

book review essays



Women and War in the Balkans

A Comparative Review Essay

Review essay by **Maria Bucur**

Alin Ciupală, *Bătălia lor: Femeile din România în Primul Război Mondial* (Their battle: Women in Romania during World War I), Iași: Polirom, 2017, 392 pp., 48 illustrations, RON 39.95 (paperback), ISBN: 978-9-73466-577-8.

Jelena Batinić, *Women and Yugoslav Partisans: A History of World War II Resistance*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015, 287 pp., 11 illustrations, GBP 24.99 (paperback), ISBN: 978-1-31611-862-7.



We have come a long way since the days when talking about the Balkan Wars or the two world wars in Eastern Europe was a strictly masculine affair. In the past decade, scholars have produced a number of studies that generate a more nuanced understanding of what living through total war meant in Balkan societies in 1912–1913, 1914–1918, and 1940–1945. Two recent books, *Bătălia lor: Femeile din România în Primul Război Mondial* (Their battle: Women in Romania during World War I) and *Women and Yugoslav Partisans: A History of World War II Resistance*, provide substantial contributions to this emerging field of research. Since the books focus on quite separate events, I will treat them individually, with points of connection offered at the end.

Alin Ciupală has been writing on women's history in Romania for two decades and has already brought to light many interesting elements of political and social history in the modern period with women as subjects. *Bătălia lor* is the result of his prolonged and very impressive research in the Romanian archives to bring to light important aspects of life during World War I. The historiography of Romania's participation in World War I is dominated by military history with a focus on strategies and operations. A social history of the Romanian military has yet to be written. Additionally, historians have obsessed for a hundred years over the shifts in internal and international alliances between the pro-German versus pro-Entente factions, which led to Romania's delayed entrance in the war. Ciupală is in a very small minority of historians who have stopped to ask what was going on in the homes of average Roma-



nians in 1914–1918. Indeed, he is one of only a handful of historians to investigate how women in Romania fared in the increasingly violent and chaotic environment of the war, especially between December 1916 and March 1918, when half of the country was under the occupation of the Central Powers, while the rest of the country was heaving under the enormous pressure of the refugees, fighting, deadly epidemics, and absence of sufficient food and other supplies.

The book is divided thematically, but with a chronological logic as well. The author first presents the attitudes that women (and in particular feminists) took in relation to the war, suggesting that the majority of these women supported entry into the war in 1914. Unfortunately, this claim, along with the notion that women tended to invoke divinity in their support for the war, is not accompanied by sufficient contextualization of what the feminist movement looked like in Romania at that time and why. As a result, in this chapter women's voices are represented primarily by one feminist, obscuring the diversity of opinion that existed in Romanian society at the time, and especially among women's organizations. The next chapter is "Love, Sexuality, Eroticism," followed by "The Fighters," "The Queen," and "The Heroine," all of them providing many different voices. What is missing throughout are important categories encompassing the vast majority of women, such as peasants or survivors, as well as any serious gender analysis. The chapter on love, for example, examines how assumptions about women's morality in relation to sexuality shaped views of collaboration with the enemy. The research presented here offers ample opportunity for a serious gender analysis of wartime propaganda and the overall biases of the political and military leadership. Yet the author holds back, which weakens the effectiveness of the investigation. He describes what various historical agents said about women's roles in society, but does not delve deeper into the important issue of why they did so and with what results for power relations and specifically women's ability to act as autonomous citizens. The other chapters deal with how various categories of women, from those who volunteered primarily as nurses to the best-known female military officer, Ecaterina Teodoroiu, participated in the war effort. The descriptive aspects of these stories are quite rich. The author has done impressive work in unearthing new evidence about women's contributions to the war and is careful to present many perspectives on the same issues, such as the inadequacy of medical support in relation to the epidemics ravaging the country during the war.

Where the book proves quite disappointing is in the author's repeated shyness in drawing broader conclusions about the state of Romanian society during that time in terms of gender norms. I find the following example most telling: In describing the efforts of volunteer nurses, Ciupală notes that one such woman mentioned that nurses "did not have the ability to take care of themselves financially and made the suggestion that [the authorities] offer a monthly stipend of 50–100 lei" (105). The author considers the observation "pertinent," pointing out that only a small minority of the volunteers were ladies from the aristocracy. But he follows that with no further analysis of why women could not take care of themselves financially. I and others have in fact written about these larger structural problems that women faced in Romanian society.¹ They are essential for understanding the kinds of sacrifices these women made during the war.

