of troops in South Africa were engaged in combat against the Italian troops in Abyssinia and Somaliland in East Africa and the German forces under the leadership of Erwin Rommel in the deserts of North Africa. Smuts’ words of motivation to these men going off to fight emphasised the notion of “fighting the good fight” for freedom and human liberty against the clearly defined aggressor of fascism. In addition appeals to the Christian duty of men to fight invoked images of glory, heroism and martyrdom.

In conclusion, therefore, all members of South African society made some form of contribution to the war effort. The overwhelming image created is of a country united against a common foe however, within this, I have shown that older distinctions are apparent in terms of gender, race and ethnicity – all were contributing but the contributions they were allowed to make depended on who they were and where they
stood in South African society. Mobilization for the Second World War, while creating opportunities and the possibility of new ways forward for South African society, upon further interrogation, was still very much bound to distinctions made on the basis of race and gender – distinctions which appeared inherent in the social order. Simultaneously and perhaps contradictorily I have argued that there existed the possibility for change brought about by South Africa’s opposition to a common foe.
Chapter Three - War

Oh, Lord God, when Thou givest to Thy servants to endeavour any great matter, grant us also to know that it is not the beginning but the continuing of the same until it is thoroughly finished which yieldeth true glory. - Sir Francis Drake

The Second World War, particularly as it related to South Africa, was a period of rich complexity and contradiction in terms of its relation to gender, race and ethnicity. Within the context of this period of great change and social upheaval, is the larger question of South Africa’s role in the international arena and the way this changed in the period after 1945. The issues I have briefly raised here will pave the way for further questions on the nature of South African society both politically and socially once the war came to an end.

The above quote appearing in the monthly publication *The Women’s Auxiliary* in 1942 indicated a change of pace. After the initial frenzy on the part of government, military and the civilian population to prepare for the business of war and after the initial mobilisation of troops to the front lines, the designation of roles to women in the Auxiliary Services and in war production, the attempts to protect the home front and the propaganda designed to ensure that all this had the full support of the public, came the continuous exertion to win a war that was to last for three years more. The words of Sir Francis Drake indicate a number of themes, which I wish to explore further.

The image of a prayer is an indication of the feeling of righteousness on the part of the Allies – a sense of “fighting the good fight” as it were. Fascism was perceived as a distinct aggressor against the Allied values of democracy and individual liberty. The Second World War was portrayed as a clearly defined conflict between good as represented by the Allies and evil, as represented by the Axis powers. The propaganda of the day was imbued with this imagery and it was also a key reason that so many men of African, Indian and Coloured descent in South Africa eagerly

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2 By “ethnicity” in this context I am referring to English and Afrikaans-speaking South Africans.
volunteered to play their part in a war. In a state where a significant portion of the population had been living under racial oppression the Second World War offered the opportunity to bring about domestic change. Like the North American and British women in the First World War who were given the franchise after the end of the war, due largely to a demonstration of their capability and invaluable contribution to the war effort, the Second World War with its emphasis on a defence of freedom suggested the possibility for bringing about political and social equality for the races of South Africa.

The quote is especially significant as it exhorted those involved in all aspects of the war effort to maintain their contribution throughout the duration of the war. It is apparent that there was a change in attitude on the home front towards the war. By the middle of 1942, at the halfway point of the war, the enthusiasm and support for the war had been waning – a phenomenon described in The Women’s Auxiliary as war weariness. After the initial euphoria of “fighting the good fight” had passed, came the hard reality of death, defeat in battle, rations and a shortage of goods, families living in a state of limbo with little or no news of loved ones away on the front lines for years, horrific prisoner-of-war stories and exhausted women trying to juggle their new roles as heads of the household with raising children and working in munitions. In addition the threat within South Africa’s borders by Afrikaner dissidents in the form of the Ossewabrandwag and the subsequent acts of terrorism attributed to that organisation, and little indication that the situation was going to change any time soon, in fact, added to the sense of war weariness within South Africa’s borders. There is a dearth of secondary information on war weariness. I have developed my arguments from primary sources after 1942 in conjunction with the way in which propaganda appealing to women operated at this time.

I believe that the use of a quote by the British explorer Sir Francis Drake in a South African publication is a demonstration of the South African belief of their position in the international arena.3 Being part of the Allied Forces gave a sense of holding in common the experiences and values of the other Allied countries. Many White South

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3 In some of the primary sources which I will look at during the course of this chapter, reference is made to “Empire” and a sense of belonging is implied - the people of the Union of South Africa being grouped under the auspices of the British Empire.
African men such as “Sailor” Malan actually fought in British branches of the Armed Services such as the Royal Air Force or fought alongside British, American, Australian and Canadian troops in North Africa and Southern Europe. On the part of women, similar auxiliary organisations were formed in the Allied countries and communication between these various branches was common on an international level – contingents of auxiliary service women were sent to Britain and the United States and similar contingents found their way to South Africa. At this stage therefore and for the duration of the war I argue that South Africa was very much part of the international arena – her contributions were valued and her leader, Jan Smuts, was internationally respected.

The perception of masculinity was affected by the war in terms of its effects on the men fighting – killing, being killed or maimed, being taken prisoner-of-war, distance from home and family and the psychological repercussions of all this. Within the broad category of “men” there were the contributions made by the Black, Indian and Coloured men in their non-combatant roles to the war effort, the shared experiences with their White counterparts and their perceptions of the relationship between war and masculinity. This chapter demonstrates that within all of this is the constant narrative of race, which adds an extra dimension to the discourse on masculinity.

The role of women in the Auxiliary Services was partly shaped by their interaction with women in the Auxiliary Services of the other Allied countries and their perception of their role within this framework. Due to their changing contributions in a war situation came particular notions of femininity which were applied to South African women in the Auxiliary Services - particularly by themselves - in cartoons, poetry and songs and an important question which I address here is whether this perception had any impact on the gender relations of the time. Key to answering this is the discussion of the belief of these women in their role in society and their contribution to the war effort.

To an extent it can also be claimed that South Africa was engaged in conflict on two fronts – the international arena and on the home front in terms of the threat from within – the Ossewabrandwag, which I suggest brought the fascist threat closer to South Africa’s shores than would be expected in a country physically distant from the
European and Pacific theatres of war. The Ossewabrandwag itself was an organisation drawn from a distinctly Afrikaner cultural heritage with its own perception of gender and racial relations – initially designed to promote Afrikaner culture in the face of what it believed to be English dominance, with the outbreak of war and the subsequent entry of South Africa on the side of the Allied Forces, it became political in nature and is also accredited with carrying out acts of terrorism within the borders of South Africa.

This chapter begins with a discussion on those individuals considered key to the war and to victory – the troops on the front lines.

**Fighting Men**

The experiences of men fighting in the Second World War were what served to distinguish them from the home front. A gap is evident between those who received the baptism of fire and those who did not. More often than not this became a gendered gap. One of the more prolific South African writers of the Second World War Sarah Gertrude Millin describes this sense of separation when her brother goes off to war, leaving the family behind:

> I have just seen my youngest brother take a plane for Cairo – the north. Though he tries to tell himself what this war means to the world and, in all its phases, to himself, he is elated, exultant.

> As we watched the Lockheed Lodestar motoring slowly, among great clouds of red dust, from the landing ground to the veld, and then going quicker and quicker and mounting into the skies, his wife and little boy stood holding hands.

> The plane disappeared. I remembered how, in the last war, I had seen my eldest brother going away so gaily too – leaving for France, never to return. And the second one paying his own passage to join a British regiment and ending the war, wounded, in a German prison camp. . . . We went back to our cars and our same lives. . . .

> But, as for him, sailing over Africa, in two hours he will have morning tea in Bulawayo, in Southern Rhodesia; he will lunch in Lusaka, in Northern Rhodesia; he will dine in the Belgian Congo. To-morrow he will be in Kenya. In three days he will be with the Pyramids, the Battle of the Western Desert, the Battle of the Nile, the greatest event in the history of the world.

> When this war began, I said to myself that I would not, as in the last war, sit at home. I sit at home.4

Several features stand out in the quote above. The first was the sense of excitement and adventure evident in going off to war. War took on the aspect of a game or a

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sporting activity. Prior to the actual experience, war is idealised and, often after the reality of war, many long to return as it forms the pinnacle of experience, the point where one felt most alive:

Roosevelt went to Cuba with romantic notions of war which were rudely shaken by reality. Instead of heroic hand-to-hand combat, the field was swept by unaimed fire from unseen opponents, which killed men randomly. Men suffered from horrible wounds…yet when the campaign ended and Roosevelt was faced with return to political life, he was already nostalgic for the fading adventure…

The significance of the plane flying into the distance while the family watched from the ground indicated the growing separation between the home front and the front lines – between men and women. There was perhaps an indication of a tinge of envy on the part of Millin as she described the scene. While acknowledging the possibility of internment, injury and even death, Millin also described the places he would be going to and the sights he would see. In addition, he would be having the enviable experience of playing a role in a conflict that was to go down as one of the greatest moments in history, giving him a sense of glory and making him and all those like him almost immortal by becoming a part of history – an experience of which she would never be part. The phrase “…We went back to our cars and our same lives…” is suggestive of that separation between the exciting and adventurous and the mundane.

Along with the idealised vision of the glory and adventure of war came the change of personality wrought by the extreme situation where men, were called upon to do that which is normally frowned upon by Western society – to kill. It is then that men – who were previously pacifist – might have embraced a growing sense of belligerence exacerbated by watching comrades die and themselves coming under fire. The humanity of the enemy was reduced and it became a case of “us against them” as is evident in the view of an American veteran of the Second World War:

At the beginning of the war I believed fiercely in the brotherhood of man, called myself a follower of Gandhi, and was morally opposed to all violence. After a year of war I retreated and said, Unfortunately nonviolent resistance against Hitler is impracticable, but I am still morally opposed to bombing. A few years later I said, Unfortunately it seems that bombing is necessary to win the war, and so I am willing to go to work for Bomber Command, but I am still morally opposed to bombing cities indiscriminately. After I arrived at Bomber Command I said, Unfortunately it turns

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out that we are after all bombing cities indiscriminately, but this is morally justified as it is helping to win the war….I had surrendered one moral principle after another.\footnote{Jean Bethke Elshtain. \textit{Women and War}. (New York: Basic Books Inc Publishers, 1987) p204.}

The South African war hero “Sailor” Malan who was an ace fighter pilot with the Royal Air Force was described as a “brooding sort of chap…cool, precise, impersonal. He is privileged to kill well – with dignity.”\footnote{Olive Walker. \textit{Sailor Malan: A Biography}. (London: Cassell and Co Ltd., 1953) p106.} After the war “Sailor” described the way in which he was perceived: “They called me a cold, ruthless, calculating killer.”\footnote{Walker. \textit{Sailor Malan}. p106.} Here, shooting down enemy planes and engaging in dogfights was considered an art – those most proficient in it were described as aces. Killing was reduced to impersonal numbers and once again the image of sport and the game was invoked. Competition was intense between pilots and squadrons and between those who flew Hurricanes and Spitfires over the number of kills made. Each plane shot down was tallied up as part of a “score” – the higher the score, the more heroic and the more legendary the pilot.\footnote{Walker. \textit{Sailor Malan}. p107.} Killing was now impersonalised to a statistic and those that carry it out treated it as such. The war theatre is the only space where, not only is killing condoned it is actively encouraged and those that do it well are lauded. The example of the pilots may appear to be in contrast to Elshtain’s view where she draws upon the compassionate, self-defensive warrior. However, these men killed for a higher purpose – to protect the civilians under attack from German air raids, turning themselves into killers to serve the greater societal good. “Sailor” Malan served with distinction during the Battle of Britain. Cited by some as a cold killer, his main motivation in fighting was to defend his family:

\textit{...He [Malan] is married and has a son...I mention this because when I was painting him he told me that having a wife and son had been of the greatest moral help to him during the Battle of Britain; that it had been an absolute definite thing to fight for and defend and that this was his constant thought...}\footnote{Walker. \textit{Sailor Malan}. p94.}

Hand in hand with killing came the real possibility of death. In a letter written by an Australian fighter pilot in North Africa to his wife “Johnnie” he acknowledged the possibility of death in war:

I have said before, Johnnie, that I know there is always a chance that I may go west, as so many good fellows already have, but also feel that when things are looking bad for us, we of this generation must forget ourselves and fight for the future. This seems a bit morbid the way I am saying it, but I don’t feel morbid in the least. The
whole thing rests on the fact that, whatever happens, I’d like you to know that I’m fighting for our happiness above everything else, and if I don’t live to realise that happiness, then it is to be yours.11

Dominant here was the notion of fighting for a better world – the sacrifice of one generation in order to save future generations from the evils of totalitarianism. The phrase “fighting for our happiness” personalised this to the level of the relationship between husband and wife. Hand in hand with fighting for the great abstract ideal of freedom was fighting for the more concrete ideal of the home and the family – as is also evident in the case of “Sailor” Malan. The phrase I find most compelling in this excerpt is “I may go west” which served as a euphemism for death. The use of a euphemism suggests a glossing over of the reality of death – part of this stemmed from a strong desire to protect those on the home front from the harsh reality. It appears to be related to the role of the warrior that, in addition to the physical protection of the home, engaged in the psychological protection of loved ones as well. By portraying war experience euphemistically and the airman’s eagerness to sacrifice his life despite having a wife whom he loves at home, the letter served an additional purpose of retaining public support for the war. Rather than being a private communication between husband and wife it appeared in the South African publication The Women’s Auxiliary and, in addition, was sent to London for publication to “prove an inspiration to young men and a comfort to those bereaved”.12 Written in 1944, the letter came in the middle of “war weariness” – which I will discuss further on – and became part of the propaganda machine as a means of drawing support for the war effort – the high death rate and the hardships on the home front which were beginning to take their toll, were portrayed as insignificant beside the glory of “fighting the good fight”:

> In war a man is either lucky or unlucky, and if he is unlucky, that’s all there is to it. To those at home bad news hits hard, but they can still find Life good and feel proud in the fact that he was there on the job.13

This sense of writing to those at home on a euphemistic level was not just confined to the arena of combat. In a letter written by a South African prisoner-of-war captured at Sidi-Rezegh in 1941 and held in Italy, a similar process was evident. Once again the

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letter became more than a private communication between mother and son as his mother, who was a sergeant in the W.A.A.S. sent the letter for publication in *The Women’s Auxiliary* in the hope that:

…it may be of interest to some of the many mothers, wives and sisters who are anxiously awaiting news from their dear ones who [have] more recently been made prisoners of war.\(^\text{14}\)

The excerpts published from his letters to his mother made no reference to any possible mistreatment or discomfort on the part of the prisoners of war. Part of this, of course, may have stemmed from their mail being read by their Italian captors prior to being posted and part of it was a desire to assuage the fears of their loved ones at home. If the excerpts were to be taken at face value it was almost as if he were on a holiday:

Have just returned from a walk in the countryside, which is now looking very beautiful. Apart from one shower the weather has been fine all this week – we missed the hot-cross buns again this Easter, but we hope to make up for this next year.\(^\text{15}\)

He appeared to be making a determined effort to portray his experiences as a prisoner-of-war in a positive light and the lack of food was only hinted at:

All these items,\(^\text{16}\) which we normally take so much for granted, seem like absolute luxury now. Excitement was high and the boys were like a lot of kids gloating over Christmas presents…Our new camp commandant was very interested in it all the other day and was offered snacks here and there. He has taken camp interests to heart and is doing a lot for our welfare. Also had another lovely hot shower and was inoculated.\(^\text{17}\)

He emphasised the leisurely nature of life at the camp – rather than a POW camp the letters suggested a summer camp type of environment with sporting activities and sunbathing:

The weather has been fine the last few days and the boys are indulging in sun-bathing quite a lot…We have received some sports equipment form the Red Cross, including tennikoit sets, footballs, boxing gloves, numerous indoor games. The camp library is gradually increasing, but we still don’t get books too often…\(^\text{18}\)

In these excerpts two key issues were apparent. The first was a downplaying of the harsh experience of war. Written either to avoid censors or to allay the fears of a worried mother, it began to have wider repercussions when it entered the public arena.


