Feminism's Influence on Peace History

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ABSTRACT
This essay examines the influence of interdisciplinary feminist scholarship on the evolution of peace history as a field. The author argues that feminist perspectives have helped to transform the way we study and understand women and gender in relation to war and peace in historical and contemporary times.

RÉSUMÉ
Cette dissertation étudie l'influence que le savoir féministe interdisciplinaire a eu sur l'évolution de l'histoire de la paix comme domaine. L'auteure affirme que les perspectives féministes ont aidé à transformer la façon d'étudier et de comprendre les femmes et les sexes en relation avec la guerre et la paix dans l'histoire et dans l'époque contemporaine.

When Barbara Roberts died two years ago at the age of fifty-five, the historical profession lost a remarkable talent. Barbara's scholarship spanned and greatly enhanced the fields of immigrant and labour history, women's history, and peace history. Her productive and creative pursuit of innovative research topics crossed perceived field and disciplinary boundaries. Simply put, Barbara was a pioneer.

This issue of Atlantis honours Barbara's scholarly legacy. Our respected colleague died in the midst of researching broadly conceived comparative topics on women's peace history. We hope that the first essay in this issue, "Feminism's Influence on Peace History," helps to focus renewed attention on the scholarly significance of Barbara's work as contextualized in a richly varied and increasingly transnational field. Feminist perspectives on the histories of peace and war in Canada and elsewhere retain their relevance as we enter a new and dangerously violent century.

Over the past three decades feminist scholars in a variety of disciplines have produced an impressive body of work on war and peace history. A rich treasure trove of empirical studies now demonstrates the centrality of women as agents of change in same-gender and mixed-gender national and transnational peace movements from the early nineteenth century to the present. Theoretical works debate the root causes of war and have contributed much to our understanding of the roles that overt forms of oppression and covert systemic violence play in sustaining militarism and warrior societies. There is no question in the minds of feminist scholars that this new literature is exciting and important. But has it achieved respectability outside of feminist circles? Or to rephrase the question with a narrower focus and in a more positive fashion for the purposes of this essay: how has feminist war and peace scholarship influenced peace history?

To begin to answer this question we need first to appreciate that peace history and feminist scholarship share a common origin: both emerged in a self-conscious way in the tumultuous 1960s. The heady, politically-charged climate of this decade witnessed the rising power of a global movement against Cold War nuclearism and a parallel struggle against the US prosecution of the Vietnam War and, in North America, the rebirth of the Women's Movement. As feminist and peace history scholar Sandi Cooper has remarked, "More than many areas of academic study...women's history [and] peace research in history [live] in an intimate relationship with political realities of the moment."

In North America, we date the formal commencement of peace history with the founding in 1964 of the Conference on Peace Research in History (CPRH, now called the Peace History Society), perhaps placing peace history just a few years ahead of women's history in institutional
development. This group of scholars and scholar activists was led by historians and its members were predominantly men. Interestingly, however, the few women who became early leaders in CPRH were mostly scholar activists whose commitment to feminism and the development of women's history was unwavering. The key individuals in this group were Berenice Carroll, Blanche Wiesen Cook, and Sandi Cooper. Thus, from the outset, research in peace history benefitted from a feminist perspective.

In their beginnings, peace history and women's history shared other attributes. Practitioners sought not only to recover the hidden histories of their respective subject matters (e.g., peace movements and their leaders, women's contributions to and roles in peace societies), but also to identify in the practice of doing history and in societal values and institutional arrangements the underlying reasons for the near invisibility of both peace and women in the historical record. Hence, peace history and women's history researchers embraced empiricism and theory-building as necessary and interconnected tasks. Further, as each field developed, scholarship became transdisciplinary; peace historians and women's historians established journals, university programs (peace studies, women's studies), and research projects that transcended established disciplinary boundaries. Scholars in these emergent fields laboured with purpose and flair on the margins of the academy, and this positioning helped to build group solidarity and encouraged rather grand collaborative research projects.

