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'Red Amazons'? Gendering Violence and Revolution in the Long First World War, 1914-23

By Matthew Kovac¹

Abstract

This article seeks to position gender theory as critical to making sense of one of the First World War's largest remaining historical problems: the persistence of mass violence after November 1918. While Robert Gerwarth and John Horne's pathbreaking work on veteran violence has challenged the standard 1914-18 periodisation of the war, their focus on military defeat and revolution obscures the centrality of gender relations to the continuation of violence after the formal end of hostilities. By putting their work into conversation with that of feminist theorists, I argue that countries which experienced more extreme gender dislocation or 'gender trouble' witnessed the greatest post-war violence, chiefly in the former German, Austro-Hungarian, and Russian empires. In states where women's struggles were more successfully contained, patriarchal forces faced a less severe threat and thus responded with considerably less violence. Drawing on the work of Judith Butler, Laura Doan, Joanna Bourke, Klaus Theweleit, and Erika Kuhlman, this article shows how right-wing violence targeting 'red women' in this period was not a mere outgrowth of battles between competing nationalisms or communism and fascism, but, crucially, a military clash between feminism and anti-feminism. With revitalised feminist movements sweeping Europe today from Poland to Ireland, understanding the violent restoration of patriarchy in the early 1920s offers crucial lessons –and warnings – for our own dangerously promising political moment.

Keywords: First World War, sexual violence, feminism, socialism, masculinity

Introduction

When Hungarian military officer Miklós Kozma returned home at the end of the First World War in late 1918, he was appalled to find the streets full of communist protesters, who jeered and attacked his fellow soldiers. Leading these mobs, the counter-revolutionary activist later wrote, were 'Red Amazons', an image rich with gender connotations (Gerwarth, 2016: pp. 136-137). Kozma, a future right-wing politician, was not alone in diagnosing his country's revolutionary turmoil as stemming from women's political and sexual liberation. The spectre of strong, independent women fighting for revolution loomed large in the right-wing imaginary, drawing upon mythical archetypes of 'warrior women' who threatened male power. Indeed, this framework was not unique to Hungary, but united counter-revolutionary political thought across Central and Eastern Europe during the post-war period, taking root in Germany, the states of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire, and, with most deadly effect, in newly Soviet Russia.

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This article will seek to position gender as a critically underutilised lens for making sense of one of the First World War's largest remaining historical problems: the persistence of mass violence after November 1918. Although there is a rich gender studies literature covering the 'official' war years, especially concerning the Western Front and Allied home fronts, gender theory is similarly useful in understanding the revolutionary and counter-revolutionary waves that shook Europe from 1916 on, bleeding into the 1920s with little regard for the Armistice – what has been termed the 'Long First World War' (Moses, 2017). Why did these struggles break out where, and when, they did? Why did they rank among the most brutal contests for power in an unimaginably brutal war? In this area of First World War studies, gender is not merely a useful conceptual tool, but perhaps the most useful conceptual tool for making sense of the wild variations in post-war violence from country to country.

It is ironic, then, that gender as an explanatory factor has been downplayed in works dealing with post-war violence, even though gendered imagery and language appear often in this growing literature on paramilitarism. The Kozma story, for example, comes from Robert Gerwarth's *The Vanquished* (2016), arguably the most comprehensive study of post-war violence to date. While Gerwarth and frequent collaborator John Horne (2011) have thoroughly documented the role of 'ultramilitant masculinity' within right-wing veteran groups (p. 498), the explanatory power of gender in their work is ultimately subsumed by geopolitical factors including imperial collapse and the rise of 'existential' exterminationist ideologies like fascism and communism (Gerwarth, 2016: p. 13). Despite their frequent references to gender violence, the clash of feminism and anti-feminism is never treated as a causal factor on the level of national or class divisions. The same holds true in Jon Lawrence's work (2003) on the more limited violence of post-war Britain, in which he consciously attempts to 'counter a tendency in some recent historical writing to raise gender to a new metacategory of analysis with overarching powers of explication' (p. 560). For Lawrence, the gender dimensions of post-war violence must be noted, but the roots of this violence lie elsewhere, distributed instead among other political, cultural, and social factors. Class, not gender, remains the fundamental unit of analysis. However, as the epithet 'Red Amazon' shows, these intertwined class- and gender-based fears are not so easily untangled.

