

## Book Review

Boyd Cothran, Joan Judge, and Adrian Shubert, eds., *Women Warriors and National Heroes: Global Histories* (London & New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020). Pp. 260. \$115.00 cloth; open access online at <https://www.bloomsburycollections.com/book/women-warriors-and-national-heroes-global-histories/>

Readers who open *Women Warriors and National Heroes* expecting to find uplifting narratives tying women's actions in combat to feminism and increased gender equality will be disappointed. Instead, these twelve case studies soberly investigate the varied ways that national communities have made meaning from the heretofore exceptional circumstances in which women became warriors. For the most part, these tightly focused essays – drawn from a 2018 conference at Toronto's York University – argue that nationalism has trumped feminism in determining how societies have interpreted and commemorated the violence which women have committed in war.

Most of the authors have written longer works on the same topics, with the footnotes here highlighting their own books and essays. Harleen Singh, for example, who analyzes accounts of Rani Lakshmi Bai's actions in the anti-British 1857 uprising, published a 2014 monograph on this Indian queen. The scholarly erudition is to an extent matched by the collection's geographical reach, with four essays on Asia, two each on Latin America, North America, and Europe, and one each on the Middle East and Africa. Several studies cover twentieth century wars, while most discuss how nineteenth and twentieth century nationalists memorialized women warriors from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries.

As the authors describe the statues, novels, poems, films, popular histories, school curricula, and other forms of commemoration, they note that in many cases myth has outstripped fact. Typical is Gabriel Cid's comment that a chief Peruvian enthusiast for the incorporation of women into that nation's pantheon of heroes engaged in this work "unencumbered by any supporting historical evidence" (211). Marcia Yonemoto's conclusion is even more striking in her analysis of two young Japanese peasant sisters who were said to have avenged their father's death: "*they never existed*, at least not in

any way even vaguely resembling the story that was told and retold over the course of more than one hundred years” (81, emphasis in original). Several authors astutely invoke Terence Ranger and Eric Hobsbawm’s concept of “invented traditions” in their investigations.

A few examples will illustrate the volume’s contention that commemorations of these women warriors served conservative nationalist ends and even reinforced traditional gender norms. Nerea Aresti portrays nineteenth and early twentieth century Basque nationalism as infused with a conservative Catholic ethos, and its leading intellectual proponent constructed an idealized fifteenth century heroine defying the Spanish even as his new political organization “firmly believed in women’s inferiority to men” (56). Colin Coates contends in his essay on the French Canadian Madeleine de Verchères, who fired a cannon against attacking Iroquois, that her transgressions of gender boundaries “had to be contained” in the statues and films which depicted her actions: her “return to the domestic sphere had to form an essential part of the story” (144). Gina Martino argues – not entirely convincingly – that the violent encounters between two seventeenth century New England women and their Indian antagonists served as fodder for nineteenth century American justifications for Manifest Destiny, with its continued dispossession of indigenous peoples. The warriors’ deaths in several cases – India, Zimbabwe, and the Peoples’ Republic of China – facilitated their transformation into female martyrs who could not challenge women’s societal position.

Taking this position to an extreme is Karen Gottschang Turner, in her denunciation of the treatment in postwar Vietnam of the young female volunteers who helped build and maintain the all-important Ho Chi Minh Trail. Perhaps she provides stronger evidence in her 1998 book and 2004 film on this topic, but the sources here are thin for Turner’s thesis that society shunned these women for their “polluted bodies” (240). The hardships these women faced on the Trail and after the war could apply just as well to male soldiers in Vietnam on both sides and, indeed, to soldiers in most wars.

Flickers of feminism do emerge, nonetheless. Greek Communists published photographs of women soldiers with guns during that nation’s civil war in the 1940s as their program also called for women’s rights. Nehanda-Charwe, a symbol of Zimbabwe’s resistance to British colonialism in the late nineteenth century, became important not only for Robert Mugabe’s masculinist nationalists but, through a critically acclaimed 1993 novel, helped inspire that nation’s newly assertive women’s organizations. And while downplaying it in her analysis, Singh’s inclusion of a 2007 poster of India’s Congress Party leader Sonia Gandhi superimposed on a horse in the manner of Queen Rani certainly ties the earlier resistance leader to recent women’s activism. Marilyn Booth’s meticulous unpacking of the figure of Jeanne d’Arc in turn-of-the-twentieth-century Arab and Ottoman literature and history shows that the French heroine – put to death by the English, she notes – served as a touchstone both for male-oriented

nationalists (especially in British-dominated Egypt) and those throughout the region who included improvements in women's rights among their goals.

