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BLIND SPOT: WOMEN AND THE HISTORY OF WAR

Elizabeth Cobbs

Stephanie McCurry, *Women's War: Fighting and Surviving the American Civil War*. Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2019. xii + 285 pp. Notes, and index. \$26.95.

Kara Dixon Vuic, *The Girls Next Door: Bringing the Home Front to the Front Lines*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019. 382 pp. Figures, notes, and index. \$29.95.

Heuristics is a fancy way of saying shortcuts. Our brains take them every waking moment. That is how we process information fast enough to outrun saber-toothed tigers. When I tell new acquaintances that my specialization is American foreign relations, I suggest they “think war.” The next shortcut most people take is to “think men.” Stephanie McCurry and Kara Dixon Vuic demonstrate in their valuable new books that the problem with this heuristic is that women have always played roles in military conflict. Napoleon Bonaparte said an army marches on its stomach. So who did the cooking?

It used to be worse. Not long ago, if someone said *history*, the instant calculation was *men*. Half of humanity disappeared. Then, around fifty years ago, scholars began writing women's history, a subset with a secondary status like any subset. There were athletes and female athletes, artists and female artists, politicians and female politicians, soldiers and female soldiers, presidents and, well, presidents. Much as scholars have tried to rebuild the narrative, women's history remains a lean-to against the house of history.

Doubt my assertion? Consider that in 101 years, the Pulitzer Prize for History has been awarded only once for a book focused on women—on the topic of childbirth: *A Midwife's Tale* (1990). In the historical profession, at least to some extent, women remain in their place.

They remain so in the library, too. I discovered this when I recently began research for my first book focused principally on American women's history and found myself wandering, mystified, in the nether regions of the stacks, far from any reference librarian or computer terminal. At Stanford University,

this subject is two floors and a football field away from the traditional Es and Fs of U.S. History. Women, it turns out, are in the basement.

I cannot fault Stanford for this distancing as it is true wherever Library of Congress classification prevails. Across disciplines, regions, and time periods, most books on women are jumbled together under H and J as a topic within the social sciences. So, for example, Linda Kerber's prize-winning scholarship on three centuries of American law, *No Constitutional Right to Be Ladies* (1998), is next to a reporter's analysis of politics inside the beltway today. Books on Peruvian feminism and women of ancient Rome reside nearby. It is as if some primordial cataloguer had no idea what to do with "women's studies" and so tossed it all in a cosmic junk drawer.

Stephanie McCurry and Kara Dixon Vuic hope to change the assumptions behind such segregation. Women's experience, they show, is the American experience. McCurry, whose slim, muscular book sits among the traditional Es in the library, insists women are central to comprehending the Civil War. Vuic's book vividly documents the strategic support role female civilians played in every U.S. conflict of the twentieth century. It is less successful in breaking free of library gendering, however, and rests amid the hodgepodge Js near an anthology on rape in wartime and others that evaluate Medea's role in Greek tragedy and female poetry of the Spanish Civil War.

McCurry is aided by a stellar track record of reviving stories of massive population groups long conjured out of scholarship. Her previous prize-winning book, *Confederate Reckoning: Power and Politics in the Civil War South* (2010), demonstrated a new way of analyzing the Confederacy's downfall by factoring in the other two-thirds of the people on the ground: poor white women and the enslaved. The approach seems obvious in retrospect, but it took a century and a half for someone to figure it out. In her new book, *Women's War: Fighting and Surviving the Civil War*, McCurry adds three new chapters to her Homeric epic, revealing the female face of secession, black liberation, and Confederate defeat. McCurry also asks why, if women's engagement in all phases was patent at the time, was it "promptly and purposefully forgotten—literally written out—as soon as the war was over" (p. 14)?

McCurry's first chapter examines Union enemies. Female secessionists were as committed to insurrection as their men. An undetermined number carried secret messages, scouted intelligence on enemy troops, ran illegal mail networks, sewed uniforms, passed ammunition, and smuggled medicinal opium. Charged with writing a code of military conduct for Abraham Lincoln's armies in the field, jurist Francis Lieber unblinkingly confronted the problem of guerilla war. European by birth, he knew from experience that females were as capable as males of taking to the barricades and had done so, were doing so, would continue to do so. For the Union army to defend itself from enemy women, Lieber must tear down the ancient legal fiction that women

had no role in the state and redefine them as potentially lethal challengers. Hundreds were tried in the South under Lieber's code. In the St. Louis area alone, the provost marshal arrested and imprisoned 360 women.

Yet, once the war was over, Lieber adopted the blinkered determination of his generation to un-see what had happened. A momentary aberration should not dim anyone's clarity about the nature of gender. Dismayed by postwar appeals for female suffrage, Lieber insisted in defiance of his own experience that women "belonged to the realm of marriage and the family, not politics or the state" (p. 61).