Commonalities aside, by the 1970s, historians of women (who often were women themselves) were unlikely to be aligned primarily with the field of peace history, although there were notable exceptions to this pattern. Instead, the women's history project was, to paraphrase Gerda Lerner, "the majority [finding] its past." Methods and concepts in women's history favoured a separatist approach to understanding the past lives of women, an "outsider" narrative that featured women either as victims of male-dominant structures (including, in some cases, an appreciation of the interrelatedness of patriarchal arrangements, class divisions, and racism) or as rebels against or resisters to societal subordination. Because a liberal (or egalitarian) feminist sensibility helped to frame the writing of North American women's history in its early stages, projects that identified women seeking to integrate into mainstream society (via, for instance, the suffrage campaign, trade union organizing, or civil rights activism) held sway. Moreover, with peace history still in its infancy (with fewer practitioners), feminist historians did not, at first, seek to find the women of peace narratives. Instead, in line with egalitarian feminist premises, they turned with alacrity to writing contributory history on women's roles in the military, national liberation struggles, and wars.

Although feminist historians were slow to discover the potential for writing women into peace history, once begun, the progress has been rapid. In the United States, the pioneering scholarship of Blanche Wiesen Cook, Berenice Carroll, and Barbara Steinson - undertaken in the 1970s and early 1980s on women's involvement in nineteenth- and twentieth-century peace movements - stirred a second and larger generation of women's peace historians to enrich the narrative of women's separatist activism. Thanks to the work of scholars Harriet Hyman Alonso, Amy Swerdlow, Linda Schott, Carrie Foster, Dee Garrison, Anne Marie Pois, Susan Zeiger, and others, the history of the US women's peace movement has been effectively presented. Further, Canadian scholars have been active and creative participants in developing a rich literature on women's antiwar activism. The scholarship of Barbara Roberts and Thomas Socknat, in particular, has demonstrated that peace work among Canadian women in the Great War and interwar period owed much to a uniquely Canadian socialist-feminist tradition that awaits full rendering by historians. As well, feminist scholars of European women's history such as Sandi Cooper, Nadine Lubelski-Bernard, Sybil Oldfield, Jo Vellacott, Jill Liddington, and Rosemary Cullen Owens have made progress in narrating women's achievements in modern peace movements on the continent and in Great Britain and Ireland, and a separatist women's peace tradition is being recorded in other areas of the world, too.

The new literature produced by second-generation women's peace historians has revealed that the so-called postfeminist era following the First World War witnessed the flowering of an international women's peace movement that linked pacifist ideals to a larger world movement for
women's and human rights. Recently, women's history scholar Leila Rupp has published a nuanced study of the international women's movement up to the Second World War that reinforces this peace history theme. As her scholarship shows, the most prestigious and effective separatist peace organization, the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF, founded in 1919), was also the most influential transnational women's organization in the interwar period.9

One topic that feminist peace historians have studied with some care concerns the practical and ideological reasons for the interwar separatist women's peace movement structure. Separatism was a strategy that insured women peace advocates could avoid male dominance within their organizations; separatism also created an intellectual climate among theoretically-minded pacifist women that encouraged an ongoing critique of patriarchy, as such. Members of women's peace groups up to 1939 in North America and in European countries shared a social-feminist or maternal-feminist belief that women's life experiences were radically different from men's; as the "mother half of humanity" - society's nurturers and moral guardians - they felt the need to exploit this perceived difference on behalf of peace. Stressing men's rather than women's responsibility for social violence, militarism, and war, pacifist-minded women from the era of the First World War to contemporary times have tended to idealize women as peacemakers and deprecate men as warriors. Nonetheless, feminist peace historians have taken pains to point out that in the modern period pacifist women have been in the minority; the vast majority of women - including most feminists - have supported their country's call to arms, and the moral mother has been a defender of war more often than a pacifist critic of war.

Paying tribute to the scholarship of these second generation women's peace historians, Sandi Cooper notes that their findings help us appreciate the extended reach of women's political work: "Over the past century, 'motherist' arguments altered the course of peace movement programs, helped push toward the creation of the welfare state, attacked the nuclear preparedness politicians, and even produced independent women's peace societies - before and after the First World War."10 Cooper reminds us that feminist scholars have been especially sensitive to the importance of "grounding peace in social movements and political climates." Overlapping with this body of women's peace movement narrations is the collective work of interdisciplinary feminist scholars who have been focused on building feminist theory in relation to women/gender, militarism, war, and peace. Particularly relevant to feminist peace history scholars are the insights of Jean Elshtain, Cynthia Enloe, Betty Reardon, and Elise Boulding; they argue convincingly that war and peace are gendered processes.11 These respected theorists propose that historically the social construction of gender (manliness, womanliness) has been central to militarism, warmaking, and peacemaking. Elshtain has shown that man the "just warrior" and woman the "beautiful soul" or "moral mother" who nurtures soldiers and uncritically supports war have been dominant cultural images in Western societies, and that this symbolism has served to legitimize and promote war. Reinforcing Elshtain's argument, Enloe has demonstrated that despite some women's military participation in social revolutions and war - in both historical and contemporary times - the warrior/nurturer dichotomy has held firm. Betty Reardon's work has offered compelling evidence of the interrelatedness of patriarchy and war as social systems. In counterpoint to theorists who connect gender systems primarily to warmaking, Elise Boulding presents an alternative theme: the resistant and "inventive" tradition of peacemaking among women from diverse societies in modern times. Boulding shows that peace-minded women have subverted the beautiful soul construct to suit their vision of a world without war. In line with feminist theorists of women's social and moral development such as Carol Gilligan and Sara Ruddick, Boulding argues that "women's knowledge and experience worlds have equipped them to function creatively as problem-solvers and peacemakers in ways that men have not been equipped by their knowledge and experience worlds."12

