

The Role of American Women during World War II

Melissa Gillespie

Southern New Hampshire University

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Introduction

This paper will describe the roles of American women during World War II (WWII). This paper will give a brief overview of the Navy Nurse Corps (NNC), Women's Army Corps (WAC), and civilian women during the 1930s and 1940s. This paper will compare and contrast attributes of women from these three diverse groups.

Navy Nurse Corps

Though nurses had been working on ships and in navy hospitals for years beforehand, the US Congress officially established the Navy Nurse Corps (NNC) in 1908 (Armed Forces History Museum [AFHM], 2012, para. 1). Nearly 100 years passed between the suggestion of a Nurse Corps to its implementation. This demonstrates the slow march forward women have faced throughout US history. By the time Pearl Harbor was attacked on December 7, 1941, there were nearly 1700 active duty and reserve NNC nurses.

NNC nurses personified the four primary nursing archetypes of the ministering angel, battle maiden, sex symbol, and healer. These characterizations had been prevalent since the 1800s and though nurses didn't put a lot of effort into combating stereotypes until the 1980s (U.S. National Library of Medicine, 2015, para. 2), they did see a slight shift during WWII. Images became "saucier," but nurses were also allowed to demonstrate bravery in other ways.

WWII saw a shift in NNC nursing from the bedside to more dangerous rescue missions (AFHM, 2012, para. 6). In fact, the first WWII US military woman to die in a combat zone was NNC nurse, Aleda E. Lutz (Wilson, 2016, para. 10). The NNC continues to thrive as a crucial facet of the US military over 100 years after its inception.

Women's Army Corps

The Women's Army Corps (WAC) was established in 1943, 45 years after the NNC. There was a societal backlash, as the addition of women was seen to be a humiliating affair, brought on only by dire necessity for warm bodies. Including some WAC members, more than 400 military women lost their lives during WWII (Wilson, 2016, para. 10). Though the WAC attempted to portray their women as competent professionals, US society was not ready to accept females as equal soldiers. Military psychiatrists had their "concerns over lesbianism in the Corps, which was the apotheosis of cultural anxieties over women's entrance into the military, highlight the performative nature and the close connections between the categories of gender and sexuality" (Hampf, 2004, pp. 13).

The WAC embodied a newly conceptualized conglomeration of class, gender, race, and sexuality within the United States. Male soldiers had their pinup fantasies and nurturing, celibate nurses to keep their mind occupied. They didn't know what to make of these WAC soldiers who sought to fight in the war. Their positions were largely clerical "women's jobs," but men still found them disconcerting. Part of the issue was that masculinity had been so engrained in the ideas of citizenship and soldiering since pre-Revolutionary times (Hampf, 2004, pp. 16). It's easy to reduce women to sexual playthings from a difference, but those men of war furthered their objectification of the WAC women they encountered. The result was that WAC soldiers were classified as either "dykes" or "whores."

Interestingly, the view of WAC roles differed among races. White women's groups saw the WAC as a temporary sacrifice, whereas African American groups saw it as proof of the need for progress. The WAC helped to serve as a catalyst for later civil rights movements within the African American and women's communities.

Civilian Women in the United States

The role of civilian women in the United States (CWUS) changed during WWII. The years leading up to the war were economically stressed. Bennett (2006) states that both the United States and England shows that wartime economies can open up new possibilities for women (pp. 69). Indeed, this was true for the bomb makers and factory workers.

Rosie the Riveter helped inspire the more than six million females who worked on assembly lines and operated heavy machinery during WWII. Together, they built tanks, bombs, and other weapons that helped the allies to win WWII. Some women were able to stay home, but during WWII, they had options.

Unfortunately, there was a conservative backlash after the end of the war (Bennett, 2006, pp. 50). However, it did not keep women down for long. Women made unique and necessary societal contributions during the 1930s, 1940s, and continue to do so today.

Discussion

The WAC, NNC, and CWUS were three distinct groups of women with different roles. Their respective attributes conformed to and stood in juxtaposition to the mores and norms of 1930s and 1940s United States culture. The WAC represented a more mobile, educated, and autonomous women's workforce than the NNC. Overall, there was greater acceptance of gender role reversal during the war, due to the necessity of warm bodies for logistics and materials production (such as bombs). This brought about an economic upswing, which finally lifted the United States out of the Great Depression. Women were a crucial part of the turn the United States took during and after WWII.

Conclusion

This paper described the roles of American women during World War II (WWII). This paper gave a brief overview of the Navy Nurse Corps (NNC), Women's Army Corps (WAC),

and civilian women during the 1930s and 1940s. This paper compared and contrasted attributes of women from these three diverse groups.

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