\(^{15}\) *The Women’s Auxiliary*. November 1942, Issue 27, p15.

\(^{16}\) This refers to Red Cross food parcels, which had just arrived at the camp.

\(^{17}\) *The Women’s Auxiliary*. November 1942, Issue 27, p15.

Like the previous instance of the pilot who did not mind death in service of the greater
good, the portrayal of an almost idyllic life in a POW camp distanced the reader from
the unforgiving experiences of war – not only did this ignore the actual conditions of
a prisoner-of-war, it encouraged support for the war in terms of families being more
willing to let their sons enlist as the only image of war available was the idealised one.

In addition the letters can be read in terms of what Michael Adams describes as “The
Great Adventure” where war was reduced to the level of a sport, an adventure, which
became a test of manhood and chivalry. The portrayal of the POW camp as almost
a kind of summer camp and the description of sporting equipment enhanced this
image. The reluctance on the part of those experiencing it to describe its reality to
those on the home front created a barrier between the two where the latter continued
to perpetuate the idealised nature of war as clean and noble, being unaware of its
messy, ambiguous reality. Elshtain writes of the lack of communication between
those returning from war and those at home who never experienced it:

...when asked by his mother, “Was it very bad out there, Paul?” Baumer...lies, “No
Mother, not so very. There are always a lot of us together so it isn’t so bad.”

In addition to this inability to communicate a life-changing experience was a gendered
element – it was more masculine to assume the heroic role in protecting those on the
home front from the psychological impact of the war, which these men bore on their
own. However this silence allows following generations to go to war holding
idealised assumptions about the experience in terms of heroism, glory and
masculinity.

A number of letters appeared in the various issues of *The Women’s Auxiliary* written
by men experiencing the various aspects of war, to their womenfolk on the home
front. The two previous letters I have cited dealt with death and being taken prisoner.
However, the other side of war was aggressive – combat. In a monthly segment
entitled “A Bomber Pilot’s Letters to His Mother” letters were written by a South
African pilot in the RAF to his mother describing the various aspects of his role in the
European theatre of war:

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19 Adams. *The Great Adventure.*
One seems to have done nothing as a bomber pilot until one has been to Berlin. I have always been looking forward to the day I would go there. So the other day when a couple of crews were wanted I managed to get on to one...We made our way across Germany in the brilliant moonlight. Imagine how disappointed I was, however, when we found a layer of low cloud had formed over the city itself and I could see nothing of it. Accurate flak chased us around quite a bit, but I swear the only reason why we did not hit our target was because we couldn’t see it. Our bombs gone, we had to think of getting home again. That was not so straightforward. We had stirred them up on the way in and they were waiting for us. Still we were not unduly troubled by anti-aircraft guns, and the three fighters we saw did not attack.21

There was almost a sense of bravado in his description of a bombing raid – earlier in the letter he referred to his confrontations with the Germans as taking “good cracks at Jerry”.22 Taking part in a bombing raid over Berlin was seen as a rite of passage for a pilot. This served to distance the bomber pilot from the repercussions of his actions, as was the case with the high scoring ace fighter pilots. Berlin was no longer a city with a civilian population but an impersonal target and the only strong emotion provoked was disappointment at not hitting the target. At the same time there was a hint of defensiveness where he claimed that the only reason that the mission failed was due to the poor visibility rather than the threat presented by the anti-aircraft guns. This downplayed the element of danger and emphasises the superiority of the Allied pilot.

The use of euphemism and the almost false bravado evident in these letters can be construed as a defense mechanism to mediate the psychological effect of these experiences. By reducing the enemy to a statistic and portraying the war as a game testing manhood, the deeper implications of taking life and having one’s own life in danger were diverted. It was only towards the end of the war when women on the home front were faced with the prospect of thousands of men returning from the front lines that the full enormity of their experiences were given some kind of voice:

He never mentioned the dirt and terror of the front line, trying to sleep in the sleet and the snow, nor the time his platoon was isolated for two days and nights buy a curtain of heavy fire, unable to withdraw or get rations up...Only the front line soldier, the infantryman, the tankman, the airman and the artilleryman experience the real anguish and brutalizing hazards of war...to see friends maimed by an exploding mine; bodies and limbs disappearing in a high flash of explosive and the screams of chums trapped in a burning tank...23

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21 Documentation Centre – Department of Defence Archives. The Women’s Auxiliary, December 1941, Issue 16, p15.
22 The Women’s Auxiliary. December 1941, p15.
The article claimed to come as something of a shock to its female readers adopting a tone in complete contrast to previous narratives of male war-time experiences – this was probably the case considering the euphemistic way in which the war had been written about previously on the home front:

This article is realistic and may offend the sensibilities of some readers. We publish it because we feel even a superficial knowledge of the wreckage of war may help some women to avoid making grave mistakes. If it helps only one woman in her relationship to her returned soldier it will be worth while.24

Why the change? Previously, during the course of the war, strong attempts were made to convince those on the home front otherwise as this helped retain support for the war effort and those letters published were integral to this. However, as the war drew to a close, the influx of returning psychologically traumatised men called for a new way of portraying war. The soldier was no longer the cocky hero full of bravado who had been a player in the great game of war, but a wounded victim and it was here that the nurturing qualities of women are called for:

Wounds of the mind are like wounds of the body. Time is the healer. If your man happens to be among the sufferers you must think of him as a wounded man and your patience will heal the scars. Think of it as your great war job.25

In addition, now publicly acknowledging the reality of men’s war experiences and portraying the man as the victim made appeals to the sympathy of women. The psychologically devastated man needed his life at home to be one of comfort and stability as he remembered from the pre-war era. Women were not expected to “rock the boat” – their “selfish” claims for independence brought about by their war work and as the heads of their families were subordinated to the needs of these men who had made the far greater sacrifice:

What is it that wives fear? First of all they realise that they have been alone for so long that they have become independent, and it will be difficult to get back into the routine of marriage and meet its demands physically and psychologically…Independence is inclined to make women squeamish, even selfishly prude, and wives should prepare themselves to fall in with their husbands’ desires, not lead the way in this instance…What every husband desires when he returns is peace and security, and his wife alone can give him that, physically and mentally. At heart most women are “yes women”, and this is the one occasion when wives can fulfil the role of comforter. Their own worries must wait till he is at peace.26

Thus the portrayals of men’s experiences in war itself had wider implications. To portray it positively was to increase support for the war by denying its harshness and to portray it negatively was to enhance the role of men as victims, allowing their needs to be placed above those of the women on the home front and ensuring that the gains made by women during the war remain confined only to the war.

**The Unknown Force**

The overwhelming bulk of information available deals largely with White South African troops. One of my key sources, the monthly publication *The Women’s Auxiliary* devoted only a handful of articles on contributions by Black, Indian and Coloured men and women to the war effort. However, it is clear that the contribution by Black, Indian and Coloured men under the auspices of the Non-European Army Services (NEAS) was substantial. To dismiss their role, as being that of non-combatants is to demean their contribution and the way in which they also constructed their masculinity in time of war.

A striking feature of the role played by these troops classified as “non-European” is the many incidents of heroism, which Ian Gleeson narrates in his book *The Unknown Force*. In one instance, during the advance of a convoy into Abyssinia where troops of the Indian and Malay Corps (IMC) played supporting roles as drivers, the officer in charge was saved from drowning by Private Bushney of the IMC in disregard of his own personal safety. In addition, support roles also included that of stretcher-bearers. John Radebe of the Native Military Corps (NMC) attached to the Royal Durban Light Infantry (RDLI) was awarded a medal for bravery for performing his duty whilst under enemy fire. He:

…worked unceasingly and tirelessly in full view of the enemy and under concentrated artillery, mortar and machine-gun fire, attending to the wounded and arranging the evacuation of the serious cases. He ceased his efforts only when the advancing enemy was 200 yards away, successfully withdrawing the stretcher-bearers under his command.

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27 This title is taken from Ian Gleeson’s book *The Unknown Force* detailing the activities of Black male noncombatants during the Second World War.


Despite the view of non-combatant roles as “supportive”, these men and their White counterparts had strikingly similar experiences during the course of battle. They faced the same risks from enemy fire as they worked as stretcher-bearers or drivers of convoys and death was a very real possibility. In addition the chaos of war meant that the distinction between combatant and non-combatant became rather blurred. During the battle of Sidi Rezegh in North Africa, two cooks with the NMC described only as Johannes and Ambrose hid in a trench to avoid an approaching German tank. However they were spotted and, as the German commander alighted to search for them, the two got hold of Italian rifles and Johannes fired at the German officer, either injuring or killing him. The two then escaped.  

During the battle of Keren in East Africa much praise was heaped on the Coloured drivers drawn from the Cape Corps:

> The Coloured drivers have won the respect, indeed the gratitude, of the whole Sudan striking force for the tireless tasks carried out throughout the battle of Keren. They came north with one ambition, to excel the record of the Cape Corps of yester war. The typical remark of their officers is that they cannot speak highly enough of them and everybody’s respect for them grows daily. They have played a man’s part in winning the war in Eritrea.  

A few points are of interest here. These troops were perceived to be part of a tradition of service by the Cape Corps dating from the First World War. Their contribution was not seen as something new or unique to the Second World War but as a part of proud service when the need arose. In addition, although their role as drivers was classified as “supportive” their work won them the admiration of their White officers and they were now thought of as “men” for their efforts. The classification “men” therefore may not only be applied to White combatants however, it was key to being part of the baptism of fire – of playing a part in the war effort.  

Perhaps one of the most prominent images of Black men serving in the Second World War is of Lucas Majozi, the only Black soldier to be awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal. Working as part of the Field Force Battalion, Majozi served as a stretcher-bearer during the battle at El Alamein. He and his fellow stretcher-bearers traversed a minefield under constant enemy mortar and machine gun fire to bring

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wounded men to safety. During the course of this Majozi was wounded by shrapnel but continued through the night until he collapsed from exhaustion and loss of blood. He was awarded the DCM for these actions and his portrait was painted by Neville Lewis, the first official war artist, in 1942 and currently hangs in the South African Museum of Military History.\textsuperscript{33} It has become emblematic of the role played by Black soldiers during the war. Commenting on his actions, Majozi’s commanding officer described him “as a brave and loyal soldier with an exceptionally high sense of duty.”\textsuperscript{34}

The two pictures – one of the war hero Majozi and the other a Communist Party poster advocating the arming of Black men during the war – stand in stark contrast. Majozi is presented as the idealised noble, heroic figure, the perfect non-combatant. The CP poster on the other hand appears grainy and real – and gives a far more subversive message and was outside state control.

The key elements present in Elshtain’s description of “the compassionate warrior” are the soldier’s role as defender rather than aggressor, which can be applied to Johannes and Ambrose, the latter forced to shoot to defend himself and his comrade. This soldier saves life rather than takes it and is self-sacrificing – his role is a protector of his comrades even at the risk of his own life, which was apparent in the example of Private Bushney’s rescue of his commanding officer. The framework that holds this

\textsuperscript{33} Gleeson. \textit{The Unknown Force}. p220.
\textsuperscript{34} Gleeson. \textit{The Unknown Force}. p220.
together is that of duty, which was explicitly mentioned in a reference to Majozi’s actions and can also be applied to the actions of the Cape Corps drivers – duty here lay in carrying out one’s allocated tasks in the face of enormous odds. Elshtain’s description of the masculinity derived from being a soldier therefore has very little to do with actual combat and it is in this setting that one can place the role of the soldiers of the NEAS. In a tribute paid to the NEAS in 1944 by the 25 Squadron of the South African Air Force in Italy, reference was made to the role of the “compassionate warriors” of the NEAS:

In our eagerness to read everything in our own home newspapers, though they be months old, we cast only a cursory glance at the articles praising the work of the Native Military Corps. Yet we among whom they live should be the first to offer the tribute to them.

These soldiers, still imbued with the fighting spirit of their forefathers, who go to war without weapons. These warriors urged to the defence of their homelands with pick and shovel, not understanding why they cannot join battle, yet serving with unswerving loyalty...These unsung heroes, carrying stretchers, not guns, have saved lives and given their own.

The phrase “we among whom they live” was significant as it suggested the close proximity of the NEAS to their White counterparts, the similarities of their circumstances, which had the potential of fostering a bond across racial barriers that could be carried over into civilian life after the war. In addition their non-combatant role was suggested as being superior to that of men carrying guns – as Elshtain suggests, saving lives was given precedence over taking them.