The cumulative effect of these accounts is to obscure the centrality of gender to post-war violence, to render it as a single contributing factor among many – even though, notably, the most lawless and savagely violent arenas of post-war conflict coincided with the most vigorous, and often successful, contests for women's inclusion in the political and economic spheres. Two notable exceptions to this trend are Susan Kingsley Kent's *Making Peace: The Reconstruction of Gender in Interwar Britain* (1993) and Matthew Stibbe and Ingrid Sharp's recent *Women Activists Between War and Peace: Europe, 1918-1923* (2017), which seek to bridge the gap between these disparate wartime and gender literatures. Gerwarth, too, has expanded on the gendered implications present in his own work with an invaluable chapter on paramilitary violence against women (2011: pp. 122-136), although, strangely, the feminist movements discussed there are largely missing from his recent book, *The Vanquished*. This article will follow their lead, putting scholarship on post-war violence into conversation with the writings of gender historians, specifically Judith Butler on gender performativity (1999), Laura Doan on the inversion of gender roles (2006), Joanna Bourke (2007) and Klaus Theweleit (1987) on wartime masculinities, and Erika Kuhlman on 'patriarchal reconstruction' (2008).

Drawing on these works, I will argue that countries which experienced more extreme gender dislocation or 'gender trouble', witnessed the greatest post-war violence, chiefly in the former German, Austro-Hungarian, and Russian empires. In states where women's struggles were

more successfully contained – including Great Britain, France, and the United States – and pre-war gender and sexual hierarchies maintained, the patriarchy faced a less severe threat and thus responded with considerably less violence (Butler, 1999; Doan, 2006). Although gender-based violence remained considerable in these countries, most prominently in their repression of women activists, it was far more restrained. For example, contrast British police violence against suffragettes and their force-feeding of hunger strikers² with the roving death squads and ritualised sexual violence of the German *Freikorps*.³ One illustrative, if heavy-handed, example is the disparate treatments meted out to major feminist radicals on either side of this transnational divide: U.S.-based anarchist Emma Goldman was deported to Soviet Russia, where she spent a year in exile, while German Communist Party founder Rosa Luxemburg was arrested, beaten, and summarily executed by right-wing forces in Berlin (Bru and Gilleir, 2017). In explaining this intensified violence, historians have focused more on national and ethnic fault lines while understating women’s growing social power in these regions. With revitalised feminist movements sweeping Europe today from Poland to Ireland, reassessing the violent restoration of patriarchy in the early 1920s offers crucial lessons – and warnings – for our own dangerously promising political moment.

Imperial Masculinities

At the heart of this argument lies a paradox. Although gender analysis alone cannot explain why the First World War started, it is among the best explanatory tools for understanding why it failed to end. Gender theorists Cynthia Enloe (2000) and V. Spike Peterson (1992) have offered convincing, overlapping explanations as to the construction of masculine war-making identities and therefore the psychological urge for violence and domination – that is to say, war and militarism generally. Building on this framework, Heather Streets-Salter (2004) and Jessica Meyer (2009) have ably demonstrated how turn-of-the-century notions of masculinity in the British Empire shaped military recruitment schemes, motivated young men to enlist, and framed their experiences on the battlefield.

Where gender theory is less convincing is in explaining why this particular war erupted when, where, and how it did. The aggressive masculinities at play in 1914 Europe simmered since at least the mid-19th century without sparking a global conflagration, possibly due to their gradual release, pressure-valve-style, into the far-flung corners of empire. For a field that takes as truism that gender is socially constructed and constantly renegotiated – as Meyer reminds us in *Men of War* (2009), ‘men’s identities are never set in stone’ (p. 161) – conceptualisations of masculinity and patriarchy have remained fairly static, from Graham Dawson’s ‘soldier heroes’ (1994) who crushed the 1857 Indian Rebellion to Ana Carden-Coyne’s ‘stoic warriorhood’ (2012) in the trenches of France and Belgium (p. 94). While this imperial masculinity changed in its details, gradually adopting a more Spartan and less swashbuckling aesthetic, its defining attributes – belief

² Jailed British suffragettes routinely went on hunger strike to protest their detention. Prison officials force-fed the hunger strikers to avoid creating martyrs, resulting in a public relations disaster for the Asquith government. The ‘Cat and Mouse Act’ of 1913 allowed for the release of prisoners weakened by hunger strikes. When their health improved, they were re-arrested.