In a second chapter on slave emancipation, Stephanie McCurry points out that the historical profession still tacitly accepts Lieber's assumption. Despite voluminous evidence that enslaved women exerted every effort to achieve liberation, "it has not yet made much of a dent in the prevailing political narrative" (p. 67). Most accounts still consider the U.S. Colored Troops the main story and ignore the rest, perhaps because black women achieved freedom as a race through subordination by gender. McCurry shows that flummoxed Army commanders, besieged congressmen, and female liberty-seekers collaborated in a patchwork fiction that all such refugees were soldiers' wives. If free white men owned the bodies and labor of their spouses, free black soldiers should be equally entitled. Men took the martial route out of slavery, women the marital route—the only one open to them, McCurry observes. "Republicans abandoned one kind of property in persons while clinging desperately to another" (p. 119). Historians should incorporate this evidence to render the story whole and make clear one of its larger themes, McCurry asserts: women and children were last into the lifeboat.

The final third of *Women's War* explores the contribution of women to postwar mythmaking, a project that shapes North and South to the present. The defeated planter class struggled to make sense of its upended world and re-impose control. In this, female enslavers played an essential, if pernicious role. Utilizing the diary of Gertrude Thomas, an heiress and secessionist who fell from the pinnacle of wealth to ditch-digging poverty, McCurry deftly analyzes how psychological denial and personal irresponsibility undermined the transition to peace. Thomas stands for a generation of women that passed its sense of entitlement and illusions of racial superiority to its heirs, blighting their futures, too.

In other words, women had agency. They were deeply engaged participants despite the "forgetting, erasure, and trivialization" of their war records (p. 209). Stephanie McCurry's frustration is apparent. She finds it absurd that this fact still needs asserting. Her *cri de coeur* reminds me of Gerda Lerner's 1967 biography, *The Grimké Sisters from South Carolina*, in which Lerner observed that an outcome of "women's subordination" was that "intellectual women were destined to reinvent the wheel over and over again" (p. 135). McCurry

agrees that “the pattern of denying or suppressing knowledge of women’s participation in military conflicts forms a striking and persistent pattern across a range of postwar societies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries” (p. 204). Considered epiphenomenal to the main event, women’s deeds always seem written in sand, soon washed over.

The Girls Next Door: Bringing the Home Front to the Front Lines is Kara Dixon Vuic’s second book. Her first monograph illuminated the vital medical help female nurses provided combat soldiers in the U.S.-Vietnam conflict, facilitating the war’s prosecution. Vuic’s new book investigates the part civilian women played in sustaining soldier morale in every major military conflict of the twentieth century. As George Marshall (and, again, Napoleon Bonaparte) averred, morale wins wars. Endurance and persistence determine the outcome of most conflicts. From World War One onward, the U.S. army used female volunteers to help men keep going.

Vuic excavates an entirely new layer of women’s wartime service, one mostly undocumented before her valuable book. Across an entire century, she shows the evolution of a job pioneered in World War One. Red Cross nurses, Salvation Army “lassies,” YMCA and YWCA recreation organizers, and co-ed ambulance drivers tended the wounded, softened the fears of dying men, lifted the spirits of doughboys waiting to go over the top, and kept in front of soldiers’ eyes the homeland for which they were fighting. Julia Irwin, Lettie Gavin, Lynn Dumenil, Kimberley Jenson, and others have previously recounted women’s World War One experience, but Kara Dixon Vuic tethers their tale (always in danger of evanescing) to ones that followed.

Civilian volunteers in 1917 and 1918 occupied an odd but important role that became odder as the century wore on. Men under fire manifested a “trembling eagerness” at the sight of females who reminded them of their grey-haired mothers, loyal sisters, chaste girlfriends—and by the Iraq War—pornographic fantasies of willing vamps (p. 47). In World War One, the federal government initially resisted utilizing patriotic women who strove under rough and sometimes dangerous conditions to prove “we are of use otherwise than as ornaments” (p. 54). Handing out coffee and doughnuts in driving rain, playing the piano in converted barns, and dancing with clumsy doughboys who pined to hold a woman, volunteers walked the knife-edge between looking attractive enough to arrest men’s attention and deflecting their advances. A woman whose primary job was to raise morale must avoid assault without letting lonely boys down too hard.

Not only did the patriotic service of female volunteers impress the men who met them, but back home Woodrow Wilson cited their bravery in a plea to the Senate to give women the vote. Female civilians and soldiers had served in a multitude of capacities “upon the very skirts and edges of the battle itself” (p. 56).