Despite the distinction of combat, the White soldiers and their NEAS counterparts shared similar experiences on the battlefield in terms of facing enemy fire, being wounded or killed in the line of duty and holding on to similar perceptions of duty to comrades. They also faced other war hazards such as being taken prisoner. Almost two thousand men from the Native Military Corps were also taken prisoner alongside White South African troops after the defeat at Tobruk in 1941. Many made daring escapes from POW camps and travelled through difficult desert terrain until Allied forces picked them up. In many instances their escape routes were hundreds of miles long exacerbated by mine fields and a shortage of food and water.

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37 Gleeson. *The Unknown Force.* p188.
For those unable to escape, their position was in fact worse than their White counterparts, as they were treated more severely due to their race. They were given less rations and medical treatment and were beaten by their captors:

Their ration is only one packet of British Army biscuits per day and they are kept very short of water. They are not allowed to enter shelters when the RAF and US Squadrons bomb the town [Tobruk]. Tired and weary they are beaten and kicked by both German and Italians. These grim facts are told by escaped prisoners.\(^{39}\)

Their non-combatant roles – which had been assigned to them by the South African government on the basis of race – meant that they were perceived by their captors as being of a lower status than the other Allied prisoners and were not allowed the same rights accorded prisoners of war under the Geneva Convention. They were used as a labour force and singled out for more severe treatment:

In one instance, when a senior British officer objected to their being used as forced labour, an Italian official curtly replied that they were not considered “regular” troops and that they would be punished if they refused the work assigned them.\(^{40}\)

The proximity with which the NEAS worked to the “regular” troops and the experiences they shared allowed for the fostering of cross-racial understanding. However, the situation was not without its problems. There was a general sense that the NEAS was more undisciplined than the rest of the Union Defence Force. Their misconduct was believed to be so serious that there was the suggestion of withdrawing them from service overseas.\(^{41}\) Ranging from misdemeanours such as petty theft and intoxication while on duty, to the more serious offences of rape, murder, unrest and riots, the latter while occurring in few numbers, were given great attention and seen as an indictment on the entire NEAS system.\(^{42}\)

While some of the disciplinary issues could be attributed to the poor screening process of recruits, the gap in communication between members of the NEAS and White officers and a lack of “service tradition” where new recruits could be inculcated with the military values of those serving before them, many of the more serious incidences of misconduct was related to the policy of dilution. Dilution became an official policy by the end of 1941 and was put into action in 1942 due to a shortage of manpower. It was created to put NEAS personnel in all non-combatant

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posts in previously White units, freeing the men who had previously occupied the posts for combat. To do this it broke up existing NEAS units and employed those servicemen in units both domestically and in North Africa in an enormous variety of support roles ranging from cooks to drivers, mechanics to stretcher-bearers.\(^43\) Despite the implementation of this policy there was concern of the:

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\text{...negative effect impassive and prejudiced officers and NCOs would have...non-white recruits, often with little or no military background, and with inferior education and training, were to be thrown in at the deep end with white servicemen who had already been “through the mill”...They had not been adequately trained to meet the standard for frontline units.}\(^44\)
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The dilution policy and the subsequent closeness with which the two groups in the same units worked also compounded the problem. Facing the same dangers in similar circumstances led to a questioning of the unequal privileges afforded the White members of the UDF in terms of pay, leave and other features. This discrimination caused no small amount of resentment and was responsible for many of the disciplinary problems arising from the ranks of the NEAS.\(^45\) Working together for a common cause - democracy – and facing common war hazards thus not only had the effect of fostering mutual respect but also led to a questioning on the part of the NEAS troops of the discrimination within the South African military system – and perhaps within South African society as a whole.

However, by the end of the war, this discrimination was still very much in place. In Don Mattera’s autobiography *Gone With the Twilight*, his Uncle Willie who was injured in El Alamein and suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder was symbolic of the members of the NEAS who returned home expecting some kind of political and social change but finding none:

> The worst affected were the black ex-servicemen: Africans, coloured and Indians who had come back full of the zeal of victory and bright visions of emancipation for all of South Africa’s oppressed people. Smuts’s promises proved empty; joblessness and poverty quickly blurring those visions and dreams. There were hungry mouths to feed and bodies to clothe and lives to be protected. Victory can be a bad provider.\(^46\)

\(^44\) Gleeson. *The Unknown Force.* p139.
Returning NEAS soldiers who were honoured in a special parade in Johannesburg found a different life from that for which they had fought.

The photographs above take on a note of irony – the distinctions and accolades given to the NEAS both domestically and internationally signalled a change for the better but this was not to be. Many had hoped that their efforts in the war had demonstrated their capabilities but they were unable to capitalise on this. The only job opportunities available were for unskilled labourers. Schemes to train Black ex-servicemen as cooks or waiters only lasted for a short period. In addition grants and loans for a small amount were only approved should the returning soldier demonstrate financial loss incurred as a result of military duty. Furthermore:

Both a disability pension and a grant were available, but the scales were low and the medical and social welfare structures, particularly in rural areas, were inadequate. An ex-soldier who had employment and lived more than two miles from his workplace was entitled to a bicycle. All of them received a suit of clothing, made of the same material as the khaki army uniform, only with a civilian cut.47

Perhaps most painful was the reception they received when returning home with a bicycle as compensation and the taunt: “Is this what you fought for?”48 It was clear how Black masculinity was perceived by the South African state: these men became "boys" again on their return to the White nation state of their birth.

White soldiers, on the other hand received housing subsidies and access to tertiary education. Their ability to ascend a colour and racial ladder was assured by their war involvement, and their pre-eminent position at the apex of gender, race and class

power in South Africa was both literally and discursively cemented. The great difference in compensation accorded the different race groups despite all men facing the same hardships and dangers of war, compounded the racial inequality ex-soldiers experienced on their return. The ability of working class White ex-soldiers to gain access to their own homes and a university education – made possible by the South African state – may have helped reinforce a racial as well as a class distinction where even previously working class White families were given the opportunity to adopt a middle class lifestyle whereas the conditions for ex-Black soldiers remained the same – and were actually worsened once the full effects of Apartheid took hold.

**Women in Service**

*Not only on the home front but also far afield the women of the Auxiliary Forces have quietly and efficiently done their share, with the men, in the struggle for victory to which we are committed. Much remains to be done. As the country’s efforts increase so must the work of the Auxiliary Forces increase, but I look to the women of South Africa to play their part in that great spirit which must assuredly bring us victory.*

- Jan Smuts

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Smuts’ encouragement of women to throw their weight behind the war effort went beyond rhetoric as is apparent in the photograph above which is strikingly similar to photographs of male troops on parade.

Once the women’s Auxiliary Services had been initiated in its various forms, the time came to settle down to their actual war work, be it in munitions and industry or as serving in a support role for the male troops. These women perceived their work as being part of a larger contribution made by women from other Allied countries. One of the tasks carried out by these women on the home front was transport work under the auspices of the South African Women’s Auxiliary, Transport Unit. The women of the Transport Unit were involved in driving all forms of motor vehicles from ambulance and lorries to troop carriers and motorcycles. Some even served as far afield as Kenya where they were exposed to “military life in the tropics”.50

Those that drove the heavy vehicles such as lorries defied the conventional stereotypes of the “butch” truck drivers:

Many of them, slim, svelte and attractive, look as if they could barely handle a Baby Austin, but they are all athletes, their whole bodies are in training, and the efficiency in training is revealed in the skill with which they manipulate these cumbersome vehicles.51

The work of women in the Transport Section, while initially a wholly masculine domain, was suited to women who had been adequately trained. The work was not seen as an insurmountable obstacle based on gender and the women who engage in it are portrayed as competent while retaining their femininity – the description of the lorry drivers of the Transport Section as “slim, svelte and attractive” which was contrasted with the work in which they engaged was a suggestion that the appearance of femininity belied the capability of women. Their training had also made them independent of male assistance and the conventional image of the “helpless female”:

None of these young women are going to be caught sitting helplessly on a country road waiting for some kind motorist to repair the carburettor.52

50 Documentation Centre – Department of Defence Archives. The Women’s Auxiliary, October 1940, Issue 2, p16.
51 The Women’s Auxiliary, October 1940, p16.
52 The Women’s Auxiliary, October 1940, p17.
The work of these women was seen as related to those of British, American, Canadian or Australian women who may have been engaged in similar activities. On the previous page is a photograph of a British woman of the ATS who embodied the image of the Transport Corps – independent, engaging in a previously masculine activity yet clearly identifiable as female. An article appeared in *The Women’s Auxiliary* less than two years later relating the activities of the “sister drivers” in the Women’s Mechanised Transport Corps in Britain. Very similar observations were made such as the contradiction between their appearance and the work they do:

> In a town through which a convoy had just passed I was asked: “What sort of girls are these?” The only answer is that they are not a type except in so far as they are women. They have a hard and tiring job to do, and to look at some of them it is difficult to believe that their wrists can hold a heavy lorry on an icy road. Experience has proved that they can.53

Various themes in the perception of women’s war work were evident in the quote above. The first was their defiance of conventional roles for women as was apparent in the observation “What sort of girls are these?” suggesting that the activities they were engaged in were somewhat scandalous. The reply that they were “not a type except in so far as they are women” indicated the extraordinary times in which they found themselves where they were called upon to engage in “non-traditional” activities – duties which became very much part of a definition of being a woman during the course of the war. Once again their “delicate” appearance was a poor indicator of their job capability and the final sentence shows that women were given

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the opportunity to demonstrate this capability and to move beyond the conventional stereotypes of the weak submissive female which were so largely based on appearance.

At the same time concessions were made to female vanity:

…the open air has given them complexions not often seen in towns nor to be found in cosmetics. “Twelve months ago I would have said rouge was a necessity,” said one of them, “but look at me now…” It was a pleasure to do so.54

The move beyond appearance to capability was somewhat contradictory. An attempt was made to make the work of the transport drivers appeal to notions of femininity and the creation of a new type of woman is ambiguous. In spite of the previous masculine nature of the work or, perhaps because of it, the ability of these women to adhere to some of the notions of femininity particularly in terms of dress and make-up, was emphasised.

The work of British and South African women in the transport services was not only confined to the home front but to the front lines as well. A description of these women in Kenya contrasted them to the role of women in previous wars and emphasises their active role in the war effort:

This is a war in which women decline merely to wait at home and weep, and both on the Home Front and in the field they have made themselves a valuable part of the war effort…the story of the F.A.N.Y., the sister corps of the S.A.W.A.S., in which there are many South African women…is doing a grand job in Kenya. Their versatility embraces manifold duties, from dispatch riding and ambulance driving to dance catering and guarding an internment camp, while in their leisure they have learned to dance in brogues.55

While conceding to the valuable contribution made by these women and the way in which their new roles were a sign of progress distinguishing them from the women who had gone before, there was a constant tendency in these articles to introduce a frivolous element connected to the idea of femininity such as the notion that their greatest challenge near the front lines was learning how to dance in brogues around a ballroom.56 It suggests that despite the great changes occurring in the status of women and the new roles they had adopted, there was still a great need to hang on to

54 The Women’s Auxiliary, May 1942, p28.
56 The Women’s Auxiliary, January 1941, p31.
deeply rooted elements of femininity and a fear of rejecting the familiar and stereotyped perceptions of women. Sitting uneasily with this were the difficult experiences of these women on the front lines in terms of facing the hazards of war:

Convoy drivers of the A.T.S. returned to their depot here recently and reported an uneventful journey except for “a little machine-gunning”. It seems that a few bursts had been fired at them.57

The laconic description of coming under enemy fire contradicted the image of the hysterical, screaming female, suggesting a matter-of-fact approach to danger and keeping the emotional element at a distance.

Another activity not typically associated with women was “manning” the guns. In the coastal cities of Durban and Cape Town women were recruited to join the coastal batteries. The initial experiment was modelled on a similar situation in Britain where women from the A.T.S. assisting in anti-aircraft fire against German bombers. The appeal made to South African women was partly based on the perception of British women engaging in similar work as the elite of the A.T.S.:

The women who are doing this type of work in Britain are called the “Brains Trust” of the A.T.S., because a fairly high standard of education is needed... The “Brains Trust” are the only members of the A.T.S. who are allowed the privilege of wearing the service caps of the regiments to which they are attached.58

A month later the first article appeared in The Women’s Auxiliary describing the initial bunch of women recruited for artillery duty. Emphasis was placed on the mathematical nature of the work in terms of calculating the range of enemy aircraft in order to ensure accurate firing rather than the firing of the guns themselves. It was stressed that women themselves did not engage in firing although they were in the line of fire on par with the male gunners. A strong theme was the close interaction between men and women as this was one of the few examples where they worked in close proximity:

There was great excitement in the battery when the first batch of girls arrived for the training course, and the men gave them a royal welcome. One of the best things about army service in this war is the way in which men and women are co-operating in the service of their country.59

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57 The Women’s Auxiliary, May 1942, p28.
58 Documentation Centre – Department of Defence Archives. The Women’s Auxiliary, October 1941, Issue 14, p7.
59 Documentation Centre – Department of Defence Archives. The Women’s Auxiliary, November 1941, Issue 15, p36.
A similar process is evident in John Steinbeck’s description of the female gunners in England:

He [the commander of the battalion] tells about the customs that have come into being in his battery, a set of customs which grew automatically. The men and the women sing together, dance together…But when a girl walks out in the evening, it is not with one of the battery men, nor do the men take the girls to the movies. There have been no engagements and no marriages between members of the battery…These things are not a matter of orders but of custom.60

The relationship became one of mutual respect normally accorded to comrades facing the same dangers and engaged in the same activities. This situation appeared to be divergent from the distinct nature of men and women’s contributions to the war effort in the Second World War – the sexes were conventionally separated by the work they did - women’s supportive role in the Auxiliary Services and men’s combatant roles - as well as geographic separation – women on the home front and men on the front lines. Neither applied to the coastal batteries, which could have possibly been the forerunner for greater professional interaction between the male and female sectors of the military. Simultaneously though, women were not allowed to actually fire the guns and therefore the taboo of women actually engaging in combat in any form still remained intact.