³ The *Freikorps* (Free Corps) shared few of the British state’s concerns about creating martyrs. The paramilitary detachments, composed of right-wing veterans, repressed communist uprisings in Germany, Poland, Latvia, and Estonia, torturing and killing left-wing men and women alike from 1919-23. *Freikorps* men formed the core of the Nazi Party, including SA leader Ernst Rohm and Auschwitz commandant Rudolf Hoeß.

in racial and gender superiority coupled with a willingness to use violence in defence of white male prestige – were present long before summer 1914.

Even the best gendered reading of Europe's path to war, found in Christopher Clark's *The Sleepwalkers* (2012), largely overlooks these continuities within imperial masculinity, pitting a 20th century 'true masculinity' based on 'unyielding forcefulness' against a supposedly prior iteration that valued 'the suppleness, tactical flexibility and wiliness exemplified by an earlier generation of statesmen' (pp. 360-361). That he cites German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck, of 'iron and blood' and Berlin Conference infamy, as a model of foreign policy restraint does not much help his case for a less bellicose pre-war masculinity. While Clark skilfully details how diplomats and generals understood the July Crisis in gendered terms, whether perennial questions of courage, fear, strength, and endurance amounted to a full-blown 'crisis of masculinity' within Europe's diplomatic corps is less convincing – an uncertainty Clark acknowledges by punctuating this section heading with a question mark (p. 358).

By focusing on inter-European relations rather than colonial conquests as the barometer of masculine norms, these accounts miss how Clark's 'unyielding forcefulness' (p. 361), far from a new development in European patriarchy, served as the default mode of imperial masculinity in the colonies for decades, if not centuries. Isabel Hull (2005) makes this clear in her study of German colonial violence in Southwest Africa, where she cites the 'late-nineteenth century identification of males with strength, violence, decisiveness' as contributing to the 1904-08 genocide of the Herero and Nama peoples (p. 101). Given this bloody track record of pre-war masculinity, it remains unclear to what extent gender dynamics were responsible for provoking the dramatic reversal of 'peripheral' violence back to the metropolitan centre. For those answers we must look beyond gender theory to the economic imperatives of empire (Mishra, 2017).

Gender at War

This is not to say that a war started on economic grounds did not have an electrifying effect on gender conventions. On the contrary, the First World War reinforced gender norms even as it profoundly dislocated them. The totalising effect of the first global war converted millions of women into 'citizen soldier' contributors to the war effort, not only as nurses and ambulance drivers but also in freshly militarised conceptions of marriage and motherhood (Kuhlman, 2017: p. 42). Whatever their station, women could not escape being put on 'war footing', even if they were largely confined to auxiliary roles. One million women in Britain and nearly half a million in France worked in munitions factories during the war. Eight hundred thousand women joined Germany's industrial workforce in the same period. In Russia, women comprised nearly half of all industrial workers by 1918 (Thom, 2017: p. 52). Margaret Higonnet (1987) has described the resulting dynamic as a 'double helix', in which women traded labour roles with men but remained in a subordinate position.

Despite its conservative implications, this conscription of women to serve interlinked white male imperial power structures still proved destabilising. Even if the cause was reactionary, the expansion of roles available to women within this reactionary project proved discomfiting for men, especially soldiers at the front. The wartime 'topsy-turvydom' noted by Laura Doan (2006), in which 'every man is a soldier, and every woman is a man', resulted in unprecedented gender inversion, one quite unwelcome to budding counter-revolutionaries like Kozma (p. 517). This took on literal form even in Britain, which was otherwise insulated from the vagaries of post-war

violence, when women donned uniforms and joined rioting ex-soldiers in Luton in July 1919 (Lawrence, 2003).

