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Nicole Hudgins, *Hold Still, Madame: Wartime Gender and the Photography of Women in France during the Great War*. St. Andrews, UK: St. Andrews Studies in French History and Culture, 2014. No price listed. (pb). ISBN 978-1-907548-12-3; (e-book). ISBN 978-1-907548-13-0.

Review by Martha Hanna, University of Colorado, Boulder.

“Hold still, Madame,” is a clever and subtle title, hinting as it does at both the topic and the thesis of Nicole Hudgins’s analysis of photographs of women in World War I France. We learn not only that professional photographers, all of whom were men, turned their lens towards the women of wartime France, but also that their photographs were far from ideologically innocent. Indeed, Hudgins argues, the photographers of the war years—having very recently captured in still images the efforts of progressive French women to advance their claims to political equality—preferred after August 1914 to present women as invariably dependent, frequently despondent, but ever devoted to their men and their nation in arms. We might even say that these photographers were not content merely to have women ‘hold still’; they wanted them to return to an age of religious piety, domestic dependence, and social deference. “The photographs of women...exposed the stark contrast between pre-war French women’s proud march toward greater independence, and wartime women’s dependence on the male-designed and controlled wartime welfare state” (pp. 39-40).

Hudgins examines a rich and varied set of photographic archives: the records of the Section photographique de l’Armée; of the Parisian police (which took many photographs of civilian life in the capital during the war); and of such national news magazines as *L’Illustration*, *Le Monde illustré*, and *Le Miroir*. Taken for very different purposes—the army had no intention of circulating its photographs, whereas the news magazines made money only if theirs attracted a substantial audience—the photographs inevitably document urban life more extensively than rural society, and the miseries of civilian life close to the frontlines more than the quotidian realities of life in the Midi. It is possible that this predominantly urban and northern orientation over-determines the three themes Hudgins identifies as the dominant motifs of gendered wartime photography: distress, devotion, and toil. Women, she argues, were represented as helpless refugees, fleeing the barbaric Hun; as toiling workers selflessly dedicating themselves to the larger project of the nation in arms; and as bereaved, grieving mothers and wives. And even though the Third Republic was adamantly anti-clerical, photographs (and other visual images) explicitly appropriated the long-established iconography of Catholic and Christian piety to represent the multifaceted reality of female suffering.

When analyzing photographic representations of women in distress, most notable of whom were the refugees forced to abandon their homes in the first months and last year of the war, Hudgins contends that the photographs emphasized female helplessness and male command. Without a doubt, images of women and children sleeping on straw in railway stations, or of displaced women trundling their belongings through the streets of Paris capture the misery of forced relocation. Whether these images uniformly convey a message of female submission and male dominance is, however, less clear. In the photograph of refugees arriving in Paris in 1914, women led the way while men—also pushing baby carriages filled with household belongings—followed in their wake. The men, in this image at least, look more dependent and more feminized than the women. Hudgins correctly reminds us, however, that

while the forced relocation of civilians from their homes was not restricted to the early months of the war, it is not completely accurate to argue that “from 1917 to mid-1918...refugee caravans once more headed toward hoped-for safety as French and Allied troops recaptured territory from the Germans” (p. 23), because in the spring of 1918 French civilians were once again seeking refuge from a daunting and demoralizing German advance. Did French photographers portray the massive relocation of civilians caused by Germany’s springtime victories in the same manner as they portrayed the disruptions caused by Allied advances later that year?

Chapter three examines the many faces of female devotion, arguing persuasively that “the ideal of the devoted woman, preoccupied with service to others, was perhaps an even more dominant theme in wartime photography than the woman-in-distress” (p. 54). Manifestations of devotion, of course, took myriad forms, from knitting to nursing, from praying to grieving. Wives and fiancées faithfully awaiting a soldier’s safe return; volunteer nurses giving of their time and youth, with no thought to compensation or reward; *marraines de guerre* assembling packages to be sent to their ‘adopted godsons’ at the front; and mothers mourning their fallen sons: all dedicated themselves simultaneously to the welfare (or memory) of their menfolk and the salvation of the nation. Not surprisingly, many of these photographs framed female sacrifice by reference to the established iconography of Catholic devotion. Yet the *pietà*, that most iconic representation of female bereavement, seems to have figured more frequently in the art of commemoration than in the photography of the war itself. This point, which deserves closer analysis, is worth pondering: not only did bereaved women have no access during the war to the bodies of their fallen sons and husbands, but for the duration of the war the French state had a strong interest in minimizing these and other unsettling images of mourning. As Françoise Navet-Bouron has demonstrated, censors were especially sensitive to images of female grief, often insisting that newspapers and journals suppress drawings (or modify the captions) showing mothers cradling their dead sons or widows visiting the graves of their fallen husbands.[1] This might explain why the photographic record of female bereavement appears less substantial during the war than immediately thereafter.

Although the grief of mothers was often only alluded to (and even then through line drawings rather than photographs), the toil of women could be readily captured in contemporary photography. In fact, the munitions worker, the tram-driver, and the office clerk became iconic images, in France as in Britain, of women dedicating themselves to the national war effort. Hudgins has unearthed some less familiar photographs that expand our understanding of how women’s labor was presented to wartime readers. Women working in chemical laboratories; actresses entertaining convalescent troops; and women collecting books for shipment to prisoners-of-war: they, too, were part of the national mobilization of female labor. But whatever their workplace, Hudgins argues that women invariably appeared in the pages of “[n]ewspapers, magazines and other illustrated outlets...as content, diligent patriots, cheerful protégés working under their male superiors” (p. 97). Not surprisingly, photographers rarely captured the physical misery and strained economic circumstances of women workers, and gave little public attention to their discontent with—or outright disavowal of—the war. One photograph, taken in October 1918, of striking *midinettes* attending a meeting at the Bourse de travail in Paris hints at something more complicated, but the seated women, many wearing hats, appear unthreatening and almost docile. Yet the photographic record of women’s discontent is more extensive and less tranquil than this one image suggests. Prominent photo-journalists, including Henri Roger-Viollet and staff photographers for the newsmagazine, *Excelsior*, documented the *midinettes’* strike of May 1917, with images of women marching in the streets of the capital, assembling en masse and even scaling the walls outside the Chamber of Deputies.[2] It is possible that some of these images (several of which are now available through Gallica) remained unpublished during the war, but the photographer’s lens neither belittled these women’s defiance nor suggested that it could be easily controlled by male power.

In her concluding chapter, Hudgins explores how a few images of feminine non-conformity made their way into the public record. Some essays affirmed women’s demands for political equality; one intriguing

photograph captured a group of young women exercising in the open air; and a series of humorous sketches, published in 1916 as *Une Journée à l'hôpital*, presented a more human and less saintly portrait of nurses at work in a wartime hospital. Ultimately, however, *Hold Still, Madame* concludes that “photography could strengthen the illusion of female consent, enthusiasm and docility during the war. Drawing upon aesthetic, religious and republican prescriptions for femininity, photographers performed important gendering work that, some have argued, became the most important function of the war itself” (p. 143). Perhaps so, but photographers did not apply the motifs of distress, devotion, and uncomplaining labor for the sake of the nation only to the women of France. These themes also permeate the photographic record of the quintessential hero of the French war effort: the *poilu*.

NOTES

[1] Françoise Navet-Bouron, “La Censure et la femme: pendant la Première Guerre mondiale,” *Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporains*, 198(Juin 2000): 46-47.

[2] Jean-Noël Jeanneney, *Jours de Guerre, 1914-1918: Les trésors des archives photographiques du journal Excelsior* (Paris : Éditions des Arènes, 2013), pp. 384-389.

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