As South African women in the Auxiliary Services went about their work there seemed to be a constant referring to the activities of the women in the other Allied countries which was evident in the constant comparisons with Britain made by the Transport Services and the coastal batteries. In August 1942, the Women’s Auxiliary ran an article on the activities of British women in the Army, Navy and Air Force as well as their jobs in munitions and aircraft production.61 Two months later a similar article appeared on the activities of Australian women with the added emphasis on the sacrifices made in elements key to their beauty routine:

With war clouds on the horizon, Australian women have discarded unessentials – such as nail lacquer, the nitro-cellulose of which is needed for munitions – and have joined their men in the nation’s war effort.62

61 Documentation Centre – Department of Defence Archives. The Women’s Auxiliary, August 1942, Issue 24, p32.
Yet more articles appeared on Canadian, American and even French women. For S.A.W.A.S. the fostering of a bond between the Allied women was essential as it would eventually be a powerful force in bringing about world peace:

Let us compare notes so that, as our service strengthens, so will the bond between Empire women strengthen until our united influence for future peace becomes irresistible.\(^6^3\)

There was a sense of a growing awareness of their counterparts all over the world and the bond they held based on shared experiences and activities. There was also the appeal to the inherently pacifist nature of women and their role in creating peace. To this end women in South Africa actually paid a visit to England and reported back on the activities of their British counterparts noting both similarities and differences – the latter arising from Britain’s smaller population as well as the threat to her borders.\(^6^4\)

As many of the initiatives of the S.A.W.A.S. modelled itself on Britain so too did South African women believe that they were setting an example for their allies in India through the medium of *The Women’s Auxiliary*:

She [Juliet Bader] already has three groups of women taking a course of instruction in garages, running repairs, etc., and these will take over driving of ambulances at cantonments, and such like duties. I think your magazines are responsible for the ideas, and not I….It will be lovely if South Africa can show India the way.\(^6^5\)

There was therefore an active interaction between women in the Auxiliary Services of the Allied countries, which influenced the activities they carried out and the way in which they perceived themselves as part of a great Allied campaign where the ultimate goal was victory and they subsequently believed that they had a very important role to play in this.

In addition to these references to the other Allied countries, there was also a perception of South African women in the Auxiliary Services in South Africa itself, which had a strong bearing on ideas of femininity and their role in the war. A strong theme here was that their work had created possibilities for women, defied stereotypes


and opened up new worlds from which it would be impossible to go back. As early as November 1940, mention was made of the new status of women:

This war, I have heard it said, is woman’s opportunity. Never have so many fields of service and activity been opened up to women, and never have such openings been seized so eagerly and so efficiently…it means also an advance in the status of women, which is going to persist into the post-war world.66

The war was perceived as the ideal environment where women could have the opportunity to prove themselves and achieve a new status, which was expected to last beyond the war. This status would be achieved after women had capably done the same work, which was once confined to men. A month later Bertha Solomon, the first female South African Member of Parliament, (for Jeppe, in Johannesburg) vocalised the new possibilities for women which went hand in hand with their duties as citizens:

This outpouring of women to replace in the social order the men who go out to fight, this effective functioning of women as transport drivers and parachute packers, firemen and tram conductors, traffic policemen and munition workers, and generally do a hundred and one things ordinarily considered outside their scope, does prove once and for all on a nation-wide scale that those who contended that no logical or valid distinction between jobs can be based purely on sex were right…This war…will…bring about a more general realisation by women that as citizens they will have a job to do in the peace that is no less important than their present job in the war, the job of helping to create a new social order which we hope for from the war, an order which will put an end once and for all to poverty and starvation in the midst of plenty…67

As with many of the perceptions of women in this period there appears a fundamental contradiction. Solomon, for instance, acknowledged that women were as capable as men of performing similar tasks and job discrimination based on gender was a blatant fallacy however; simultaneously, she believed that once the war ended women would return to their homes but with a new outlook and new purpose to their role, which was based on their duty as citizens.68 Their new purpose would be in line with the way in which women had been seen since the nineteenth century – confined to welfare, the social guardians of society, which was their role in the home as mothers and nurturers applied to the public sphere. Despite claiming that women were as competent as men in roles such as “firemen and tram conductors, traffic policemen and munition workers” Solomon did not envisage a post-war future where women would be

engaged in the same type of work. Their duty as citizens was to create a peaceful and moral society, which was almost envisioned as a welfare state where those that were most in need would be taken care of. At the same time there was the hope that the war would bring about this new utopian type of society where strife and hardship were things of the past and the role of women was integral to bringing about this new social order.

Along with the sense of equality achieved through work came the more practical requirement. In a memorandum written in 1941 and addressed to the Prime Minister by Dorothy D. Kirby, secretary of the South African League of Women Voters issues were brought forward relating to the unequal treatment and pay received by women in the Union Defence Force. The role of the League of Women Voters in this suggests that it was also a question of citizenship – as holders of the franchise they were entitled to equal treatment as that meted out to the male members of the Defence Force. One of the points brought up by the memorandum was that the pay of women officers was less than half that of their male counterparts and no allowance was made for the extra expenses of their dependents – even if they were widows – as was the case with men. In addition enlisted women were not paid extra for earning further qualifications as “parachute-packers, lorry drivers, or as able to render flying services…as was given to such men.”

Attention was also drawn to the shortage of officers in the Women’s Auxiliary Defence Corps and the serious repercussions this might have had in the unit effectively fulfilling its duties:

Both corps [under the command and consisting solely of women] are seriously understaffed as regards officers, which not only throws additional work on the officers on duty, but limits the opportunities for promotion from the ranks compared with those for men in their parallel units. Without hope for extra pay for proficiency and no promise of quick promotion, the tendency to slackness and lack of initiative must be hard to combat under such unpromising conditions of service.

As much of the propaganda and, indeed many of the publications of the Auxiliary Defence Corps suggested, it was not enough to simply be accorded the privilege to serve. These women were in a field of employment and required the same rights

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given to men – equal pay and equal opportunity for promotion. The phrase “unpromising conditions of service” suggested that the conventional notion of freeing men to fight and doing their bit to defend freedom was simply not enough unless material gain accompanied it as it did for men – the ideal paled before the reality.

The memorandum was also a rare example of an instance where White women compare their status to that of the men from the other race groups in military service:

Finally comes the very illconceived circular No. A.G. (3)154/61 “the concession of free rail warrants to their home stations cannot be extended to members of Women’s Auxiliary Services or Non-European Army Services when proceeding on leave”. The juxtaposition of the two classes of exceptions to the general rule of railway concessions to say the least of it offensive to the women and very ill advised. It is difficult to find justification for the exclusion of the two worst paid sections of our Defence Force from participation in such privileges..71

The connection between the two categories within the Defence Force was one of economics – they were accorded the least privileges and pay than White men. Part of this was due to the perception of their role as being one of support rather than the key combat roles of White men. However, at the same time, their roles were portrayed by propaganda and many of the policies implemented as being essential as, due to a shortage of manpower, were it not for the stepping in of the S.A.W.A.S. and the N.E.A.S. “freeing men to fight”, far less White South African troops would have been available for combat. It was to this notion that Kirby made her appeal as she suggested that the unequal treatment of women would have prevented many of them from enlisting, hence hampering the war effort.72 There was therefore a realisation of the importance – and perhaps indispensable nature - of women’s role in the war effort.

Her final appeal to the Prime Minister was related to the ideals for which the Second World War was fought in the first place – democracy:

The effect of these inequalities and disabilities...[is] to raise feelings of discontent and despair among women of ever reaching equality of pay and opportunity which is surely the most elementary condition of a true democracy.73

Although South Africa was nowhere near being a true democracy at the time, Kirby took advantage of the climate of the time where the social upheavals of the war and the international mobilisation against the enemy of freedom in the form of fascism,

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72 D.R.(W) F11/2.  p2
offered the possibility of bringing about real social, economic and political equality between men and women.

Co-existing with this possibility of change came the more ambiguous perception of women. In the monthly publications issued by the S.A.W.A.S. no small amount of space was devoted to recipes, household hints and even women’s fashion and hair:

Under the beret of the Waasie peaked cap, a bubble or feather cut is the most satisfactory or a semi-shingle with a slanting wave at the back. The style…with sculpted curls set low on the head, is also suitable. Curls over the ears are essential, otherwise the head looks too mannish with army headwear…74

Care was taken to ensure that the woman in uniform retained her femininity and hairstyles were not to be too “mannish”. This related to the idea that the military was a male sphere and women who entered it during times of need were not to adopt any feature of masculinity, as the genders had to remain distinct.

Simultaneously, a transformation had to occur from a civilian woman to an auxiliary servicewoman. This change was most apparent in the form of the character “Winnie the WAAF” who made a monthly appearance in a journal published by the Women’s Auxiliary Air Force entitled “WAAFS”. “Winnie” was a stereotypical and somewhat hair-brained recruit whose inability to transform into an acceptable auxiliary was the source of much humour. In a cartoon in March 1943, “Winnie” appeared before her commanding officer requesting a transfer, as her “coiffure” did not suit her hat. “Winnie” was presented as a wholly feminine, slim, well-endowed figure which was contrasted with that of her female commander who was far more androgynous with almost masculine features, broad shoulders and stern expression – the only feature identifying her as female was her hair, styled in acceptable auxiliary manner.75

A month later another cartoon appeared showing “Winnie” in the recruiting office wearing clothing at the height of fashion for civilian life and the height of impracticality for the Auxiliary Services due to its fitting nature, high-heeled shoes and large bow. At the same time “Winnie” had on a great deal of make-up. The caption deals with a conversation of two similar looking androgynous female officers

who suggested that her past experience as a beauty queen would best suit her for the camouflage section.\textsuperscript{76}
The humour in women’s adjustment to military life was by no means confined to the South African experience – below is a British cartoon containing the same theme, which portrays groups of mismatched women, poorly outfitted and not adopting the proper stance, who were a far cry from the uniform military ideal.

(Cartoons taken from WAAFS, March, April, 1943)

In a further issue, which had been drawn “by a man” there appeared almost an aversion to women in the military in a situation which did not clearly distinguish them...
from men, such as combat. A figure of a very feminine looking recruit is reading a newspaper and asks, “What is an Amazon anyway?”

This referred to the Amazons of Greek mythology, who eschewed any contact with men save for the purposes of reproduction and were fierce warriors. It was believed that they cut off their left breast so as to more effectively hold a bow, thus symbolically denying a defining feature of their femininity and role as mothers and nurturers. The recruit’s lack of knowledge of Amazons suggested that great distance existed between those fighting female warriors and the role of women in the Auxiliary Services. Their roles were not therefore a denial of their femininity but worked in harmony with it, although adjustments would have had to be made from civilian life.

(Cartoon taken from *WAAFS*, October 1944)

Another issue raised by the figure of “Winnie the WAAF” was that of the interaction between female recruits and their male counterparts. In a play on the idea of the ace pilot where each kill was recorded by an “X” or some other symbol painted on the body of the plane, a cartoon appearing in 1942, suggested the alternate connotation of the “X” – the kiss – and the number of “Xs” appearing on the plane were instead a token of his infatuation with “Winnie”. In another cartoon appearing in February 1944, entitled “Three Offences”, one of the offences is termed “Striking an Officer” and showed an officer distracted by the figure of a well-endowed recruit. The two examples suggest the difficult adjustment made by men and women working in a new

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relationship in a sphere that was previously completely male. On a more negative note it was implied that female recruits might have been a distraction to men, diverting their attention from the war itself.

(Cartoons taken from WAAFS, June 1942, February 1944)

Women’s perception of their role in the Auxiliary Services during the war was thus a complex and extremely ambiguous one. Hand in hand with the new possibilities opening up to them and their Allied counterparts, giving them the chance to prove themselves, was the belief that war remained a male occupation and that women’s greater work would come in peace as they would be integral in building a utopian society. In addition, those women who took advantage of the social change brought about by war, its democratic premise and the need for women to “free men to fight”, to call for greater equality for women in the Auxiliary Services, was juxtaposed by characters such as “Winnie the WAAF” who demonstrated the more frivolous side of women in the Auxiliary Services as well as the belief that the adjustment to military rules and regulations would be difficult for women – and men.
The Internal Threat

During the course of the Second World War in South Africa a high proportion of troops were stationed within the borders of the country – by 1945, of the 335 000 servicemen in the Union Defence Force approximately only 100 000 served outside the country. This was an extremely high figure for a country so isolated from the European and Pacific theatres of war. The reason behind this was the threat from dissidents particularly in the form of the Afrikaner Nationalist organisation, the Ossewabrandwag, which was extremely right wing.80

The OB had initially begun as a cultural rather than political organisation in 1938 on the 100th anniversary of the Great Trek and was formed to promote an Afrikaner way of life:

Die doel wat met die Ossewa-Brandwag beoog word, is: die bestendiging van die ossewa-gees in Suid-Afrika, die handhawing, die uitbouing en die uitlewing van die tradisies en beginsels van die Diets Afrikaner, die beskerming en die bevordering van die Godsdienstig-kulturele en stoflike belange van die Afrikaner, die aanweek van vaderlandslike en nasionale trots, en die inskakeling en samesnoering van alle Afrikaners, manne sowel as vroue, wat hierdie beginsels onderskryf en gewillig is om hulle kragdadig daarvoor te beywer…81

[The aims of the Ossewa-Brandwag are: the perpetuation of the spirit of the oxwagen in South Africa; maintaining, amplifying and giving expression to the traditions and principles of the Dutch Afrikaner; protecting and promoting the religious-cultural and material interests of the Afrikaner; fostering patriotism and national pride, and harnessing and uniting all Afrikaners, men as well as women, who endorse these principles and are prepared to make energetic endeavours to promote them…]82

An interesting feature of this quote is that Afrikaner women were brought in as being integral to the culture. Later on, there was even an idea of creating camps for Afrikaner men and women to promote culture.83 The role of women in Afrikaner culture was portrayed as that of the “volksmoeder”:

…women’s lives were centred around their concern for their nation, their husbands and their children. The most important attributes of women were their ability and willingness to suffer and sacrifice for nation, husband and children. As martyrs they were heroes not because of their actions, but because of their passivity: their

82 Roberts. The South African Opposition. p231.
83 Roberts. The South African Opposition. p74.
humbleness, their patience, their resignation, their submissiveness and their servility.84

The patriotism of Afrikaner women lay within this framework of wives and mothers. Their duty was to maintain an Afrikaner home and imbue succeeding generations with Afrikaner ideals, thereby building an Afrikaner nation.85 It was in this light that the OB laid down its strict policy on gender roles where the man was the worker and the fighter and the woman was confined to the home as the wife and mother where she was best suited to propagate an Afrikaner way of life.

