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The WRNS in Wartime: The Women's Royal Naval Service, 1917-45

A voiceover for a short recruitment film made in 1941 for the Women's Royal Naval Service informed the audience that 'our work's essential to the Navy. Every week more women join the Wrens. They free men from offices to ships, from shore jobs to the sea.'[1] Releasing non-combatant men to undertake more active roles in the conflict, which had evolved into a total war requiring the mobilisation of all available human and material resources, was a key theme of propagandists. The poster series 'Join the Wrens and free a man for the fleet' exhorted the same message. At its peak in June 1944, 74,620 women had responded to the appeal and were serving in the organisation. Yet as this new book by Hannah Roberts asserts, the high prestige with which the WRNS were held, based on its service in the First World War, the persuasive notion of it being the most sought after, its comparatively small size connoting selectivity and engendering respectability and the glamour of the uniform, meant that it never struggled to find recruits.[2] Indeed, it did not rely on conscripts as most of its members were volunteers applying to join the organisation before they received their call-up papers. 15,000 women had applied to join the Service in January 1939 upon receipt of the *Handbook for National Service*, which was delivered to every household. With just a Director and a Deputy in post, no members and no headquarters staff, the mountain of applications was overwhelming, and compounded by the outbreak of war when they were once again inundated with an enthusiastic response. It was perhaps fortunate that the name WRNS had been chosen in 1917 when it was first formed rather than one of the other options: the Women's Auxiliary Naval Corps was given the erroneous and even more unfortunate acronym WANK.

Roberts' book, published just after its centenary, tells the story of the WRNS from its formation in 1917 to the end of the Second World War utilising official documents, published and unpublished personal testimonies including memoirs, the BBC People's War archive and 21 newly conducted oral history interviews. 7000 women served in the WRNS between 1917 and 1919, when it was disbanded. The adage 'Never at Sea' was applied, resulting in a limited role for women, who were mainly deployed in conventionally feminine jobs such as clerical work. Yet some assumed roles previously undertaken by men such as cylinder capping and acetylene welding. In the inter-war period the Association of Wrens was formed and a magazine produced, entitled *The Wren*. As another war looked increasingly likely, and following the formation in 1938 of the ATS (Auxiliary Territorial Service), the female branch of the Army, the service was re-formed. Yet despite the adoption of naval ranks, military uniform and the close links with the Royal Navy, the WRNS retained its civilian status outside the remit of military law. This, notes Roberts, meant that the WRNS were a part of the naval service rather than being members *in* the Navy.[3]

Indeed, one of the strengths of Roberts' book are the references to the other female services: the First World War WAAC (Women's Auxiliary Army Corps, later renamed Queen Mary's Army Auxiliary Corps), the inter-war Women's Reserve and Emergency Service and the Second World War ATS and WAAF (Women's Auxiliary Air Force). Indeed, Robert's account of the WRNS is a long overdue contribution to the scholarship of

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[1] INF 6/451, *WRNS*.

[2] Hannah Roberts, *The WRNS in Wartime: The Women's Royal Naval Service, 1917-45* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2018), p.99.

[3] Roberts, *The WRNS in Wartime*, p.4.

women and war as both the WAAF and the ATS have been the subject of scholarly treatment.[4] The similarities and differences are drawn out between the organisations, from their appeal to potential recruits to the differing degrees of independence from their male military counterparts.

We read about the motivations of its Second World War members to volunteer, which included patriotism, a familial connection, a desire for travel and the visual spectacle of the uniform. We are informed of the two-week initial training, which compelled the new recruits to undertake menial chores such as scrubbing floors and exposed them to a quasi-militaristic regime that resembled the disciplines of male military life. And we hear about the overseas placements of some Wrens. As Roberts makes clear, the WRNS was not an elite club of aristocratic young ladies (like the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry – the FANY – for example); it was a largely meritocratic service, with new recruits serving on lower deck as 'ratings' rather than parachuted straight in to the officer class and accordingly there was the possibility for social mobility. This leads Roberts to conclude that the historiographical debate among historians as to the extent of the emancipatory potential of participation in the total war is 'unresolvable'.[5] Contesting revisionist scholarship, such as that of Harold Smith who questions the war's transformative effects, Roberts sides with the less fashionable arguments of Arthur Marwick, noting that social change did not have to be 'all-encompassing or revolutionary' and could instead be 'incremental' and 'small'.[6] The war's main legacy for women who served in the WRNS was 'the possibility of choice that the war opened up.'[7]

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[4] Tessa Stone, 'Creating a (Gendered?) Military Identity: The Women's Auxiliary Air Force in Great Britain in the Second World War', *Women's History Review*, 8:4 (1999), pp.605-24; Lucy Noakes, *Women in the British Army: War and the Gentle Sex, 1907-1948*, (Oxford: Routledge, 2006).

[5] Roberts, *The WRNS in Wartime*, p.222.

[6] Harold Smith, *War and Social Change: British Society in the Second World War (*Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990); Arthur Marwick, *Britain in the Century of Total War: Peace and Social Change, 1900-1967* (London: Penguin, 1968).

[7] Ibid.