This interdisciplinary gendered approach to militarism, war, and peace parallels a new initiative in women's history that has significant implications for peace history. Since the early 1980s, we have seen a shift in the field of women's history from a focus on women in history to the history of gender. Louise Newman, in a probing essay published in 1991, notes that gender history
examines "how gender operates through specific cultural forms," while women's history examines "why specific groups of women share certain experiences." Newman argues that gender history and women's history must be viewed as complementary approaches. "The challenge," she argues, is "to analyse how changes in the representation of cultural forms relate to changes in experiences that specific groups of people construct for themselves. The point of such an enterprise would be to develop the skills and perceptions that might enable us to manipulate cultural forms in ways that would alter our understandings of past experience, as well as our political commitments for the future." Newman's suggestion that feminist historians seek to combine gender history practice with the more established approach of women's history has resonated with what we might call the third generation of peace historians. Since the early 1990s, new gendered studies of women's (and men's) relation to war and peace have appeared, and their authors are moving peace history to new terrain.

Some gender historians link their scholarly endeavours with the longstanding goal of peace historians to understand the causes of war and the prerequisites for peace; they concur with more established peace historians that the historical record must be more inclusive of peace and related social justice movements, and they stress the efficacy of many social change movements in modern history. Such scholars have been influenced by feminist theorizing around war and peace issues, and they have often been trained (or have trained themselves) in postmodern methods of analysis. They have resisted the poststructuralist tendency to locate power and oppression solely within the operation of language but hold a perception that symbolic systems of meaning are never neutral and exist as sites of power and legitimation for specific groups. Members of this third generation of peace historians most likely would agree with Louise Newman that the scholarly enterprise must be "explicitly political in its attempt to specify how oppression is perpetuated and experienced, as well as how it may be resisted and escaped."

Gender history studies on topics related to peace (and war) history are diverse, but they all share an appreciation that cultural representation of sexual difference in conjunction with meanings individuals derive from social experiences are powerful influences on intellectual and political discourse and affect in complex ways the goals and outcomes of social change movements. Particularly insightful within this emerging body of work is scholarship that explores the state's attempt to manipulate wartime and postwar gender systems (especially the language of gender) to maximize social cohesion and to discourage or quash dissent.

Feminist scholars who choose to explore aspects of peace history through the lens of gender history have been influenced by postmodern thought to look sceptically upon the notion that historians can write history "wie es eigentlich gewesen ist." Nonetheless, while aware of the incompleteness of linear narratives and the contingency of historical truths, feminist gender scholars who pursue topics related to peace history believe that they can apprehend aspects of people's lives and arrive at some valuable insights. And, as three recent feminist studies of leading twentieth-century peace advocates attest, a new genre of historical writing, the feminist biography, offers an innovative and creative method for further explorations into a gendered peace history.