An immanent feminism may not necessarily be in contradiction to gender-bound nationalisms and traditions which undergird the analysis of several authors. Those two avenging sisters, real or not, won acclaim in Japan as embodiments of filial piety, a traditional Confucian value – but perhaps this experience shows that Confucianism allowed more nuance with regard to women's role than usually imagined. Gabriela Cano's fascinating portrait of Amelia Robles, who fought as a man in the Mexican Revolution and lived for another six decades as "Amelio" – with a pension, a new (male) birth certificate, a school named after him, and even a wife – both reinforces and disrupts the idea that, as Cano writes, "the Mexican Revolution celebrated binary gender as the epitome of national identity" (183).

Important instances of women in combat are missing, including, among others, Boudicca, the anti-Roman Briton; China's Mulan, now an icon of popular culture; British anti-aircraft gunners and Soviet fighters during World War II; mid-twentieth century anti-Portuguese African guerrillas; and Israeli army conscripts. Such omissions are inevitable in such a collection, and the editors mentioned a few of these examples in their introduction, with its impressive bibliography.

But the editors do bear responsibility for some of the book's drawbacks. A general lack of attention to copy-editing is annoying at best, and, at worst, it will make the otherwise fine essay on Greece embarrassing to use with students. While the authors' expertise is not in doubt, an overall listing of their affiliations and key publications – standard in such edited collections – is missing. The index, moreover, is woefully incomplete. The editors claim in their introduction that the essays highlight transnational processes, but only Booth's essay on Jeanne d'Arc in Middle Eastern discourse does so systematically.

The essays' organization into four parts, in categories such as "violence" and "gender fluidity," appears arbitrary at best. Some of the women in the study of Greece – placed in the "violence" section – committed mass suicide rather than fight. Coates fails to establish a substantive case for "gender fluidity" in his portrait of de Verchères, the substitution of her bonnet for a hat notwithstanding. In several essays the focus on how these women were remembered overshadows what they actually did: Singh devotes only one line, for example, to Queen Rani's actions in battle during the anti-British uprising. Louise Edwards' analysis of two Chinese Communist women who spied behind Japanese lines during World War II is harrowing, but these women did not engage in violence. Despite the sophisticated theorizing of most authors, there is inadequate interrogation of what being a woman warrior entailed.

The book, at points heavy with academic jargon, would probably be appropriate only for graduate courses in global women's history or comparative nationalisms. However, its open-access publication makes it easy to assign a chapter or two in courses

on women's or military history, or on a particular nation or time period. The essays on the apocryphal Japanese avengers, the Chinese spies, and the Mexican transgender soldier should be accessible and thought-provoking for all undergraduates, and even advanced high school students. Those on Jeanne d'Arc's reception in the Middle East, New England and French Canadian anti-Indian fighters, and Zimbabwe's Nehanda should appeal to upper-level undergraduates.

Voltaire, quoted here by Coates, declared centuries ago that "Each people has had its women warriors" (131), and *Women Warriors and National Heroes*, with its breadth of examples, substantiates this statement. With its conceptual focus more on gender history than on women's history, this collection of essays also reminds us that the role of women in combat can be claimed, remembered, and even manipulated to serve nationalist ends as much as to advance women's equality with men.

---

Robert Shaffer, roshaf@ship.edu, is Professor of History Emeritus at Shippensburg University, where he also taught social studies education. He has recently written about the Spanish Civil War in world history textbooks for *World History Connected* (February 2022) and about Black cowboys in U.S. history textbooks for *The American Historian* (September 2021). He is book review editor for *Peace & Change*, the journal of the Peace History Society.