Jelena Batinić takes a decisively more feminist stance with regard to both the events of World War II and also their various historiographic and memorializing trajectories. In explaining the extent of women's participation in the war effort on the side of the partisans, Batinić is careful to present the wider context in which politics, military action, and social mobilization took place. Essential to this context are not just the events of the war, but also the gender norms that undergirded significant limitations to participation in specific wartime activities. As she rightly points out, without such awareness we cannot accurately appreciate what sorts of vulnerabilities and dangers women faced as a specific category of people. The book argues that the communist partisans were extremely effective at utilizing both modernizing arguments about women's emancipation and gender equality, as well as traditionalist arguments about women's qualities as illustrated in folk culture, to engage them in the workings of the wartime guerilla movement. Her examination of both the propaganda as well as the recovered voices of those women partisans themselves provides evidence that there was indeed success in this regard.

Yet the book wavers, as does the evidence, on the question of the long-lasting changes brought about by women's extraordinary experiences in the partisan movement. If women writing in the 1960s were nostalgic for the wartime years, what does that suggest? Regardless of how accurate such remembrances are, they unambiguously point toward loss. Loss of freedom? Loss of voice? Loss of authority? In examining this process, the author places under the microscope the memorialization of the partisan movement and of partisan women as a specific symbol of wartime resistance. Her conclusion is that the increased sexualization of these narratives and specifically of such women alienated those who had taken pride in their wartime experiences. What is unclear about this process of sexualizing the memory of the war is who pursued this reframing and with what goals in mind. It is as if there is an imagined audience, made up exclusively of men aged thirteen to sixty-five, who represent the entire significant population. If that is the case, then we can already conclude that women made very few inroads in changing Yugoslav gender norms with their participation in the partisan movement. Since during the interwar period a serious tradition of feminist journalism and culture already existed, to move from that to the sexualization of women partisans suggests the willful erasure of such feminist critiques and the resignification of women's wartime experiences in a direction that effectively negates their agency as historical actors.

The impression left by this book is that, as in many other cases, while the communist movement did manage to mobilize significant numbers of women (Russia and China are similar cases invoked comparatively), once the movement became a one-party regime, the male leadership managed to marginalize women from the movement, so that the fate of communist regimes everywhere in the world became tied to ideas and policies generated exclusively by men, despite the gender equality rhetoric of all of these states.

The 1920s postwar Romanian regime denied women the right to vote, even though feminists made the argument that female citizens had amply demonstrated patriotism and dedication to the well-being of the country during the war. Alin Ciupală's book contributes substantial new research to showing how much women had participated

in the war. Future research will have to return to the scenes described in this book and make the necessary connections to enable us to better appreciate why the Romanian political leadership was so fundamentally opposed to women's suffrage. But the book reminds us that neither the liberals nor the conservatives, the two dominant parties, wanted anything to do with women's suffrage, and were instead obsessed with pacifying the rifle-toting peasants, afraid that bolshevism was knocking on Romania's door. It was actually fascism that came knocking a decade later, when the promises made after the war turned into empty words.

If women's participation in the war brought little immediate change in their political and civil rights, what changed for women in Yugoslavia as a result of their participation in the partisan movements? Batinić describes the overall changes effected by the Yugoslav Communist Party in the name of gender equality, which were very similar to the changes that took place in all other postwar Eastern bloc countries, regardless of the actual participation of women in the resistance. Yugoslav female partisans were somewhat kept involved, but by the 1950s women were forbidden from both the military and also any professions connected to the handling of military weaponry. This reads like a categorical negation of any substantial credit being given to women as a category of partisans. Just as they had been treated after World War I in both Serbia and Romania, women who participated in uniform or as guerilla fighters in supporting the war effort were conveniently marginalized afterward. The conclusion one draws after reading these two books is that war did little to substantially change gender norms and that women have been more effective in peacetime in altering their political and civic rights. The metaphor of the double helix seems to hold here.²

◆ About the Author

Maria Bucur is the John V. Hill Professor of East European History and Gender Studies at Indiana University, Bloomington. Her latest books are: Maria Bucur and Mihaela Miroiu, *The Birth of Democratic Citizenship: Women in Modern Romania* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018), and *The Century of Women: How Women Have Changed the World Since 1900* (Lanham, MD: Roman and Littlefield, 2018). She can be reached at mbucur@indiana.edu

◆ Notes

1. Maria Bucur, "Between Liberal and Republican Citizenship: Feminism and Nationalism in Romania, 1859–1918," *Aspasia* 1 (2007): 84–103; Maria Bucur and Mihaela Miroiu, eds., *Patriarhat și emancipare în istoria gândirii politice românești* [Patriarchy and emancipation in the history of Romanian political thought] (Iași: Polirom, 2002); Roxana Cheșchebec, "Feminist Ideologies and Activism in Romania (approx. 1890–1940s): Nationalism and Internationalism in Romanian Projects for Women's Emancipation" (PhD diss., Central European University, 2005).

2. Margaret R. Higonnet et al., eds., *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987).