In the midst of the Second World War where women were taking up the vacant positions in the workplace left by men, the OB issued stern instructions to Afrikaner women to return to their “traditional” gender role:

Hierdie proses van vernietiging wil die O.B. weer ongedaan maak met die wekroep aan die vrou: terug na jou huis! Hou op om ‘n karikatuur van die man te wees, en gaan word weer vrou en moeder. Jou ere-taak is nie om die man na te aap nie, maar hom te vorm en hom in die wereld te bring en ‘n volk te bou…86

[This process of destruction is what the O.B. wishes to undo again by issuing a clarion call to all women: Back to your homes! Cease being a caricature of the man, and be a woman and a mother once more. Your task of honour is not to imitate the man, but to mould him and bring him into the world and to build a nation…]87

There was a certain similarity evident to the ambiguity of women in military service represented by “Winnie the WAAF” and her more androgynous superior officers however within the O.B. no such ambivalence existed. Women’s work outside the home was portrayed in no uncertain terms as an attempt to “mimic” men. Her patriotic role lay in inculcating her sons with Afrikaner ideals and build an Afrikaner nation in that way. The word “honour” is interesting as it was similar to appeals made to male soldiers - fighting for honour and duty. However, women’s duty was in the home – anything else was dishonourable to her Afrikaner heritage.

Part of the condemnation of women’s work outside the home lay in the O.B.’s disapproval of South Africa’s role in the war against Germany and its open sympathy with National Socialism and the Nazi ideology. Although its roots were cultural,

87 Roberts. The South African Opposition. p237.
from the outset the O.B. set itself up as a commando system. This system has military origins with a long history dating from the early European settlers and, in fact, influenced the early structure of the Union Defence Force after 1910. The commando system was integral to the Afrikaner definition of masculinity, initially forming a male rite of passage. It was thus not difficult for the O.B. to move from a cultural organisation to a political and military one where the aim was the defence of Afrikanerdom against the perceived influences of the English and traitors to the volk as represented by General Smuts. In addition it modelled itself partly on the Nazis with a section entitled the “Stormjaers” or “Storm Troops” – an equivalent to the S.S.

At the height of its power the O.B. claimed to have a membership of 400 000 which was more than the entire complement of the Union Defence Force and was credited with carrying out a number of terrorist attacks against the South African state during the war:

…on many occasions its members clashed viciously with servicemen in the streets of the larger towns. Hand grenades were manufactured from water pipes, arms and ammunition were accumulated, and acts of sabotage and arson were committed.

For the members of the O.B. it was a case of war against an aggressor – the South African state - due to a conflict in ideology and a fear of Anglicization. The ideal of a domination of South Africa by a National-Socialist minority was openly expressed in an annual celebration in Amajuba in 1943 and the activities of the O.B. – and its appeals to Afrikaner men - were based upon the perception of a glorious past of struggle and heroism. It was in this light that their conflict of the state was seen:

Ons dooies slaap nie, ons offers sterf nie
Niks gebeur om niks nie: Alles vir almal,
Almal vir elk. Ons land, ons volk, ons God!
Gedenk ons Hollandse Volksplanters,
gedenk ons Hugenote Gelooofsvaders,
gedenk ons Duitse Voortbouers,
gedenk ons helde-leiers en helde-lyers.

90 Swart. “‘A Boer and His Gun and His Wife’”. p738.
93 *South Africa’s Yesterdays*. p307.
[Our dead do not sleep, our sacrifices are not in vain.
Nothing happens in vain: Everything for all,
All for one another. Our country, our people, our God!
Remember the Dutch founders of our nation,
remember our Huguenot forefathers of the faith,
remember our German ancestors who carried on the nation-building,
remember our heroic leaders and heroic sufferers.]95

The confrontation between the state and the O.B. was therefore the means whereby the latter asserted its patriarchal authority – which was very much part of early Afrikaner society96 - by protecting the volk and asserting a form of nationalism in the public sphere which would be echoed by women in the private sphere. Men were the visible activists in this conflict as the duty of defending Afrikanerdom fell to them as well as the belief that they were carrying on a great tradition of heroism and resistance to oppression in the manner of the Great Trek and the South African War. With the idea of upholding a great and glorious past came that of duty as, integral to the notion of patriarchy, is a defence of home and a particular way of life. In this way they can be viewed as being similar to their English-speaking and liberal Afrikaner counterparts fighting against fascism as, whilst the two groups were in perpetual conflict, both perceived the conflict to be a defence of the home and hence their duty. Their masculinity therefore depended on them carrying out this duty as best they could – which set them in opposition to each other.

By 1942, hundreds of members of the O.B. were arrested and interned until 1944 and, in 1947, the movement was basically a nonentity. However, the National Socialist ideals for which it stood and the huge support it gained, retained its hold on the public mind as the National Party under D.F. Malan came to power in 1948 and, with it, an espousal of right wing principles in total opposition to the ideology for which the Second World War was fought.97

**War Weariness**

In 1943 a shift occurred in the support of the war. There were difficulties on the home front in terms of rationing, blackouts and even the constant fear of the rise of

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97 *South Africa’s Yesterdays*. p307.
National Socialism within the country. For the women on the home front, many with male family members on the front lines being taken prisoner-of-war or killed, and having to cope with their new roles in the work place and as heads of the family, there appeared to be a drop in enthusiasm for a war which had been going on for almost four years with little end in sight.

The first signs of disharmony in the system came as early as 1942 where the Director of Recruiting, Colonel G.C.G. Werdmuller, discouraged tendencies amongst W.A.A.S. women to voice their complaints about life in military service as it was contributing to a shortfall in recruits:

Every time she airs her grouses and grumbles in public she damages that reputation and, consciously or unconsciously, discourages some other woman from joining it [W.A.A.F.] and contributing towards its further success.98

Werdmuller portrays the Defence Force as an organisation where each woman is “a shareholder in her country’s security”99 and, as such, was responsible to maintain its high status, despite any personal misgivings. He called upon these women to overlook the hardship of military life in favour of its benefits:

I know that life in the army is sometimes difficult. Life in barracks is not as comfortable as life in a first-class hotel...But when you feel like grousing about the discomforts, try to think, too, of the benefits – the companionship, the sense of achievement, the knowledge that you are doing a good job...These are the things for which others will join the army if you, by speaking of them with courage and conviction, will place them first and highest among your army experiences.100

The appeal he made was to overlook the individual discomfort in favour of the greater good – doing their bit for the war, which was essential for the victory of democracy. Simultaneously, he appealed to the sense of comradeship and camaraderie, similar to that found amongst male soldiers, which was perceived to be the most positive aspect of military service. Not only were current female military personnel expected to emphasise this positive aspect, they were also expected to promulgate it to other prospective recruits.

Werdmuller continued in similar vein in 1943 when war weariness and the subsequent shortfall in recruits was a very real problem. In a circular in October on recruiting he

98 Documentation Centre – Department of Defence Archives. The Women’s Auxiliary, June 1942, Issue 22, p5.
99 The Women’s Auxiliary, June 1942, p5.
100 The Women’s Auxiliary, June 1942, p5.
emphasised that there had to be a change in the way in which recruiting was carried out – propaganda was no longer effective:

At this stage of the war recruiting, which has always been a specialised task, has become far more difficult than it was during the early stages of hostilities. The old methods of approach such as public meetings, poster, screen and press advertising, have largely lost their value, and it remains for recruiters to employ other means for finding the volunteers now so badly needed.101

Recruiting was to take on a note of greater personal interaction between recruiter and prospective recruit and the former had to apply the reason for joining which would have most appealed to the individual concerned:

During your talk with a prospect find out what appeals to him most, pay, patriotism, a trade etc., and apply the arguments most likely to convince him. He may have to be contacted several times before he makes up his mind. This must be done where it is necessary.102

This presents a more clinical and almost manipulative vision of recruiting where the broad sweeping statements such as “fighting the good fight” were no longer applicable. The individual motivations of the recruit had to be taken into account instead. Enhancing this image of manipulation was the way in which recruiting officers were encouraged to behave in the vicinity of the recruit – as “courteous and amiable” where “overdone militarism is not appreciated by a new recruit”.103

In another attempt at recruiting women in the Auxiliary Services, Werdmuller once again made the appeal of freeing men to fight but it was given an added twist:

…wherever they [men] go they will carry with them the magnificent tradition of valour which they have built for themselves and for their country during the past three years. But they cannot go unless the women of South Africa come forward now to release them. Already there are 15 000 women on active service in the Union and in the Middle East. Some of these women are actually in the fighting services – the women of the Coastal Artillery and the Anti-Aircraft and Searchlight Batteries. Others are doing important work in offices, in factories, in transport depots, and on air stations throughout the country.104

It appears that it was no longer sufficient to merely “free men to fight” as he elucidated the various opportunities open to women – not only in the conventional roles on the home front in factories, offices and munitions, but in positions near the

102 W.A.D.C. Box 11, Ref D.R. (W) F27, p6.
103 W.A.D.C. Box 11, Ref D.R. (W) F27, p6.
104 Documentation Centre – Department of Defence Archives. The Women’s Auxiliary, February 1943, Issue 30, p5.
front lines in the Middle East or as close to combat roles as possible in the Artillery and Anti-Aircraft Batteries, which gave them a more active role in defence.

In another article appearing in the same issue of *The Women’s Auxiliary* the recruit was portrayed as infinitely important to the war effort and, on joining up, she was to be treated as such:

“Touch not a hair of her head, for even the ground on which she stands is precious” is a misquotation which applies aptly to all women recruits. So if ever you have longed to be sought after and cherished, then become a recruit!…You will become staggeringly popular; you will be at the centre of attention at whatever party you attend; you will be advised, cautioned and encouraged until your head whirls.”

The article went on to demonstrate examples of young women who did not meet the minimum age requirement and older women who fell outside its limits and the way in which these women went to extraordinary lengths to sign up due to the high level of status given to a new recruit. Designed largely to appeal to young women, the article indicated a shift for its prospective audience – no longer was it appealing to patriotism or job opportunities but instead to the enhancement of the social life of the recruit where she was portrayed almost as a celebrity. In addition the idea of being at the centre of attention where your every word was hung on to and the glamour, which was associated with it, would have appealed to women as an alternative to a “run-of-the-mill” existence.

For those young women who believed themselves to be awkward and shy, becoming a recruit and the training it involved was portrayed as a finishing school, leading “to poise and self confidence”. Here the appeal was made to the girl from the rural area who was believed to have little other opportunity to have acquired these attributes:

“Regimentals” may be the first opportunity a girl has ever had of acquiring poise and self-confidence, smartness in her dress and manner. Imagine the girl from the platteland whose previous life has been spent on the isolation of the farm. Her parents are in all probability against her joining up. She has cut herself adrift from home and has no one to advise her.

Entering the world of the regiment the “green” recruit found herself with others just like her, hence ending her sense of isolation. The NCOs served as guides for these

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108 *The Women’s Auxiliary*, March 1943, p32.
young girls and “mothered” them. The regiment became a home away from home and a place where the isolated recruit now felt a sense of belonging.

However, as late as 1944, there were still attempts to combat the malaise of war weariness as was apparent in a poem which appearing in *The Women’s Auxiliary*, which summed up the situation:

When this wretched World War started  
And our homes in danger lay  
The women in this sunny land  
Got up – and said their say  
With visions of the war work  
And the wondrous things they’d do  
They linked up with the SAWAS  
So did I – and so did You.

They bought their brand new outfits  
All with belt and tie complete  
And they toddled off to meetings  
Looking most important – Neat.  
They learnt to make good coffee,  
Served so many hungry men;  
Took up “first aid”, “knitting”, “transport” –  
But !! the war’d just started then.

Not everyone could leave their homes  
To sign for pastures new.  
The central camps engulfed our men  
The jobs got fewer – few.  
We still held endless functions  
And the money just rolled in –  
But the glad old days of action ceased  
And tempers wore quite thin.

Did our soldiers ever slacken  
In the snow and slush and dust?  
Do their buttons all get tarnished  
And their rifles filmed with rust?  
No! They’ve got a job to finish  
They must do, or die, or Bust  
Whilst we? Gossip, grouse, and grumble  
It’s not cricket, it’s not just.

They must face a year of hardships  
Such as never was before.  
Is it right that we must slacken  
When the wolf is at the door?  
Let us put away the pettiness  
The quarrels – start anew  
Help our men to face these trials

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109 *The Women’s Auxiliary*, March 1943, p32.
Sure will I – Now what of You? \textsuperscript{110}

The poem indicated the initial enthusiasm felt by women at the onset of war and their signing up for the Auxiliary Services in large numbers as well as their many activities to support the men on the front. However, as the war progressed, this enthusiasm faded as the harsh reality made itself felt and support for the war effort dwindled with a subsequent fall in recruitment. The ultimate appeal to these women was that the men on the front lines – who, for many, were dear family members - were facing a far worse situation and, if they were able to rise to the occasion with little protest, it was not too great a sacrifice to have expected the same from women. Anything else was “not cricket” – interesting here was the use of sport analogy and the failure of women to support the war effort was perceived to be unsportsmanlike. This image bore remarkable similarity to the portrayal of war as a sport among men, only in this instance, it was women’s role in the war effort, which was depicted as sporting behaviour. The main theme in the poem is that when the challenges got greater, it was up to these women to rise to meet them – “when the going gets tough…”

War weariness and the subsequent loss of support for the war effort thus led to a change in recruiting tactics to combat the fall in recruitment, particularly in the Auxiliary Services. Recruiting became more manipulative on an individual level with propaganda about the advantages of military service tailored towards specific groups – be it money, patriotism, glamour, camaraderie or even playing a more active role in defence. This was due to the implementation of specific instructions issued by the Director of Recruiting, G.C.G. Werdmuller. The final appeal made in 1944 was that of guilt where the difficulties experienced by men on the front lines was contrasted with the more minor complaints of women on the home front and women were therefore expected to rise to the challenge and meet the hardships brought about by the duration of the war.

\textbf{Conclusion}

The period during the Second World War in South Africa was one of tremendous social upheaval – both positive and negative. The influx of men to the front lines of

\textsuperscript{110} C. Burmeister “War Weariness” in Documentation Centre – Department of Defence Archives. \textit{The Women’s Auxiliary}, March 1944, Issue 43, p55.
North and East Africa created a feeling of ambiguity for those left behind – on the one hand there was the concern of having loved ones go off to war, facing injury, imprisonment and even death. On the other hand, as indicated by the example of Sarah Gertrude Millin, there was a sense of being excluded from a great adventure occurring in exotic locales and creating a sense of immortality for those who participated in it.

