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# World War I and the Mobilization of Maternal Sacrifice: Considerations for Peace Politics

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## World War I and the Mobilization of Maternal Sacrifice: Considerations for Peace Politics

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We ask the reader to consider the following stories that appeared in the *The New York Times* during the first year of World War I:

In June, 1917, Mrs. Louis Meyer of Wheeling, Virginia, received a reply from President Woodrow Wilson thanking her for her wartime sacrifices. She had written to the president to tell him that she had given two sons to the war effort and that she was willing to give her third if necessary (“Thanks Heroic Mother,” June 19, 1917).

A month later, Connecticut state police, along with U.S. marshals and agents of the Department of Justice, seized another mother, Mrs. Mary Balaski, at her home in Hartford while she was “brandishing a revolver and shouting that she would kill the first officer that tried to enter the house to get her son for the army” (“Forbade Son,” August 18, 1917).

These two stories reflect alternative voices of mothers of soldiers during wartime. The behavior of Mrs. Meyer, the mother in the first story, is consistent with behavior associated with an important cultural archetype, the patriotic mother. The patriotic mother supports the nation’s war effort and her child’s role in it. She is also expected to remain stoic and silent about the personal costs involved. The behavior of Mrs. Balaski, the mother in the second story, is normally associated with another prominent cultural archetype, that of the good mother. The good mother protects her child from harm and nurtures the child psychologically and socially.

Both archetypes are grounded in maternal work, which, according to Ruddick (1989), offers “important resources for developing peace politics” (p. 12). Maternal work is the hands-on, day-to-day work of raising a child. Ruddick argues that the experience of this kind of work leads to a way of thinking about the human body and its vulnerability, attentive love, and other issues related to care that are useful when thinking about the problem of peace.

With peace politics in mind, then, we describe how the archetypes of the patriotic mother and the good mother differ, and how the image of the patriotic mother eclipses that of the good mother during wartime. We focus on the image of the patriotic mother as she appeared in World War I because the shift in archetypes in that period set the stage for similar patterns that emerged in subsequent wars in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Finally, we argue that

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a more thorough understanding of this wartime cultural shift, which is subtle but profoundly significant, affords insights into how we might more fully realize the resources that motherhood offers in terms of peace politics.

### **Conflicting Maternal Archetypes**

The archetype of the good mother is held culturally dear during times of peace. In the United States, the good mother has historically assumed responsibility for physically nurturing her children and keeping them out of harm's way. She has also been charged with developing her children cognitively and morally, and has assumed control of training the children socially. On its face, the concept of war directly contradicts the concept of maternal work; war threatens to obliterate, in a single instance, all of the maternal care invested in a child during the first eighteen years of his or her life (Ruddick, 1989). Viewed this way, Mrs. Balaski's response to the government's efforts to press her son into wartime service, appears logical and quite natural.

At the same time, however, the archetype of patriotic motherhood makes different demands on mothers. This archetype stresses maternal work as it relates to socialization of the child. Since the earliest days of the Republic, mothers have been expected to train children to be good citizens and adhere to the requirement of citizenship, which for male children has historically included the expectation that they will defend the nation. Likewise, mothers are expected to willingly sacrifice their children to a nation in need. Willingness to sacrifice is a hallmark of the mother's own good citizenship. Cordero (2008) argues that in order to count as a sacrifice, something of value must be given up in exchange for something of greater value. In wartime, then, mothers of soldiers are expected to stoically and silently sacrifice the lives of their children for the life of the nation.

In sum, the good mother archetype focuses on the mother's role as mother. Her cultural worth is based on keeping her child alive, well and safe. In contrast, the patriotic mother archetype focuses on the mother's role as citizen. Her cultural value during wartime is based on her willingness to sacrifice her child for the nation's war effort, all the while remaining stoic and silent about the personal cost (Garner & Slattery, 2010).

### **The Eclipse**

Both archetypes are omnipresent in the culture, but their prominence appears to depend on whether the nation is at war. Historical evidence suggests that the emphasis shifts, particularly as it relates to mothers of soldiers, in times of conflict (Garner & Slattery, 2010; Slattery & Garner, 2007). The media offers one cultural narrative that reflects this shift. Specifically, an examination of the coverage of mothers of soldiers during World War I in the nation's wartime news media helps illustrate how mothers of soldiers were moved to make the shift. We focus on the news media because, according to Lule (2001) and Koch (1990), news as narrative serves the process of myth-making in a culture. News functions as a "socializing voice" (Koch, 1990, p. 176) by pointing out who is important in a culture, what counts as appropriate behavior, and what is worth valuing (Lule, 2001).