Both keenly aware of the wartime necessity of women's inclusion, and yet disturbed by its potential to snowball into wider women's liberation struggles, governments in Europe and the United States sought to control and regulate the destabilisation inherent in their total war project. Faced with this generalised dislocation, both government and private actors took it upon themselves to police the boundaries of the newly acceptable more sharply. The lines were moving, but they were also more strictly enforced. This was as true on the home front as the front line, where women of all nations were almost universally barred from participating in combat. Back home, women workers even in 'skilled' jobs were paid less than their male counterparts in Germany and Austria. Trade unions on either side of the Atlantic fought to keep women out of certain workforces, citing wage concerns over 'scab' labour rather than attempting to unionise them (Thom, 2017: p. 62). Recent work by Carol Henderson (2017) shows how British laundry machinery repairmen applied for, and received, draft exemptions on the grounds that women were intellectually unfit to perform their work, demarcating and defending technical expertise as a solely male domain.

Such examples illustrate how both state and non-state forces worked to protect male prestige and manage the assumed dangers of wartime gender destabilisation well before the final, no-holds-barred drive to full patriarchal restoration in 1918. As with the shell-pocked no-man's-lands that dotted the continent, this ever-shifting state of affairs did not favour those caught 'between the lines', especially queer and gender-fluid people, whose lives were increasingly surveilled as fixed sexual identities slowly began to take hold in the popular imagination. The 1921 parliamentary attempt to criminalise 'gross indecency between female persons' in Great Britain, although ultimately unsuccessful, is one such example of heightened policing of women's bodies (Doan, 2006: pp. 35-36).

Some countries managed this transition more gracefully than others, especially in Western Europe and North America. The British state was particularly successful in its co-optation of the suffragette movement, unconditionally releasing jailed activists at the start of hostilities and reaching a détente with the Pankhurst clan. Seizing upon an opportunity to prove their patriotism, these women agitators lent their support to the war and directed their activism toward less politically fraught subjects like sexual health and contraceptive campaigns (Hochschild, 2011). Of course, even within this tenuous alliance there remained tensions between the state and grassroots. State prerogatives like the Defence of the Realm Act and its 1917 addendum criminalising venereal disease earned the ire of suffrage activists, ultimately leading to that provision's repeal (Hynes, 2017). This cooperation served to moderate British state violence against women activists in the years immediately following the war.

Post-war feminist experiences were markedly more turbulent in the United States and Ireland. Right-wing war veterans in the American Legion, some of whom had fought the Bolsheviks during the U.S. intervention at Archangelsk, worried publicly about effeminate communists sapping the 'virility' of the nation (Owen, 1919). They violently disrupted speeches and meetings by socialist women, in at least one case kidnapping the speaker herself. Unlike their more numerous left-wing male victims, who they beat or shot to death, she was released unharmed (Nehls, 2007). Meanwhile, during the Irish Civil War, the conservative Free State government denounced women radicals who insisted on full independence from Britain as bloodthirsty 'furies' and 'harpies' who wished to prolong the killing. While women activists were not executed, they were often detained and tortured (Ryan, 1999).

For the most part, however, the centre held. As Jon Lawrence (2003) has noted, 'Britain largely escaped the traumatic disorder and civil unrest that gripped so many nations between the wars' (p. 561). The same was true in the United States and France, where, with the war won, women were unceremoniously driven from the factories as troops returned home (Kuhlman, 2017). Despite feminist hopes of securing the vote after the war as a reward for their patriotic service, British women would not receive full suffrage for another decade. French women would wait until the exigency of the Second World War forced their enfranchisement in 1944. Similarly, although U.S. women nominally won the vote in 1920, it would not be a reality for women of colour for nearly another half-century. The wartime surge of women's activism was contained. As Erika Kuhlman (2008) has written, patriarchy had been successfully restored.