For the men who participated, the war created a deep psychological change, which was yet another experience from which women at home were excluded. Facing death and killing in turn made a lasting impact. War was reduced to the level of a game by these men where death became part of a scorecard – this was particularly the case with fighter pilots. I have shown that men’s experience of war was an ambiguous one – war created a sense of coldness and distance on the part of the participant yet, simultaneously formed the pinnacle of male experience where men felt most alive during this period.

Women were not privileged to share the experience of combatants and, perhaps for the duration of the war, did not realise the extent of change, which had occurred for the male participants. This was largely due to the euphemistic letters written by men and printed in women’s publications such as *The Women’s Auxiliary*, which presented sanitised perceptions of war, imprisonment and death. It was only towards the end of the war when the country was presented with the influx of men returning from the theatres of war that women were given an indication of what to expect. I argue that part of this was perhaps to emphasise the harshness of men’s experience in contrast to that of the women on the home front so as to create a sense of sympathy and even guilt on the part of women. Women were no longer expected to be independent – an attitude which was evident in magazines issued by SAWAS such as *The Women’s Auxiliary* - as they were called upon to do during the course of the war but to place their men folk first and not “rock the boat” by considering their own needs above those of men. This was hoped to have the effect of controlling the social upheaval brought about the war and returning to a pre-war situation when women gave up their places in the work place to returning men.
For the men of the Non-European Army Services – all of them volunteers - the war became the opportunity to prove themselves. Despite their allocation to support roles – as was the case with women – Elshtain demonstrates that the notion of “the compassionate warrior” is not wholly dependent upon being a combatant but is one of defence and heroism to save one’s comrades. I have applied the “compassionate warrior” scenario to the men of the NEAS where many individual acts of heroism were recorded with the awarding of medals to those involved. At the same time, classifying their role as supportive did not do full justice to the similar experiences they shared with their White counterparts – facing death and injury, being taken prisoner and escaping. For these men being taken prisoner-of-war was even worse due to their non-combatant role and race, as they were singled out for more brutal treatment and perceived not to be subject to the Geneva Convention.

I have shown that shared experiences did not overcome racial tension, which was exacerbated by unequal treatment. The policy of dilution created a high number of disciplinary problems brought about largely by the perception of different treatment on the part of the NEAS men. Despite being non-combatant they were placed in similar hazardous situations to the White troops of the Union Defence Force but were paid less and received less benefits. This discontent manifested itself in serious infractions of military discipline, which were given high visibility. At the same time the policy of dilution and the proximity with which the NEAS worked to the rest of the UDF brought with it the possibility of mutual respect and understanding based upon shared experiences. However, this possibility was muted upon returning home, where the contributions made by the NEAS was largely ignored by the state and their benefits amounted to that of the notorious bicycle, compounded by the high unemployment and lack of opportunity to utilise the skills learned in the military. Despite them proving themselves in the war zones they were not accorded the status of equal citizens as had been extended to women all over the world after their contribution in the First World War. On the other hand I suggest that the benefits received by White men – particularly working class White men – such as housing subsidies and access to tertiary education created an association between White and middle class – thus compounding racial distinctions with class based ones.
The position of the NEAS was in fact worse than that of White women in the Auxiliary Services as the latter were enfranchised. Despite this parallels were drawn between them by the League of Women Voters due to poor pay and benefits. It was one of the few incidences of White women drawing a parallel between them and Black men. Whereas the possibility of understanding occurred between Black and White men based on the shared experiences on the front lines – with the exception of combat – for Black men and White women it was based on the perception of shared subjugation – none of which were to pan out after the war. Nowhere however, in the publications such as *The Women’s Auxiliary* or *WAAFS* is the voice of Black women heard – Black women’s activities were often subordinated to the activities of White women towards the war effort.

The women of the Auxiliary Services did however perceive themselves to be part of a larger initiative carried out by Allied women all over the world. There were constant references to the activities of women in Britain, the United States, Canada and Australia, to the extent that South African delegates were sent to Britain to report back. Within this interaction I perceive what appeared to be a hierarchy with the South African Auxiliary Services looking to Britain to emulate the latest developments such as work in artillery battalions. Simultaneously South African women perceived themselves to be influencing the war effort in India, encouraging White women there through *The Women’s Auxiliary* to make similar contributions to the war effort.

Within the S.A.W.A.S. itself there was much ambiguity surrounding the perception of women engaging in military service. On the one hand women claimed to belie their appearance – their “delicate frame” was no reflection on their ability to engage in previously masculine work such as driving heavy vehicles. On the other hand there appeared to be a sense that the very feminine woman was not appropriate for military service. This was embodied in the comic character “Winnie the WAAF” whose appearance was contrasted with that of her more androgynous superior officers. A compromise was reached between the extremes of femininity and a more masculine appearance by adapting a feminine appearance to the needs of the military. This is

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111 By the term “Black” here I am referring to men of African, Indian and Coloured descent.
evident in articles demonstrating appropriate hairstyles, fashion and behaviour. Care was taken to ensure that women do not fall the way of the “Amazon” – their femininity and their non-combatant roles, distinct from those of men, guaranteed that a woman in military service was not a man.

This, however, was not the position adopted by Afrikaner dissidents on the home front where women working outside the conventional roles of wives and mothers of the Afrikaner nation, were accused of “aping” men. A clear distinction was drawn between the position of women in the home and that of men who were expected to work and fight. For women, their contribution to Afrikaner nationalism came in the form of inculcating the values of Afrikanerdom in their offspring. For men – particularly those members of the Ossewabrandwag – their contribution came in the form of conflict with the state over the perceived threat to Afrikaner culture and way of life by Anglicization. The OB were ardent National Socialists and the duty of Afrikaner men I suggest was similar to that of those fighting fascism – fighting an oppressor and an enemy of one’s ideology. Thus, while the two groups were in conflict over different belief systems, their rationale for conflict which was protecting the home from the invader, be it Anglicization or fascism, was the same.

After three years of war with the hardships experienced on the home front in the form of the terrorist activities of the OB, rationing, the heavy responsibilities placed on women whose spouses had gone off to war, there appeared a phenomenon known as war weariness. Recruitment figures dropped drastically and propaganda designed to appeal to patriotism used at the onset of the war, no longer had much effect. The recruitment of women thus took on a new and more manipulative form designed to appeal to the individual needs of the recruit. Other than the appeals of glamour, camaraderie and a sense of purpose, an influential appeal was that of guilt by contrasting women’s complaints with the harsh experiences of men on the front lines. Military service was portrayed as a duty and women were expected to rise to the challenge. This is little different to the appeals made to men. For both therefore, I argue that masculinity and femininity came down to duty and service to country.

My interrogation of the Second World War in South Africa with its subsequent social upheaval and reconstitution of gender roles demonstrates that it was fraught with
ambiguity but retained the possibility for permanent social change in areas such as race and gender. The common experiences of Black and White men on the front lines allowed for this as did the war work of women. Within this there also existed tensions – conflict between Black and White men over inequalities in treatment and ambiguities over femininity within the Auxiliary Services. By looking at South African society from a bird’s eye perspective at that particular point in time it appears that the country was poised on the brink with the possibility of moving forward and an equal possibility of returning to pre-war relations. Only after the end of the war would it be determined which way the country would go.
Conclusion

Aftermath

There is a vast body of literature dealing with the possibility of war bringing about social change. According to Arthur Marwick writing about Britain during the Second World War, the onset of war had four effects on existing societal relations. The first was “the disruption or destruction of pre-war processes and relationships.”

Although Marwick here is referring to evacuation within Britain as a result of bombing raids, the notion may also be applied to the disruption around gender roles: within work spaces; within the state; and within the family unit as a result of the male members joining the Armed Services, female members joining Auxiliary Services and becoming the head and main breadwinner of the family for the duration of the war – and, in many cases, beyond that as well.

Following this was “the testing of existing institutions; this forces adaptation in order that a nation be successful in war.” For South Africa, as in many countries gearing up for war, this was the stimulation of industry for war production of munitions and other military equipment, which was built upon existing industrial infrastructure based on the mines and the railways. More significantly, the legislation of discrimination such as that of influx control was relaxed for the duration, allowing African men and women greater freedom of movement within the urban areas of South Africa.

The third feature bringing about social change was “the participation of previously underrepresented groups in the labour force because of the conscription of large numbers of men into the armed forces.” Here Marwick is primarily concerned with the women of Britain entering the work force, which might have had far-reaching effects, such as the eventual enfranchisement of women after the First World War and the end of the marriage bar for married women after the Second World War.


\[2\] War and Social Change. pix.

\[3\] Readers’ Digest Illustrated History. p265.

\[4\] War and Social Change. pix.
South Africa many women who had not previously worked, motivated by patriotic fervour and a desire to do “their bit”, took up positions in industry as well as the South African Women’s Auxiliary Services. In addition to the dimension of gender is that of race and hundreds of thousands of African, Indian and Coloured men volunteered for the various branches of the Non-European Army Services which, akin to S.A.W.A.S., functioned as support units for the only sector of the population allowed into combat – White men.

The final feature of the social effects of war were psychological:

Marwick claims that that total war is an emotional and psychological experience ‘comparable with the great revolutions in history’. He suggests that among the upper classes total war stimulates feelings of sympathy towards the underprivileged, while encouraging the latter to become more assertive in pressing for egalitarian social reform.5

Key here is the notion of “total war” where all segments of the population were involved and the war was not merely fought on a distant battle field but the civilian front itself comes under attack and attacks are waged on the home fronts of the enemy as well – in short, it was a war fought by all on all fronts. To an extent the South African home front was protected from the ravages apparent in the European and Pacific theatres of war. Simultaneously though, there lurked the omnipresent threat of German incursions along the coast and from South West Africa. Within the country itself domestic terrorism in the form of attacks carried out by right-wing Nazi sympathisers in the form of the Ossewabrandwag placed the country on a constant high state of alert and the greater number of the Union Defence Force troops were stationed on the home front.

Additionally, whereas Marwick writes largely of the potential for change in class relations, which was more applicable to Britain, in South Africa this took on racial and gendered overtones instead. The work in the support services performed by White women and the way in which they played their part on the home front in the absence of men, was acknowledged by the state. In a country that was extremely racially divisive and had been so for centuries, the close working relationship between the NEAS and the regular troops of the UDF gave them the opportunity to demonstrate their capability, which was compounded by the individual acts of

5 War and Social Change. pix.
heroism and bravery demonstrated by the NEAS. In addition the possibility existed of creating a bond between men of different races based on the shared experience of the “baptism of fire” as well as the experience of imprisonment, injury and death – only combat separated the two groups and even that distinction was not always so clear. On the part of White South African men who were the main combatants of the Second World War, their fight against fascism turned many into supporters of the ideals for which the Allies fought – freedom and democracy – which, upon their return to South Africa, would bring them into conflict with a state determined to follow a despotic path, at least with regards to its “non-White” citizens.

Equality for Women?

As early as 1942, South African women were acknowledging the possibility of change brought by their work in the war. In an article written about the similar experiences of British women and appearing the in South African publication *The Women’s Auxiliary* the war work done by women was expected to continue in a different form during the peace – side by side with men:

> It seems to be realised now that you cannot educated boys and girls alike and then ask the girl to neglect the faculties she had developed. I think there will be no political movement for sex equality after the war. No movement is needed to achieve what is already there. British women step forward to take their full share with the men when there was only blood and toil, tears and sweat to share. They will be needed just as much after the war. For again they will have two jobs to do. They will have to help build the new world – and they will have to provide the race that will inhabit the world.6

There was an optimism that the work of women during the war had proved their equality – no further campaigning for equal rights was necessary. Women shared the burden of war and were therefore entitled to the rewards of victory. With these rewards come responsibilities and it was here that a note of ambiguity crept in – bringing in the notion of equal education for boys and girls and the desire to utilise suggested that women would engage in work outside the home on a similar level as men. However, the phrase “they will have to provide the race that will inhabit the world” was a reference to the reproductive role of women as the mothers of

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succeeding generations. Here motherhood was elevated – as so often in the past – as being part of a national duty.

In addition the work that in which they had engaged and the vital role they had played gave them a sense of being indispensable – which they took advantage of by improving the quality of the care given to their children:

Mothers who are doing useful work have their babies looked after in Government day nurseries. The mothers of Britain, suddenly realising their power, not that they are national workers as well as mothers, having used it to insist on the best of everything for their babies.7

There was a very real sense therefore that women were not simply exchanging their role as mothers for that of workers outside the home but were, in fact, incorporating the two by using their work to improve their role as mothers. It was suggested that the two were not mutually incompatible as has often been portrayed. In addition the work of women outside the home placing them on equal footing with their male counterparts brought in the radical notion that sharing responsibilities for waged labour should lead to a similar sharing of tasks within the home:

Where you could once see a fluttering young girl waiting for her busy fiancé, in a popular restaurant, you will now see two comrades – both in the King’s uniform – shedding their responsibilities for a few hours of happy, equal companionship. You will see both coming in tired after their day’s war-work, sharing the cooking and housework at night.8

The quote above indicated a growing maturity on the part of women from “fluttering” girls to responsible adults – on par with their male partner. Their similarity of uniform was symbolic of their newfound equality evident in their sharing of war work and domestic work. Despite this article making explicit reference to British women, its appearance in a South African publication and the way in which the South African women of the Auxiliary Services constantly referred back to the other Allied countries – Britain, in particular – as the source of authority for their war work, suggested that it was a vision held for South African women as well. This was made explicit within the article:

South African women will appreciate this thoughtful article on how the war has given amenities to women to develop their organising powers and their brains. South African women, too, are realising that in war-time there is work for everybody and that, as they are sharing war-time responsibility with the men, so they should share the responsibility for the improvements that will come to this country after the

7 The Women’s Auxiliary. December 1942, p81.
8 The Women’s Auxiliary. December 1942, p81.
war…Must the average South African woman’s adult life be a continual repression of those faculties which she has begun to develop at school, or will she continue to use her brain and intelligence to help the men organise the peace?  

At the war’s end therefore, there was envisaged a role for women which would be different from that of her pre-war role whilst incorporating some of its elements such as that of motherhood in service to the nation. The new role also envisioned her as engaging in waged labour and sharing responsibility and an equal division of labour with men. She had to be given the opportunity to demonstrate the capability she had shown for the duration of the war.