We argue that the voice of the soldier's mother, as a good mother, is silenced during war, while her voice as a patriotic mother is afforded center stage. However, there is a caveat. The mothers of soldiers are encouraged to loudly voice support for the war effort but are expected to remain stoic and silent about the cost of her sacrifice. World War I offers a clear example of how mechanisms were put in place to silence those mothers who opposed the sacrifice of their children. But, before turning to a discussion of how the media depicted mothers of soldiers, we must first situate the media coverage within the larger cultural context of the war.

### **Cultural Zeitgeist of World War I**

In the years leading up to World War I, President Woodrow Wilson had advocated U.S. neutrality. Suffragists, maternalists, and pacifists were actively engaged in peace and anti-draft movements (Zeiger, 1996). Reflections of their feelings appeared in cultural texts including poems and songs. One of the ten most popular songs in 1915 was "I Didn't Raise my Boy to be a Soldier." When President Wilson made his decision to take the country to war he knew it would be necessary to mobilize citizens to support the conflict (Vaughn, 1980). To successfully prosecute the war, he and his administration believed it was necessary to create an "outraged public," one that was willing to "enlist, contribute money and make the many other sacrifices war demands" (Cooper, 2008, p. 196). The Wilson Administration put mechanisms into place to accomplish mobilization, including the National Council of Defense (NCD) and the Committee on Public Information (CPI). Both had women's divisions and went a long way toward fostering an environment in which the archetype of the patriotic mother could flourish.

The NDC was created on August 29, 1916. Comprised of six cabinet members and a civilian advisory committee, it was charged with exploring issues related to the country's wartime mobilization of resources, including "civilian forces" (Grover, 2003, p. 432). The NCD set up State Councils of Defense, which, in turn, set up the local councils of defense whose purpose was to actively engage state and local citizens in war work. The depth and reach of these activities is apparent in the activities of the local council of defense in Milwaukee County, Wisconsin.

On an average day during the First World War, the Milwaukee County Council of Defense and its employees in its various Departments, relentlessly engaged civilians in the nation's war-related activities. They tapped people from all walks of life, including those who worked in commerce and finance, public affairs, public welfare, manufacturing, business, churches, school, civil and patriotic groups, and homemakers. The Council and its employees encouraged civilian participation in such activities as going door-to-door to raise money for Liberty Bonds and Thrift campaigns, organizing parades and service flag pageants, driving soldiers to train stations, giving 4 minute men speeches at movie theaters, writing letters to sailors overseas, making service flags, hosting soldiers in private homes, creating comfort kits, knitting sweaters, giving newspaper boys badges and certificates for victory gardens created in their backyards, training housewives in food and fuel conservation, arranging military balls, banquets, band concerts, and theater parties, as well as working to Americanize foreign born women, looking for spies and searching for and reporting on slackers, i.e., those who evaded the draft or war work (The Milwaukee County Council of Defense, 1919).

The government designed the CPI as a propaganda machine that would work in hand-in-hand with the NCD's mobilization efforts. The CPI was an "extraordinarily effective nationalizing agent" (Vaughn, p. 4), and was able to build "patriotic fervor" among Americans (Cooper, 2003) by generating war-related news stories, feature articles, and cartoons all of which appeared in the nation's news outlets; as well as pamphlets, films, and advertising. According to CPI chairman, George Creel, "there was no part of the great war machinery that we did not touch. No medium of appeal that we did not employ" ("United States Committee," 1972, p. 2).

With the Administration's propaganda machine in full force by 1917, thinking about the soldier's mother's role vis a vis war had shifted as reflected in poems and songs popular in the wartime era. The predominant maternal voice in the news media belonged to the soldier's mother as patriot rather than mother as mother. In light of mounting public opinion favoring the war, many of the peace activists suspended their efforts (Zeiger, 1996).

The passage of federal laws in 1917 and 1918 further stifled questions about the nation's role in the "war to end all wars." These included among others, the Espionage Act, the Trading-With-The-Enemy Act and the Sedition Act. Lest the reader think that these were minor forces in the lives of American citizens, one need only read the newspaper for tales of women who dared to speak out. For instance, a judge in North Dakota sentenced socialist editor, Mrs. Kate Richards O'Hare, to five years in prison for "making utterances" in a speech in which she voiced her opposition to military registration. She reportedly said, "mothers who raised sons to be 'cannon fodder' were no better than a farmer's brood sow" ("Five Years," December 15, 1917). And, recall the story of Mrs. Balaski, the mother in our introduction, whose home was charged by federal and local agents. They seized her from behind and hauled her, her husband, and son off to jail and held them there for \$5000 bond. According to the news account, a federal officer called the incident "one of the most important arrests made in the country under the Registration Act" ("Forbade Son," August 18, 1917).