Performative Violence

Central and Eastern European states were less successful in peacefully re-establishing patriarchal power after the war. Here, the 'gender trouble' identified by Judith Butler (1999) reached a more advanced stage than in Western Europe and the United States, with strong and radical women's movements – usually but not always linked to socialist or communist parties – agitating not only for political rights, as in the West, but also social and economic rights. Notably, it was revolutionary Russia, not the constitutional monarchies or liberal republics of Western Europe, which first established universal suffrage (Horne, 2017). The German socialist and feminist activist Clara Zetkin (1909) hinted at this radical ferment in her assessment of the wider socialist women's movement: 'The vote is, according to their views, not the last word and term of their aspirations, but only a weapon – a means in struggle for a revolutionary aim – the Socialistic order'.

Not only were women's demands more economically radical in these countries, but their practices were more militantly gender-bending as well. Women wore military-style uniforms, drilled with rifles, and fought alongside – and against – men on the battlefield. As Sarah Benton (1995) has argued, women's historical exclusion from the 'arms-bearing citizenry' effectively erased them from national foundation stories, relegating them to 'auxiliaries, grievors, and those who kept the home fires burning' while an all-male cast of 'founding fathers' fought and won the nation's wars (pp. 161, 170). Women's participation in combat upended this narrative, staking a claim to full citizenship. After the overthrow of Tsar Nicholas II in February 1917, the Russian provisional government ended the prohibition on women in combat and assembled all-women 'Battalions of Death' to shame unenthusiastic male troops into fighting (McDermid and Hillyar, 1999: pp. 180-185). Thousands more Russian women went on to fight as communist partisans in the Bolshevik revolution and ensuing civil war. In newly independent Finland, approximately 2,000 left-wing women fought in the Red Guards against all-male White troops during their own five-month civil war in early 1918. In the revolutions that swept Germany, Austria, and Hungary over the next two years, women activists figured prominently in the left-wing crowds and, consequently, the fevered imaginations of counter-revolutionary men (Lintunen, 2014). Ernst von Salomon, a young *Freikorps* paramilitary in Berlin, described the terror of confronting these female crowds in his memoir *The Outlaws* (1931/2013):

These women hammered at us with sticks, stones, pots and ropes. They were broadly built and wearing dresses made of some kind of blue stuff, with wet aprons and dirty skirts, their wrinkled faces red with exertion, their hair tangled

and wild. They spat, abused us, screamed.... The women were the worst. Men hit, but women spit and abuse, and it is impossible to plant one's fist in their faces (pp. 169-170).

This apparent restraint was short-lived. As von Salomon's passage reveals, this feeling of frustrated impotence soon gave way to unmitigated violence against women the *Freikorps* men variously stereotyped as dirty, wild, and hysterical, whose 'wet aprons' suggested their true place in society – the home, not the streets. Any hint of female defiance could merit a violent response: when an old woman laughed at him, von Salomon fantasised about 'ramming the barrel of [his] rifle in her face' (p. 34). That left-wing uprisings succeeded at least briefly in Central Europe, with the dreaded 'red women' managing to declare Soviet republics in Munich and Budapest, merely confirmed right-wing fears that the world was coming apart at the seams. Socialist women themselves anticipated the brutality of the right-wing response. 'The establishment of the socialist soviet republic in Hungary will increase the fears and the rage of the propertied minorities and their advocates in all countries', Zetkin predicted in *The Communist International* (1919), by then a member of the newly-formed German Communist Party. 'More than ever will they put their trust in the trinity of the rifle, the maxim gun and the trench mortar'.

The backlash was swift and terrible. For right-wing war veterans like von Salomon, the rise of militant feminism at home, complete with gun-toting women, stretched Doan's 'topsy-turvydom' to the breaking point. Klaus Theweleit (1987) has amply explored the contrast between *Freikorps* paramilitaries' duelling constructions of the virtuous, sexless 'white woman', personified by their mothers, sisters, and nurses, and the lascivious, wild, and menacing 'red woman' – with clear antecedents in the Madonna-whore complex and the Biblical story of Jezebel. Beyond their 'dangerous' eroticism, left-wing women's willingness to take up arms stuck in the craw of demobilised German and Austrian troops, who sneered at communist partisans as '*Flintenweiber*' or 'rifle women' (Theweleit, 1987). As Tiina Lintunen (2014) has argued, this alarm was rooted in patriarchal understandings of women as natural caregivers and nurturers, whose expected role was to 'preserve life, not to destroy it' (p. 216). Their close-cropped hair and military fatigues, coupled with the phallic symbolism of their rifles, hinted at a disturbing next level of gender inversion, one that threatened to overturn the patriarchal order altogether. As Joanna Bourke (2007) has written of irregular warfare more generally, 'In a war in which women could be combatants, manliness demanded particularly vigilant policing' (p. 375). Their masculinity threatened by this new wave of liberated women, right-wing men sought to reassert their position on the gender spectrum violently, crushing these feminist movements and re-imposing traditional gender roles at gunpoint.