For the women of Britain at least, by the end of the war, there was a failure to live up to the potential for change. One of the key developments regarding women during the war was the move to waged labour. For many of those women involved this was due to patriotism and “doing their bit” however, for a large number it was due to economic necessity and their role as the main breadwinner. For the latter group war work was likely to be perceived “as a form of emancipation”. In addition the very social upheavals caused by war which were credited for being responsible for bringing about social change, inspired a desire in women to return to an idealised pre-war existence. The war and its accompanying changes was perceived as an exceptional period with a return to the status quo at its end as is evident by the view of a young women engaged in war work and looking forward to her imminent marriage:

Of course when we get married I shan’t want to work; I shall want to stay at home and have some children. You can’t look on anything you do during the war as what you really mean to do; it’s just filling in time till you can live your own life again.

As the war neared its conclusion a similar process is evident in South Africa. In an article appearing in The Women’s Auxiliary in May 1944, the effects of working mothers on their children is assessed. A woman whose husband had gone off to war had to make the decision to either take a war job or stay home with her children and manage with half their regular income. She chose the former but remained uncertain about her choice:

9 The Women’s Auxiliary. December 1942, p81.
I often look at my children and wonder if they would have had a better chance if I had taken a different decision and had stayed at home and managed with the smaller amount of money. Perhaps four years or more without a proper home and without having me always with them might be bad for the children – who were very small when war broke out.\textsuperscript{13}

The mother was driven to work by necessity rather than a desire for economic independence. Her work was not seen as complementary to her role as a mother but, in fact, as damaging and she was consumed with guilt at having to work outside the home, perceiving it as neglecting her duties as a mother. Her ultimate desire was for a return to normality upon her husband’s return where she could resume her duties as wife and mother in the home, leaving waged labour to him. The war was seen as an obstacle to family life which would only resume its normality or pre-war status upon the end of the war and the subsequent return of her husband:

I felt at the time it was a big step to take, but I’m glad I took it; and when John comes back after the war we will appreciate our home all the more because we will have all have had to work for it.\textsuperscript{14}

War work was therefore perceived to be a sacrifice – albeit a necessary one – but one which need not be continued after the end of the war.

In terms of the relationship between men and women, the war was portrayed as having had a much harsher effect on men on the front lines than on women confined to the home front – resulting in different experiences and different outlooks on the world:

Apart from the normal alterations of Army life, the separation from our polite tea-cup level of entertaining, he may come back with a harsh view of the world which stood by while he and his like went in and fought. He may have suffered that strange neurosis which is associated with long captivity…\textsuperscript{15}

The experiences of men on the front lines and its accompanying psychological effects were something of which women are expected to have no comprehension. In addition men were portrayed as having made far more sacrifices than women due to injury, imprisonment and having the constant threat of death in combat. For their part women were expected to be patient and understanding, putting their own needs on hold.

\textsuperscript{13} Elaine Goodchild. “Have the Children Suffered through my Wartime Job?” in Documentation Centre – Department of Defence Archives. \textit{The Women’s Auxiliary}, Issue 45, May 1944, p21.

\textsuperscript{14} Goodchild. “Have the Children Suffered?” p45.

\textsuperscript{15} Documentation Centre – Department of Defence Archives. \textit{The Women’s Auxiliary}, Issue 45, May 1944, p65.
as well as the progress they had made, in order to create a safe, stable environment allowing men to recuperate from their experiences.\textsuperscript{16}

The period after the war, while holding the possibility of social change in terms of gender relations, did not fulfil its promise. The gains made by women particularly in the form of waged labour were perceived as only lasting for the duration of the war. After the war and in reaction to the social upheavals it brought about, there was a growing element of conservatism with a tendency to return to an idealised pre-war status quo – a belief held by women experiencing among other effects, the economic difficulty of being the sole breadwinner and reconciling this role with their duties as mothers. Along with this was the appeal made to women not “rock the boat” by attempting to change these pre-war gender roles as they owed it to men – who had made the greater sacrifice – to create a climate of stability after the devastation on the front lines.

\textbf{A New South Africa?}

For the men of the NEAS – all of them volunteers – the war was a means of proving themselves. Despite being given the role of non-combatants they faced many of the same hardships of war as their White counterparts in terms of coming under fire and facing death and injury as well as imprisonment. That they rose to the occasion is indisputable – thirty-nine members of the NEAS were awarded medals for gallantry and distinguished conduct, often due to placing their own lives at risks in order to save others. The awards ranged from the British Empire Medal to the Military Medal and one of the highest honours, the Distinguished Conduct Medal of which only one was awarded to a member of the NEAS, Lucas Majozi, a stretcher-bearer.\textsuperscript{17}

In October 1945 a parade was held in Johannesburg for the NEAS, presided over by Jan Smuts and all the recipients of medals of bravery were re-invested with the awards.\textsuperscript{18} In addition a Victory Parade was held in London in June 1946, and

\textsuperscript{16} Documentation Centre – Department of Defence Archives. \textit{The Women’s Auxiliary}, Issue 54, February 1945, p29.
\textsuperscript{18} Gleeson. \textit{The Unknown Force}. p258.
consisted of thirty thousand servicemen and women drawn from all the Allied countries. Among them were eighteen members of the NEAS, a further 204 men from the regular Union Defence Force and nineteen women drawn from the South African Auxiliary Services.\textsuperscript{19} As the three distinct groups marched together it seemed the beginning of a new era in South Africa where the contributions made by the NEAS in the war were given the recognition they deserved.

This however was not to be. Once the parades had ended and the accolades given out, emancipation was not sure to follow for the thousands of African, Indian and Coloured ex-servicemen, returning to poverty and unemployment with meagre benefits in comparison to White servicemen. In Don Mattera’s biography he writes of his Uncle Willie’s bayonet, which Mattera used in a fight with a rival gang. His uncle demanded its return as it was:

\begin{quote}
…his trophy, his only reward for having fought against the Nazis. He had fought and been wounded, returned home unsung and forgotten, and watched in silent envy while the white veteran soldiers were decorated and recompensed for their valour in facing the enemy – an enemy no different from the one who would someday give the order to destroy our home.\textsuperscript{20}
\end{quote}

Ultimately his Uncle Willie became a victim of the forced removals as their home in Sophiatown was demolished. Mattera’s use of the bayonet in a gang war was almost a symbol of resistance as gangsterism and street violence rocked Johannesburg in the 1950s. The use of the bayonet – a symbol of his uncle’s role in the war – in a gang war, which is ultimately in opposition to the control of the state, was a small act of defiance against the treatment of the men of the NEAS upon their return home.

The South African efforts in the Second World War, particularly in opposition to the rise of fascism both domestically and internationally, suggested that the rise of the Apartheid state would hardly be unopposed. Many returning White ex-servicemen who had fought against fascism in the European theatre of war were not likely to support the infringements on democracy in their own country. The spark that ignited protest and led to the formation of the Torch Commando was the disenfranchisement of Coloured voters in the Cape. The mobilisation of ex-servicemen on this issue was however, not due to racial sympathy but to what they perceived as an attack on the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{19} Gleeson. \textit{The Unknown Force.} p260-261.
\end{itemize}
constitution of South Africa. In a speech at a rally outside City Hall in Johannesburg, the war hero “Sailor” Malan made reference to the ideals for which the Second World War was fought:

The strength of this gathering is evidence that the men and women who fought in the war for freedom still cherish what they fought for. We are determined not to be denied the fruits of that victory. It is good to see this support in protest against the rape of the Constitution and the attack on our rights and liberties as free men. In Abyssinia, at Alamein and a score of bloody campaigns we won the right to a voice in our country’s affairs…

However, the Torch Commando did not actually take a stand against the increasingly repressive racial legislation being passed by the Apartheid state. Standing on the brink of a new way forward for South Africa the Torch Commando became very much a product of its time when it refused to allow Coloured ex-servicemen into its ranks and did not take a stand on African rights. Thus despite a membership that peaked at a quarter of a million in 1952, the Torch Commando failed to create any significant change and the movement eventually passed into oblivion. Thus despite the organisation being composed of ex-servicemen who had fought fascism in the war, it was the ideal of democracy rather than any particular commitment to non-racism that motivated them. However, since one cannot have a genuine democracy in the presence of discrimination and the organisation was unable to make an effective decision on the latter, it lost the potential for thwarting the path that the Apartheid state was taking.

By 1945, there was a failure on the part of much of South African society to live up to the possibilities created by the Second World War. The common experiences shared by Black and White men on the front lines were insufficient to build cross-racial alliances as is evident in the case of “Sailor” Malan and the “Torch Commando”. The unequal benefits accorded Black men widened the gap between the two. On the home front those women forced into waged labour due to their new roles as household heads, did not view their employment as any form of emancipation but as a necessity and desired nothing more than a return to the pre-war status quo. The uneasy co-existence between the state, the CP and the ANC came to an end soon after. Despite this however, the Second World War opened up new windows of opportunity for

South African society in terms of race, gender and politics and gave a glimpse of another way forward for the country – it was unfortunate that it was not capitalised on and a conservative reaction set in which culminated in the development of the Apartheid state.

**Conclusion**

This dissertation begins with the Victorian dichotomy between the roles of men and women – a dichotomy which I argue influenced perceptions of gender during the Second World War, and continues to exert a powerful influence today, albeit in an altered form. The nineteenth century was a period of rapid social change – industrialisation, imperialism, and new visions of race. The expansion of capitalism and the growth of cities with their increasing distance – both physically and metaphorically from the countryside – led to a perception of gender along these lines. Men were associated with the public sphere, with cities and with the progress of civilisation and culture. Women were increasingly perceived as being part of the realm of nature due to the convergence of their gendered and biological roles. Simultaneously, nature and women were elevated to the realm of the pure and moral – home became the spiritual antidote to the corruption of the public sphere. In the colonial world the role of White women in this regard took on a racial aspect where these women were given the role of maintaining White racial purity and hegemony – they became the spiritual and moral guardians of the White race. This elevation of White women was not extended to Black women – the colonial world was relegated to the status of the barbaric, savage and backward and Black women were perceived to personify this. I demonstrate that there were two perceptions of women evident in Victorian discourse, which had its roots in Christianity – the pure, virginal and nurturing mother – representing the middle class ideal - who was contrasted with the seductive, temptress. The latter represented the working class in the metropole and Black women in the colonies.

In addition, I argue that for men public schools and the military formed a kind of private sphere of its own where they were insulated from the capitalist excesses of the public sphere. The schools with their emphasis on physicality, team sports and archaic visions of honour and a glorious death in battle, fostered the ideal background,
preparing these young men for life in the military. The metaphor of team sport helped foster a sense of male camaraderie and relegated the enemy to an opposing team. This metaphor also reduced war to the level of a game and created a desensitisation to death. The private sphere of the military, cadet training and private schools created increasing distance between men and women where women were perceived to be idealised, pure figures who formed the basis for men fighting, yet little concrete interaction occurred between the two. As men were most comfortable with their comrades, so too did women turn to each other for friendship and support – a bond strengthened by their similar roles within the home and as mothers and nurturers.

The two genders formed the dichotomy of mothers and soldiers – one dedicated to the preservation of life and the other to its destruction. However subjecting this dichotomy to critical analysis reduces its strength and strong similarities are evident in the idealised construction of the two. Like mothers, the figure of the noble soldier is not one who kills the enemy but is instead a “compassionate warrior” fighting a defensive war and dedicated to the preservation of the lives of his comrades. Another feature uniting the two is that of sacrifice – the mother sacrifices a version of what her life might have been and the soldier may be called upon to sacrifice his life in battle for the greater good. Underlying the motivation for these two roles is that of duty – it appears as if mothers and soldiers are almost trapped within this framework of reproduction and war – any attempt to deviate from this norm is perceived as a dereliction of duty, to use a military phrase.

In a similar vein the image of the idealised nurturing mother who is opposed to the taking of life fails to stand up under close scrutiny. Within the all-encompassing framework of motherhood is “patriotic motherhood” where the conception of mothers is adapted to a war situation. Here, mothers were not opposed to the taking of life but actively advocated it. Patriotic mothers were those who volunteered the lives of their sons in the service of their country and were revered for their ultimate sacrifice.

The roles of mothers and soldiers were – and to an extent, still are, deeply hegemonic. A process occurring in Europe and the United State, it was as evident in South Africa. This chapter demonstrated that despite the two having certain consistencies over time,
they are nevertheless adapted to changing situations – a fluidity that is most apparent
during war.

The framework of mothers and soldiers served as the means by which South Africans
were mobilised for the war in September 1939. Like the other countries involved in
the Second World War, propaganda was used to create or enhance support for the war
effort. Propaganda in South Africa operated within the ideal of the nation and
hegemony. Attempts to win support for the war were made through the media of
communication – radio, newspapers and posters – and appealed to patriotism, which
is a feature of being a citizen within a nation. In addition in settler countries such as
Australia and South Africa, its appeals were also those of belonging to the British
Empire. With regards to gender, propaganda operated in relation to older perceptions
of the roles of men and women. Women were mobilised on the basis of duty and
according to their roles as wives and mothers. I argue that propaganda set limits on
the possibilities existing for women during the war by emphasising the temporary
nature of war work, accentuating the auxiliary nature of their work during the war and
emphasising that it was their men folk who were making the greater sacrifice.
Therefore, although women were allowed to enter into new fields of employment –
and were in fact encouraged to do so – this was done in a limited fashion and the
state, through the use of propaganda, hoped to limit the opportunities available to
women after the war. Propaganda mobilised men on the basis of defending the home
and their loved ones and the extension of this, which was the country itself. Features
of propaganda which were presented were those of duty which was contrasted with
“cowardly” men who failed to meet their obligations, the notion of war as a great
adventure and an appeal to a tradition of courage and honour dating from their
forefathers.

In terms of Gramsci’s notion of hegemony, propaganda was imposed by the state yet,
at the same time, claimed to represent “public opinion”. This belies the fact that
many South Africans were divided over the country’s role in the war on the side of
the Allies. The first schism apparent occurred only a few hours after the outbreak of
war between the Smuts and Hertzog factions of Parliament with the latter winning the
vote over South Africa’s entry by the faintest of margins. This schism was significant
of old tensions within White South African society dating from the South African
War and earlier, which was based on the animosity felt between English and Afrikaans-speaking South Africans. The Second World War, with Smuts’ desire to join in as part of the alliance with Britain, exposed the tensions evident in White politics. South Africa’s entry into the war also had far-reaching repercussions for Afrikaner nationalism – right wing groups such as the Ossewabrandwag openly identified with Nazi Germany and were in violent opposition to the state during the war. They paved the way for a triumph of the conservative element in 1948 with the election of D.F. Malan and the initiation of the policy of Apartheid.