The meaning of women's peace advocacy in relation to their own experiences and in relation to broad social movement history is a main theme in Margaret Hope Bacon's study of American WILPF leader Mildred Scott Olmsted (1890-1990), Deborah Gorham's examination of English feminist writer and pacifist spokesperson Vera Brittain (1893-1970), and Barbara Roberts's work on feminist-socialist activist and Canadian women's peace movement founder Gertrude Richardson (1875-1946). Each biographer brings her own slant to her subject, but all three authors set themselves the difficult feminist task of writing about one woman's life without the public/private split so common in the traditional biography. Bacon was able to work collaboratively with Olmsted before her death, thereby creating a set of stimulating conversations between them, and two voices are reflected in the biography; Gorham benefited from the existence of extensive public (published) and private autobiographical sources on Brittain and analyzed these writings ingeniously; and Roberts, with neither of these methodological...
advantages, possessed the temerity, skill, and indefatigable energy to piece together Richardson's life story from numerous scattered sources across two continents. These biographies are engaging and political: the authors believe that writing about and coming to understand another individual's life - albeit incompletely - helps us to understand our own lives and times better. Roberts views Richardson's commitment to feminism, peace, and social justice as an "ethic of risk," a notion that one must maintain belief in the path as well as in the identified idealized goals of a particular social movement; this concept also brings added dimension to the lives of Olmsted and Brittain and helps us to think more clearly about other mostly anonymous women of previous epochs who have struggled in unheralded ways for feminist, peace, and social justice goals.

Set against a backdrop of one strain of postmodern theory that insists that we can never know the past or really comprehend the complexity of "the decentred subject," the feminist biography of the sort discussed here renews confidence in the historian's craft. Gorham, for one, counsels feminist historians to hold suspect theories that deny "the reality of human subjectivity." She quotes Adrienne Rich's dictum that feminism "takes women seriously." Amplifying this point and in light of her own research on Brittain, Gorham states:

For much of history, patriarchy has denied women's subjectivity by constructing woman as "other." Feminism, in contrast, asserts women's claim to selfhood, but this claim is still fragile and incomplete and it is risky for feminists to embrace theories that question the legitimacy of the transcendent self or of experience...It is because Vera Brittain took herself seriously that the nature and the development of her feminist consciousness is worthy of close examination.19

The varied approaches to studying women, gender, war, and peace I have outlined represent but the tip of the iceberg in terms of recognizing feminism's influence on peace history. It is noteworthy that in the last few years the Peace History Society (PHS) has committed itself to exploring the borders of this new scholarship, notably by sponsoring panels at conferences.20 Many of the papers that have been presented at these gatherings are now in print or are forthcoming.21 Two PHS conferences, in particular, might be noted here: "Peace and War Issues: Gender, Race, and Ethnicity," held at Rutgers University (1994), and "Peace and War Issues: Gender, Race, Identity, and Citizenship," convened at the University of Texas at San Antonio (1997). Selected papers from these conferences have been published as special issues of Peace & Change: A Journal of Peace Research.22 Perusal of other recent publications reveals that peace history is now linked in the minds of many of its practitioners to feminist theory, race studies, issues of ethnicity and citizenship, liberation struggles, and transnational social protest movements.

As noted at the beginning of this essay, feminist scholars and peace historians have always benefitted from and been influenced by interdisciplinarity; they have also embraced both empiricism and theory-building as twin aspects of their work. Of late, intellectually rewarding dialogues and cooperative projects have developed among and between not only feminist researchers and peace historians but also diplomatic and international historians, historians of ethnicity and race, "new" military historians, and peace studies scholars trained in diverse disciplines, notably political science, sociology, anthropology, literature, and philosophy.23 Today it is difficult to know where to break the flow, where to place disciplinary or field boundaries. According to historian Emily Rosenberg, delimiting boundaries is just what we do not want to do. In a provocative essay entitled "Walking the Borders," Rosenberg suggests that research must be concerned with analysing systems of power, but that because "universalized systems and supposed objectivity have worked, in the past, to create the discourses of hegemonic power...[scholarship] may need to be localized, partial, and contextual."24 The large view is crucial but needs to be grounded in evidence-based research:

Calls for a broad, international sweep will miss the mark unless they also adopt peripheral vision and challenge the abstract assumptions, such as progress, modernization, destiny, and
internationalism, upon which dominant systems of power have rested. If borders are seen as frontier areas that delineate and separate lines of power and discursive fields, we should linger at the intersections, walking the borders to analyze things from the outside in.25

ENDNOTES
4. Epitomizing this vein of study is the recently published overview by Linda Grant DePauw, Battle Cries and Lullabies: Women in War from Prehistory to the Present (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998).


8. Ibid., p. 67.

9. Useful in this context is the published forum "Why Peace History?" in which a number of leading peace historians participated. While quite contrasting, and, at times, contentious, views were expressed in this debate, contributors would all agree to what I have noted are the generalized aims of the peace historian. See "Special Issue: Peace History Forum," *Peace & Change* 20.1 (1995).


25. Ibid., p. 27.