Violence in these countries was both quantitatively and qualitatively worse than in Western Europe. In the Russian Civil War alone, the Red-White clash killed approximately 13 million people through combat, starvation, and disease – more than four times as many Russians as were killed in the entirety of the First World War (Faulkner, 2017). Thirty-eight thousand people, nearly 85 per cent of them 'reds', were killed in Finland – more than one per cent of its population (Tepora and Roselius, 2014: p. 2). According to Lintunen (2010), Finnish revolutionary women faced even harsher treatment than their male counterparts after their defeat by the White forces: 'All members of the Red Guard, men and women, were seen as traitors after the war, but women's participation in the rebellion was seen as even more shocking, especially acting as a soldier' (p. 185). White troops responded to this apparent double betrayal by punishing left-wing women with rape, torture,

and summary execution. The more that communist women threatened to shatter stereotypes of female passivity and weakness, the more aggressively men sought to reassert their power.

This 'performed' masculinity, to borrow Judith Butler's term (1999), took similar forms among the *Freikorps* troops who rampaged through the Baltics in the early 1920s. Torture, sexual violence, and the ritualised mutilation of female bodies became standard operating procedure in their battles against communists in Latvia, Estonia, and Poland (Gerwarth, 2011). This was a far cry from the more limited performances of gender violence in France and Ireland, usually restricted to the forced head-shaving of 'disloyal' women accused of fraternising with foreign soldiers. Reinforcing Butler's concept of gender performativity is Joanna Bourke's contention (2007) that mass sexual violence, common in the contested zones, formed a 'four-way relationship' between victim, perpetrator, the victim's male comrades and the perpetrator's witnessing or oftentimes participating male comrades (pp. 376-377). Performing gender, after all, requires an audience; particularly, as in these cases, a male audience. By assaulting feminist women, right-wing paramilitaries both reaffirmed their own hyper-masculine identities while calling into question those of their male adversaries, who had manifestly failed to protect 'their' women from attack.

This message to left-wing men highlights that the paramilitaries' 'vigilant policing' of gender was hardly restricted to nonconformist women (Bourke, 2007: p. 375). Men serving alongside women in communist militias in Central and Eastern Europe fell victim to similarly brutal gender-based violence, including sexualised torture and the mutilation of corpses. They were also used as proxies to commit acts that paramilitaries' twisted logic of 'masculine honour' permitted as an instrument of punishment, but prevented them from committing themselves. Outside Budapest, for example, National Army troops ordered male communist prisoners to rape female prisoners under threat of castration – one way of disciplining gender traitors through the imposition of 'traditional' gender relations without, apparently, violating the paramilitaries' supposedly chivalric code by directly raping the women (Gerwarth, 2011). When their threats of mutilation were carried out, paramilitaries violently realigned the biological sex of these men with their supposed effeminate left-wing politics even as they consolidated their own monopoly on martial masculinity. In what can only be understood as psychological projection, right-wing paramilitaries spread rumours about communist women committing the same atrocities against their own male prisoners, paving the way for increasingly brutal retaliations.

Borders and Bodies

These instances of violence against women, while well-documented in Gerwarth and Horne's work (2011), have been treated as a subsidiary element of post-war violence rather than a defining or foundational aspect in its own right. Gender-based violence is described in great detail, but without applying the gender-theoretical lens which alone can properly frame the discussion. By characterising the continuation of violence after 1918 as the result of 'revolutions, defeat, and national "rebirth"', violence against women is relegated to a strange outgrowth of clashes between communism and anti-communism, or competing nationalisms, when it was equally a clash of feminism and anti-feminism (Gerwarth, 2016: p. 15).