The Second World War also exposed tensions and contradictions within political organisations dedicated to fighting the repression by the state of African, Indian and Coloured people. The Communist Party began the war period in vehement opposition to the war itself, disparaging Black men who chose to volunteer. However, with German’s invasion of Russia, the CP changed its stance on the war and an uneasy alliance was created between the South African state and the subversive party. The African National Congress experienced similar tensions, being unresolved over its support of a state that treated the majority of the country’s population as second-class citizens. However fascism in the form of Nazi Germany was perceived to be the greater evil and there existed the hope that the war would give Black South Africans an opportunity to prove themselves – a quality which was hoped would be recognised after the war.

With the outbreak of war, the country was a hive of activity – industries were transformed to war production, the South African Women’s Auxiliary Service was initiated, troops were trained and sent to the battlefields of East and North Africa and African, Indian and Coloured men were placed in support corps – which was later amalgamated into the Non-European Army Services. South African women moved into industrial positions vacated by men and took up war production, becoming in many instances, the sole breadwinner of the family for the duration of the war.

In the second chapter I initiate the argument that the mobilization began by the state created the possibility for permanent change in South Africa in areas of race and gender. Women engaged in wage labour, many for the first time, and were given new roles and responsibilities on the home front. Black soldiers – although given support
roles and classified as non-combatants – were given the opportunities to prove themselves in the arena of war. The proximity with which they worked to their White counterparts presented the possibility for the creation of amity across racial boundaries. Groups which were previously antagonistic to the activities of the South African state such as the CP and the ANC found themselves fighting on the same side against the common foe of fascism.

The experiences of men on the front lines served to create a growing gap between them and the women left on the home front. The experiences of war – killing, facing death in turn and being taken prisoner – led to a wide divergence of experiences between men and women. Men were unable to articulate these experiences to the women at home and there is a use of euphemistic language evident in excerpts from letters written home. I argue that this also served to perpetuate the idealisation of war, allowing succeeding generations to glorify the experience. It is only towards the end of the war, as a means of preparing women for the return of physically and psychologically damaged men, that there were attempts, particularly by articles appearing in *The Women's Auxiliary*, to give women an indication of the harshness of men’s experiences on the front lines. This had the additional effect of creating a sense of protectiveness towards these men and a sense of guilt on the part of women towards these men for the greater sacrifice they had made. This was a means too of preventing women from extending the opportunities presented by war to peacetime – they were expected to create a calm, stable environment allowing men to recuperate from their experiences and “not rock the boat”.

The men of the NEAS took advantage of the opportunities to prove themselves. Numerous acts of heroism were evident despite their non-combatant role. Many of the men of the NEAS were awarded medals for bravery for saving the lives of comrades and, in this way, fit Elshtain’s profile of the “compassionate warrior” and suggested a similar perception of the male role of the noble soldier. However, tensions were evident which were exacerbated by the policy of dilution, placing NEAS men in the same units as White troops. While presenting the possibility for cross-racial interaction, this also drew the attention of the men of the NEAS to the inequalities of military service – disproportionate pay, lack of benefits and inferior treatment to the regular Union Defence Force. These inequalities were reinforced at
the end of the war with the unequal benefits given to returning men, which led to a
deflation in any sense of masculinity returning NEAS men may have experienced.

Contradictions were also very much in evidence with the work of women in the
Auxiliary Services. Along with the skills acquired in areas as diverse as radar,
transport and even military policing, I perceive an apprehension on the part of women
to not lose any degree of femininity due to their work. Cartoons demonstrating the
lighter side of service in the Auxiliary Services also drew attention to deeper concerns
– the preservation of femininity in appearance and demeanour, the relationship
between men and women in the military and the adjustments on the part of women
entering the military. The perception of women within the Auxiliary Services was
contradictory – while acknowledging new roles for women, this was done within a
traditional framework emphasising the distinction between women and men.

The activities of organisations such as the Ossewabrandwag also functioned within a
framework of duty and idealised gender roles. Afrikaner men were delegated the task
of defending the homeland against the invader which was perceived to be British
imperialism. I demonstrate in the third chapter that their roles and the way in which
they were mobilised were very similar to those of the UDF – a defence of home and
family, duty to country and a link to a glorious past. The role of Afrikaner women
however was far more restricted – the patriarchal nature of Afrikaner society forbade
any activities of women outside the home. The discourse of the Volksmoeder gave
women the role of instilling Afrikaner belief systems in the succeeding generations in
the home. Any attempt to emulate women in the Auxiliary Services was perceived to
be an encroachment on the domain of men. It is within this context that the OB
carried out terrorist activities against the state, eventually leading to large numbers of
them being imprisoned.

By 1942 a change in attitude was evident on the home front. The duration of the war
and the ensuing hardships provoked a sense of war weariness – recruiting numbers for
the Auxiliary Services fell sharply. The propaganda machine was once again put into
action, becoming more manipulative of the individual, and appeals were made to
women on the basis of glamour, social life and the “unsportsmanlike” behaviour of
not contributing. Articles appeared in The Women's Auxiliary were designed to
provoke a feeling of guilt on the part of those women “who did not play the game”. War weariness however demonstrated the failure of the image of “fighting the noble fight” and the idealised role of women in relation to war over time.

The Second World War therefore presented the possibility of a break between segregation, which had come before it and Apartheid, which came after. The contributions to the war effort made by women and the servicemen of the NEAS demonstrated their capabilities and opened up the possibilities of new non-discriminatory roles. The experience of White men on the front lines and their fight for democracy hinted at an equal fight against rising fascism in the form of the Apartheid state on the home front. These groups of people found themselves at a crossroads once the war had ended. For many women who had run the household and held down jobs as their men were away fighting, it became easier to return to a pre-war role in reaction to the social upheavals caused by war. Conservatism won the day and, instead of moving forward and taking its place as a member of the nations of the world, South Africa retreated into isolation, becoming a pariah, due to its growing repression of significant numbers of its population – people who had contributed to the struggle against fascism in the Second World War now found it in their own country.

Thus while the war brought with it social upheaval on every level and thus the possibility of social change in previously entrenched roles, it was this very upheaval which led to conservatism and a desire for people traumatised by long years of struggle, hardship and sacrifice, to return to a perceived idyllic past.

**The Consequences of World War II: Interrogating Gender and War in the last Decades of the Twentieth Century**

While this dissertation argues that the gains made in gender and race relations due to the Second World War were limited, it did create some form of positive change particularly for women. Women’s mobilization for the war presented opportunities that, in some cases, lasted beyond the war – some women who had lost husbands to the war continued in their role as the heads of households, many women chose to remain single enjoying the experience of independence that the war afforded, some
were even politically radicalised becoming ardent campaigners for racial and gender equality – this was particularly apparent in the case of women such as Helen Joseph and Helen Suzman. In terms of the military the Auxiliary Services in many of the Allied countries were eventually amalgamated into the regular military and the roles open to women in military service have been steadily expanding – in some countries today women are even allowed into combat. The women of the Second World War thus laid the foundation for many of the opportunities open to women today – while their roles were limited they helped create the equation of women with military service in public consciousness.

This final section looks at the portrayal of gender over the last fifteen years, particularly as it relates the notion of women in the military or as warriors. I have drawn some examples from three films that illustrate this, as I believe the medium of film to be a strong indicator of popular attitudes and beliefs.

The photograph above is of a scene from the James Cameron film *Aliens* released in 1986. The photograph is of the lead character, “Ripley”, who is supporting a wounded comrade. In its predecessor *Alien* directed by Ridley Scott and released in 1979, the initial perception of the character “Ripley” was of a man, however Sigourney Weaver was given the lead role. The caption of this photograph taken from a history of film-making in the twentieth century is:

> Sigourney Weaver as Ripley saves the prettiest male among the crew in *Aliens*... Weaver took over the role and showed that women could be just as resilient and gritty as male screen heroes.23

The caption overturns conventional gender roles used in film where the male hero rescues the beautiful victim from certain death and marks a shift in popular representations of female strength, militancy and warring ability in the context of a future "science fiction" scenario. Here Weaver is given the role of the strong hero and her co-star Michael Biehn whose character is a marine – considered the most masculine branch of the American Armed Forces – is portrayed as the hapless victim. This picture bears some resemblance to the recent Hollywood success *Saving Private Ryan* in which Tom Hanks’ character as portrayed on advertising posters, is carrying a wounded comrade.\(^{24}\) In the case of *Aliens* it is a woman supporting a male comrade, which is a deviation from the norm used in war films such as *Saving Private Ryan*. The success of the *Alien* series of films with its strong female lead who was constantly involved in physical combat with the enemy and its contrast to wholly masculine films such as the *Rambo* trilogy released during the same period, suggested a new willingness on the part of society at the end of the twentieth century to accept women in strong heroic roles usually reserved for men.


The director Ridley Scott who was responsible for the first in the *Alien* trilogy, has over the past five years, created two other films which are imbued with issues of the formation of gender in combat and the military. The picture on the left is a scene

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\(^{24}\) I discuss the significance of this image in some detail in the first chapter.
from the film *G.I. Jane* which portrays the experiences of a naval woman who enters the Navy SEALs – an elite special operations unit with the reputation for having the most physical training regimen, which has often been the reason that women are not allowed access into this unit or any other branch of the U.S. special forces. The scene portrayed in the picture is of the lead character shaving her head – an event to which I will return.

The film *G.I. Jane*, while demonstrating the equal capability of women in the military even in spheres that are physically demanding, contains many contradictions in its portrayal of women in the military. During the process of recruiting a suitable female candidate to become the first woman to successfully become a Navy SEAL, the female senator in charge emphasised that the candidate had to look feminine, discarding all women who tended to be too muscular as “butch”. During the course of the film the lead character was subjected to innuendo that she was a lesbian due to the misconstruing of her interaction with female friends. The film highlights a significant theme in discussions of women in the military namely, that women desiring to enter a male sphere such as the military are subjected to the questioning of their femininity. This issue was as present during the Second World War and embodied in contradictory figures such as “Winnie the WAAF”.

While the film portrays the illogical nature of such perceptions, it simultaneously delivers a contradictory message about women in the military. This is evident in the scene where she is compelled to shave her head so as to better fit in with her male candidates and her hair is additionally seen as an obstacle to her effectively carrying out her training activities. For much of the film she also engages in extensive physical training to increase her upper body strength which has the eventually result of halting her menstruation. Both elements suggest that for women to effectively play a role in the military on par with men, there has to be some loss of femininity – of the features that distinguish them as women, be it the social construct of long hair or the biological distinction of menstruation and its role in reproduction. The contradictions in *G.I. Jane* are significant of the contradictions in society over the extent of women’s role in the military – there remains intact the core belief, however unconscious, of the unsuitability of women for the military and that those women who do choose that path, would have to sacrifice their femininity to do it.
Just three years after the release of *G.I. Jane*, Ridley Scott created the blockbuster and Academy Award winning *Gladiator* – the picture on the right of the previous page. Modelled on the epic films of the 1950s and the 1960s, *Gladiator* presented a return to the wholly masculine world of the compassionate warrior and the noble hero. In a departure from Scott’s earlier portrayal of strong female roles, there are very few opportunities for the same in *Gladiator* – the only key woman in the film is portrayed as scheming, manipulative and the victim of the men around her as she has no other alternative.

The lead role is Roman general, Maximus, who becomes a slave and then a gladiator. The idealised figure of a hero, played by Russell Crowe, is strong, taciturn and brave, motivated to fight by the murder of his wife and child – the entire film deals with his desire for righteous vengeance, and he subsequently dies after achieving this. His sacrifice frees Rome from the tyranny of an insane Emperor. As a general Maximus portrays the perfect soldier motivated by honour, loyalty and duty to his Emperor – his motto is “Strength and Honour”. In addition there is the constant theme of a heroic death – which comes to fruition at the conclusion of the film – and a desire for glory where he reminds his men that their efforts in war would not go unrecognised: “What we do in life echoes in eternity”, a quote which appeared on the main poster for the film. As a gladiator, Maximus holds the crowd in contempt for the bloodthirstiness – killing was only permissible for self-defence or in pursuit of a higher goal such as freedom or righteous vengeance.

The poster of *Gladiator*, which I have used in this section, is of Maximus standing in the Coliseum – a stance that is reminiscent of the heroic portrayal of soldiers in the recruiting posters of the Second World War. The caption “A Hero Will Arise” indicates his role as the saviour of Rome and has implicit within it Christian imagery which is the resurrection of Christ which saved humankind. The return of Ridley Scott to the extremely masculine genre of the epic and *Gladiator*’s subsequent critical and popular acclaim – which is in stark contrast to the reception of *G.I. Jane* – suggest that there is still deeply embedded in society a notion of the heroic male warrior – it is a notion that I found myself deeply influenced by, despite my unpacking of the “compassionate warrior”. *Gladiator* remains my favourite film and I am moved by
the heroism of the lead character every time I see it, which demonstrates the power of this image that has an exerted an influence since the Second World War and earlier.

I wish to end this dissertation with a discussion of an advertisement taken from a magazine at the beginning of this year. It is an advertisement for a stereo sound system and is of a woman in an adapted military uniform carrying an automatic machine gun. The advertisement is illustrative of the ambiguous perception of women in the military as they enter the ranks of combatants in the USA, European armies, Israel, South Africa and other Armed Forces around the world. Here, rather than women in the military being portrayed as masculine, the advertisement goes to the other extreme – the figure is portrayed as a sex object with non-regulation uniform designed to highlight her physical attributes, manicured nails and long hair which, in reality, would ill-suit her for military service.

The recent nature of the advertisement and films such as G.I. Jane and Gladiator, suggest that there exists a contradictory perception of gender in relation to the war and the military – with deeply hegemonic beliefs of femininity and masculinity remaining intact. With the growing role of women in the military and the proximity with which they work alongside male comrades, the history and context of gender and war needs continuing interrogation if societies hope to create true equality in the military.
This thesis hopes to have made a contribution to an underdeveloped area of South African historiography and to bring both the literature on women and gender in the region, and the research on World War II in the world and regionally, into conversation. I have taken inspiration from the sociologist, J. Cock's work on Gender and War in late and post-Apartheid South Africa, and traced these connections into the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. I hope her work and this thesis will provide further debate and research on the imprint wars have left on gender roles in our region.
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