Women in World War II

by Dr. Kristine M. McCusker

Ads called them "soldiers in housedresses." Produce for Victory posters touted their labor as critical to the war effort. Illustrators such as Norman Rockwell depicted their confidence in their ability to wage — and win — an international war. Indeed, early in World War II, most Americans realized that women would be essential to winning the war.

It was the nature of World War II that caused the United States government to target women's labor for the war effort. Americans, for example, fought the war on two fronts — in the South Pacific against Japan and in Europe against the Nazis — and thus needed to draft significant numbers of American men to fight. The Nazi stranglehold over Europe also meant that few countries could supply the military necessary foodstuffs and armaments on their respective battlefronts. Acting as the promotional arm of the government, mass media, particularly magazines and movies, sounded a clarion call for women to join the effort, to fight the war in any way they could. And women responded in overwhelming numbers and in ways far different from World War I because their relationship to the government had changed since 1918. Before August, 1920, women's interactions with the government were mediated through husbands, fathers and sons. But with their right to vote established with the passage of the 19th Amendment, women imagined their role in politics in general and in World War II specifically in fundamentally different ways. And the media harped on this, hence the commonality of ads touting women as "soldiers in housedresses."

There were three primary ways that women contributed their labor substantially and crucially to the war effort, jobs that the media promoted through advertisements, handbills and movie shorts. The first was in association with the military where women's military auxiliaries filled jobs left open by the draft. The Women's Army Service Pilots (WASPs), for example, delivered new planes to army bases, transported troops, and tested new planes.
The second were the farm women and housewives who fought the war from their kitchens and gardens, labor that Produce for Victory posters especially touted. Imagining their kitchens as their own personal battlefronts, these women engaged in what historians call "domestic patriotism," where women used their ability to can, cook, preserve, sew, and salvage to provide the goods necessary to winning the war. By growing Victory Gardens, by canning fruit and vegetables, and by keeping flocks of chickens (even in urban areas), women saw to it that their self-sufficiency would preserve the majority of goods for American forces overseas. These women also directed their children's and their communities' efforts in fighting the war, typically through salvage efforts, through collection drives and through the Red Cross.

Media dubbed the women who worked in heavy industry "Rosie the Riveter," the third way they contributed to the war effort. Although women had worked in factories since they had been founded in the early nineteenth century (indeed, industrialists feared that factory work would emasculate men and thus, chose women as their first workers), a gender-segregated labor market had channeled women into jobs then considered more appropriate to their presumed skills. Thus, during World War II, waitresses, department store clerks, secretaries and factory workers from light industry flocked to the better paying jobs offered by those companies building airplanes, ships, and tanks. But women found that pay was only one benefit of their new jobs. Patriotism also played a significant part since testing a batch of rubber or riveting a ship wall seemed to bring loved ones home quicker. Women also discovered that they were good at their jobs although concerns about "double duty" (work during the day and housework at night) daunted many of them.

At the end of the war, media and the government joined together again to promote a new role for women. No longer were they critical to the effort to win a new war, the emerging Cold War with Russia. Now women's labor was needed at home, similar to a newly emerging image, June Cleaver. Although women who worked in heavy industries were fired from their jobs, they remained in the work force in ever greater numbers.
Bibliography


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