Quite apart from the gruesome frequency with which accounts of gender-based violence appear in this period, even the gendered emphasis in the reactionaries' choice of insults – 'rifle women', 'red women' – indicate that they found the women they faced as existentially terrifying as the revolutionary politics they espoused. These overlapping post-1918 struggles were fought not only over land borders (the concern of nationalists) or access to resources (the concern of Red

and White forces) but, primarily, over bodies – specifically female-identifying bodies and their liberation or domination. Right-wing Finnish writer Ilmari Kianto made this clear in a *Keskisuomalainen* newspaper article in April 1918:

When hunting wolves, the bitch may be an even better target than the dog, because the hunter knows that it's the female who gives birth to the nasty pups that will forever be trouble. It has been proved that in the Finnish civil war the Reds were beasts; many of their women, bitches – tigresses, even. Isn't it craziness not to shoot the beasts who pursue us? (in Hatavara, 2014: p. 16)

Kianto's passage underscores how right-wing men perceived communist women as innately dangerous, not only because of their supposed 'wildness' but because of their childbearing abilities. Taking Kianto at his word and focusing on gender as an explanatory force for post-war violence helps to answer some key questions that the traditional historiography fails to deal with. For example, Gerwarth (2016) cites cultures of national humiliation in the defeated Central Powers as crucial to creating the breeding ground for violent nationalist and fascist movements, particularly in Germany and the former Austria-Hungary. Yet this does not explain why violence – far less than in Central Europe, certainly, but violence nonetheless – also broke out among veterans in a number of victorious nations, including the American Legion's Red Scare campaign in the United States, the Irish War of Independence against Great Britain, and the fascist Blackshirt movement in Italy.⁴ Indeed, the Italian case, in which right-wing veterans mobilised around claims of a 'mutilated victory', challenges even the basic victor-vanquished dichotomy upon which this analysis rests (Burgwyn, 1993). Nor does this approach explain the spasms of violence in countries that did not participate in the war, such as neutral Spain, which experienced a low-intensity class war during the *Trienio Bolchevique* or 'Three Bolshevik Years' between 1918 and 1920, and newly independent Finland, which waged a tremendously bloody Red-White civil war from January to May 1918 (Preston, 2012). As Alex Burkhardt (2017) has noted, despite Gerwarth's attempt to impose order on this unruly narrative, 'there is no crystal-clear relationship between the countries which lost (or were even involved in) the First World War and those which then experienced post-war violence'.

Yet women's agitation, particularly in the Spanish labour movement and in the Finnish Red Guards, where female partisans were once again defamed as 'red women', goes some way toward explaining the eruption and savagery of post-war violence in these wartime non-combatants (Lintunen, 2014). By contrast, in Ireland's more limited experience of post-war violence from 1919-23, women were more effectively integrated into a male-dominated project of national liberation. Although some women did engage in combat with British forces, notably during the wartime Easter Rising, the activities of the Irish Republican Army's women's auxiliary, the Cumann na mBan, remained largely confined to gun-running, nursing, and cooking – much like female detachments in right-wing movements in Central and Eastern Europe (Benton, 1995). Because this traditional division of labour did not threaten to overturn the existing gender order, Irishwomen's activism never threatened patriarchal power as communist revolutions had on the Continent (Pašeta, 2017).

⁴ Right-wing veterans in the American Legion attacked labour organisers across the country, killing numerous workers and sharecroppers (Kovac, 2017) while Italian veterans in the *squadristi*, the paramilitary arm of the National Fascist Party, helped Mussolini seize power in 1922 (Millan, 2013). In Ireland, several hundred ex-servicemen joined the Irish Republican Army and fought in the War of Independence. See Taylor (2015).