Stories of mothers of soldiers who opposed the draft and/or war were few and far between. We cannot say if other mothers harbored questions about the war and were reluctant to speak out given the nation's wartime climate, but our data show that the press depicted most mothers of soldiers as supportive of the nation's war effort. Our examination of newspapers from Wisconsin, California and New York reveal that there were a lot of mothers like Mrs. Meyer, mentioned in the introduction to our essay, who gave two sons and was willing to give a third ("Thanks Heroic Mother," June 19, 1917). Mrs. Elsa Kragh, a Wisconsin mother, said she wished that she "had a 100 sons to give for the cause of democracy." Her son, Herbert, was one of the first to enlist from Madison (McCormick, 1917). Mrs. Magdalena Mueller, of Monroe, Wisconsin, gave seven sons to the military ("Monroe Woman," August 5, 1917). When Mrs. Augusta Johnson learned her son was injured overseas, she replied, "Carl has done his duty by his flag and I am proud of him" ("2 S. F. Boys Win Honor in France," January 31, 1918). A 98-year-old mother in Ohio, who knitted socks for soldiers, was described in one story as "wearing the uniform of the United States on the inside and answering roll call right" (Boyle, 1918). Eleanor Markle (1918) wrote one of the many poems appearing in newspapers about mothers of soldiers; she titled it, "The Answered Prayer":

You were so little that first day  
I held you on my arm,  
A rose leaf cheek against my breast,  
My mother love to shelter  
You from harm.  
And then I prayed  
As mothers ever do—  
“Make him a man, dear Lord,  
Brave, honest, kind and true.”

Today a message came  
From distant lands across the sea,  
Only a word or two,  
But ah! So much to me!  
And thru the tears I read  
As best I can:  
“He died for home and country,  
A brave man.”

Other mothers believed it was their job to keep up the morale on the home front. One wrote a letter to the editor in which she encouraged all mothers to organize and unite in their war effort (“Mothers United,” August 3, 1917).

The rhetoric of the mothers of soldiers, as it appeared in the news coverage, fits well with the cultural expectation of the archetype of the patriotic mother. But it runs contrary to Ruddick’s (1989) observation about the contradiction between mothering and war: “Mothers protect children who are at risk; the military risks the children that mothers protect” (p. 148).

## **Conclusion**

The archetype of the patriotic mother was a prominent feature of the World War I wartime news narrative, eclipsing the archetype of the good mother, which appears so prominently during peacetime. Efforts by the World War I federal government, in tandem with local governments, the wartime mass media, and mothers themselves, set the stage for promoting the archetype of the patriotic mother as a wartime norm in later conflicts. This archetype appears in the wartime press in later 20<sup>th</sup> century wars and again in the news media during the U.S./Iraq War (Slattery & Garner, 2007).

It is worth noting that evidence of organized counter voices began to appear in the news coverage of more recent wars. After losing her son, Peg Mullens loudly voiced her objection to the American presence in Vietnam (Mullens, 1995). Cindy Sheehan did the same after her son died in the U.S./Iraq war. Both mothers were publicly vilified. But, despite public condemnation, the evidence suggests that these and other mothers keep reappearing in wartime news; they refuse to go away (Slattery & Garner, 2007). It is our view that feminist and peace scholars should pay serious attention to these viewpoints when they appear because they speak to another truth and, as Mill (1992) observed:

... when an opinion is true, it may be extinguished once, twice, or many times, but in the course of ages there will generally be found persons to rediscover it, until some one of its reappearances falls on a time when from favorable circumstances it escapes persecution until it has made such head as to withstand all subsequent attempts to suppress it... (p. 68).

Scholars and others who are interested in realizing the resource that motherhood offers in terms of peace politics should keep two things in mind. First, the cultural shift from the archetypal good mother to the archetypal patriotic mother during wartime is extremely subtle. More work must be done if we are to understand the nature of this dynamic. Only by understanding how this cultural shift occurs can we move closer to protecting against it when the shift is not appropriate for mothers, soldiers, or the democracy.

Second, peace activists who are interested in mobilizing mothers for peace rather than war, must engage mothers during peacetime. During wartime, the music, the poems, the press coverage and the propaganda make it extremely difficult for mothers to counter the prevailing forces that have been mobilized for conflict. Historical evidence reveals that those who have dared to challenge the wartime status quo have easily been typecast as unpatriotic, marginalized and/or punished.

We focused on World War I in this essay and the overwhelming propaganda force that was wrought on the mothers of soldiers. We note that it was highly effective, in part, because mothers at that time in U.S. history did not have a vote and had only a limited voice in the public sphere. Contemporary mothers are fully franchised citizens of the republic. Peace advocates can work with mothers to understand the nature of the pressures that they will face during wartime, and the means through which they can be fully engaged in the social, political, and economic decisions that go into a nation's decision to enter a war, as both mother and citizen.

That work must be done before the bullets begin to fly.

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