Sexual mores advanced (or regressed, depending on one's point of view) in World War Two. In the preceding global conflict, officials had articulated an ideal of resolute male chastity that protected female civilians at least in theory. By the 1940s, attitudes had flipped. Officials now equated martial valor with sexual virility. As the bumptious General George S. Patton bluntly asserted, "a man who won't fuck, won't fight" (p. 66).

Yet the army also worried about soaring rates of venereal disease that accompanied soldiers' pursuit of their off-duty duty. Even Patton became a fan of Red Cross volunteers who established recreational programs at military installations overseas. As he explained, he opposed the clubs until he found that "soldiers would go to the club instead of bars and brothels and this reduced the VD rate enormously" (p. 69). As a result, Patton and other commanders increasingly depended on this "more wholesome female companionship" to divert men away from mercenary alternatives (p. 68).

Chosen as bait, these women were selected for their physical charms and urged to bring their prettiest dresses. They must entrance GIs in their role of "girls next door" while discouraging active solicitations. As one recruiting manual explained, women must serve among large numbers of men under fire and far from home in ways that did not risk their reputations, lest sex-starved soldiers take their presence the wrong way, resulting in the "occasional unfortunate episode" (pp. 68, 76). This balancing act was easily upset. When one woman in the China-Burma-India theater rebuffed an ardent officer, he punched her in the jaw. The woman's Red Cross supervisor responded that it wasn't the "right time" to report the incident (p. 98). In remote installations, women were billeted behind barbed wire under armed guard to keep away predatory men of their own nationality. The army and navy soon created official Special Services divisions to coordinate morale-boosting programs, though they relied on civilian non-profits to "supply the women" (p. 60).

Vuic extends her account through the wars in Korea, Vietnam, and the Middle East. She documents the unique challenges faced by women of color, but also the leadership and travel opportunities that these jobs gave women whose options at home were often limited to low-paid domestic labor through the 1960s. She also shows how female entertainers leveraged the USO to advance their careers, most spectacularly Marilyn Monroe.

In the 1980s, the army slowly reversed itself in response to growing numbers of female soldiers and male personnel with families in tow. In the 1990s, military officials stopped basing civilian women abroad for long-term duty (p. 266). The USO, however, continued to send dancers, cheerleaders, singers, and Hooters waitresses for brief and increasingly sexualized one-time performances. Vuic's account of future U.S. senator Al Franken's "bump-and-grind" backup is particularly revealing of the ways that twenty-first-century military entertainment "catered to the basest of sexual innuendo" (pp. 268-269).

As Stephanie McCurry and Kara Dixon Vuic demonstrate, women have suffered and served in every American war. To the particular stories these authors tell one could add those of nurses, cooks, telephone operators, test pilots, riveters, flight instructors, laundresses, clerks, and bomb makers. Once a light is shined upon women's engagement with war, it becomes obvious. So why, then, is it so quickly forgotten?

Erasure is sometimes intentional. Harriet Tubman had to fight thirty years for the veteran's pension that at least one male scout under her command received immediately, despite abundant evidence in her files. Signal Corps operators of World War One—issued regular army uniforms, dog-tags, and court martial regulations before crossing the perilous Atlantic—fought sixty years for the disability benefits, congressional bonuses, victory medals, and burial rights that the army denied them to save what amounted to pocket change when the women returned home. Female soldiers who mustered in the front row of military reviews in France were later told they were not real veterans. The Women's Airforce Service Pilots of World War Two experienced a similar injustice.

More often, though, marginalization is unintentional. Humans are hard-wired to see what they expect to see and ignore contrary data. Psychologists call this selective perception. Bombarded with stimuli, even historians ignore evidence that doesn't fit a picture already in their heads.

Such oversights are not necessarily a problem. Shortcuts conserve mental energy. When stakes are low, it does not much matter if we miss some variation because it is unexpected. But when it comes to women in public roles, historical inattention reinforces stereotypes with potent consequences for today.

A 2016 study¹ at the Yale School of Management found that both female and male leaders receive greater criticism for mistakes made in jobs not considered gender-typical. A bad call by a female police chief, corporate executive, or national politician is immediately noticed and long remembered. A man who burns dinner or forgets the baby at day care is similarly dismissed as hopeless—"of course." This might be a mere curiosity except that the leadership territory traditionally assigned men has been vast while women's has been puny. Scholarship that ignores female participants in history's most determinative events—like war—reinforces the damaging impression that their presence isn't normal. It makes the job of women soldiers and leaders today more difficult.

It is time to rewire our heuristics and reconceive the big patterns of American history so we don't miss the people in our blind spot. Stephanie McCurry and Kara Dixon Vuic show us how.

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1. <https://hbr.org/2016/04/research-we-are-way-harder-on-female-leaders-who-make-bad-calls>