As a result, as Gemma Clark notes (2011), women did not face the threat of ‘mass sexual assaults’ during the Irish War of Independence and subsequent Civil War as they did elsewhere. Even individual cases of violence against women by British or Irish nationalist forces – while no doubt underreported given the conservative Catholic climate – were comparatively rare. ‘Female republican sympathisers received humiliating, gendered punishments (like hair cutting)’, Clark writes, ‘but nothing to match the violent retribution and “sexually charged torture” served on “politicised women” by paramilitaries in Central Europe in the same period’ (Clark, 2011: p. 141). Tim Wilson (2010) arrives at a similar conclusion in his comparative study of Irish and Polish paramilitary violence after 1918: ‘Any evidence of a specifically sexualized element within these types of Irish nationalist violence does seem to be lacking’ (pp. 119-120). Similar dynamics were at play in the post-war United States, where labour militancy among all-male workforces in coalfields and lumber yards meant that the gun-battles between union activists and the forces of order at places like Blair Mountain, West Virginia in 1921 were a men-only affair. Despite the national prominence of feminist radicals like Emma Goldman and Mother Jones, the lack of armed activism among U.S. women meant that it was union men, more so than ‘red women’, whose conspiracies disturbed the sleep of American Legionnaires (Kovac, 2017).

Conclusion

The level of brutality driven by male anxieties over the post-war gender order hints at the extent to which feminist militants in Central and Eastern Europe – along with their male comrades in arms – were victims of their own success. Women activists in Western Europe and the United States never came as close to seizing power, and thus the resulting crisis of masculinity and restorative campaign of male violence was more muted (Kuhlman, 2008). Feminist agitation in the imploding German, Austro-Hungarian, and Russian empires precipitated a savage counter-strike from state and affiliated forces, one that was quantitatively and qualitatively more severe than those seen in other countries where radical feminist movements did not hold such sway. This recognition of cause and effect should not be confused for victim-blaming. Rather, this acknowledgement speaks to the strength of gender as a category of analysis in explaining why post-war violence manifested itself in such extremely different ways in different places, despite European nations’ shared experience of industrial slaughter between 1914 and 1918. This is particularly true given that both right-wing paramilitaries and their left-wing opponents saw their post-war struggles in gendered terms. While right-wing fears of ‘Red Amazons’ have dominated the discussion here, German leftists did not leave the field uncontested. They seized this motif and turned figures like the martyred Rosa Luxemburg into powerful propaganda representations of strong, independent female leaders working to usher in a newly liberated world (Bru and Gilleir, 2017).

Although both revolutionaries and counter-revolutionaries constructed their own radically different politics of gender, using this gendered lens also highlights that the former were not universally feminist, and helps to illuminate why certain revolutionary movements succeeded where others failed. Even within Europe’s more gender-egalitarian revolutionary movements, the ‘woman question’ remained somewhat of a last frontier, and those that did not seek to forcibly challenge patriarchal power structures faced less overall political and military resistance than those that did. The Irish War of Independence, where women’s activism was confined to the nationalist struggle rather than broader feminist or communist goals, was successful in achieving partial freedom from the British state and with a comparatively low number of casualties (Benton, 1995).

Overtly socialist and feminist elements within the movement were generally side-lined, particularly during the Free State's consolidation of power in the 1922-23 Civil War, which John Regan (1999) has characterised as a 'counter-revolution'. In countries where women's liberation formed a major plank in the revolutionary platform, armed right-wing opposition was stiffer, with more violent and less certain results.

This tenor of all-or-nothing militancy is best described by a Russian socialist of an earlier era, Alexander Herzen, whose warning for 19th century Russia can be more broadly applied to post-war European feminist insurgencies: 'Russia will never be *just-milieu*. Russia will not make a revolution with the sole object of getting rid of the Tsar ... and gaining, as the prize of victory, other Tsars: parliamentary representatives, judges, police officials and laws'. His conclusion – 'we are asking for too much, perhaps, and shall achieve nothing' – was borne out in blood in Germany, Hungary, Finland, Spain, and Italy, where left-wing feminist movements were all crushed by 1923 (Herzen, 1870/1993: p. 339). Ironically, his pessimism was well-placed for everywhere but Russia, where communist women waged a fierce five-year civil war before finally achieving victory. In this way, gender analysis not only elucidates why post-war violence broke out where it did, but offers insights into the relative success or failure of these gender revolutions. For Gerwarth, it is analysing the winners and losers of the First World War that explains post-war violence, including gender violence. In fact, the analysis is the other way around. It is gender violence – in all its sites, its scope, and its severity – that best explains the revolutionary winners and losers of the Long First World War.

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