Situating Women and Gender in Militarization, War, and Partition

Frances S. Hasso


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A number of themes thread through this collection of books, even as they are differentiated by topic, geographic focus, research methodology, perceived audience, and quality. The most obvious shared thread is the focus on women in conflict zones or war. In *Women of Valor* and *Female Suicide Bombers*, the women involved are combatants, although the Rochambelles, who were largely deployed as ambulance drivers, nurses, and medics during World War II in France, are constructed by the author as agentic feminist heroes who chose to support the good fighters on the frontlines, while the women in *Female Suicide Bombers*, from Kurdish Turkey, Lebanon, Palestine, Sri Lanka, and Chechnya, are constructed as often unwitting participants motivated by ethnic or national subordination, and organized by the male leaders of militant movements. Three of the books consider the social, political, and embodied consequences of living in militarily divided societies: *Blossoms on the Olive Tree, The Line, and Militarized Modernity*, which focus on Israel-Palestine, Cyprus, and South Korea, respectively, although the first...
two texts are most concerned with how contemporary women’s movements work to challenge ethnic/national divisions, while the last is most concerned with the state as actor and the responses over time of gendered and gender-segregated resistance movements to pervasive militarization and violent anticommunism. The research in three of the texts reviewed, *Women of Valor, Blossoms on the Olive Tree,* and *The Line,* depended to a significant degree on oral histories, letters, and other first-person texts. Moreover, this primary source material is woven together beautifully, especially in *Women of Valor* and *The Line,* making for rich and engaging reading. *Women of Valor,* *The Line,* and *Militarized Modernity* are the most scholarly in orientation, with the last two particularly so since they provide significant theoretical discussion, analytical frameworks, and are critically oriented, in addition to having the thorough original research and rigorous attention to evidence present in all three books.

In *Women of Valor* by journalist Ellen Hampton one finds a “herstory” targeted at military history aficionados interested in women’s combat involvement in World War II. While thousands of French women were involved in the war and in resistance organizations in various capacities, the Rochambelles, according to the author, were “the only women’s group constituted as such and assigned to a combat unit [the French Second Armored Division] on the European front” (3). The concerns of the Rochambelles were less feminist emancipation than a desire to liberate France. The group seems to have been predominantly white, although a few were of Jewish background. While not a critical scholarly analysis per se, the book is rich in empirical detail, seems carefully researched, and is well-written and highly readable. Hampton structures the book in a way that follows some of the women’s lives, struggles, relationships, losses, and decision-making processes, beginning before their involvement in the war and ending with a brief discussion of the struggles of “coming home” from the war front. The book also outlines a number of the major battles in which their division was involved in France. I found problematic the absence of any self-consciousness or reflection by the author or her research subjects on “good Europe’s” colonizing and imperial policies and practices during this period. While there are occasional glimpses in the book of the ideological, ethnic, and other complexities of nationalist and resistance politics within Europe, the lack of even brief acknowledgment of the ironies of French colonizers fighting German Nazi subordination reinforces a binary and quite mainstream understanding of the politics of “Europe” during this time. This lack of attention is particularly striking in chapter two, titled “Desert Transitions,” which focuses on the Rochambelles’ experiences and preparations for battle in North Africa, much of which was colonized by the French at that time, in some cases brutally.
Rosemarie Skaine’s *Female Suicide Bombers* is not serious reading and was published by a press that appears to provide quickly produced texts, many on sensationalized issues, for the U.S. college and university classroom market. While this is a sad enough situation given that some students and faculty may confuse this book for scholarship, the final pages of *Female Suicide Bombers* go further to provide policy and strategy recommendations for U.S. military and security officials. The book includes a number of internal contradictions and is poorly fact-checked (this was most clear to me in the discussions on Palestine, Lebanon, Turkey, and even Iraq). Fact-based problems include categorizing some Palestinian women, such as Dalal al-Mughrabi and Leila Khaled, as suicide bombers. Al-Mughrabi was a bus hijacker who died in a shootout and Leila Khaled remains alive and hijacked airplanes for a period as a member of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. Instead Khaled is categorized by Skaine to be part of the “Hezbollah–Israeli/Lebanese Conflict, 1969–1987” (76). The facts are further abused when the author places both Palestinian women under a subsection titled the “Syrian Socialist Nationalist Party.” Possibly worse than such inaccuracies throughout the book is the supermarket-style writing of placing various information—etheoretical, empirical, explanatory—in the basket for the reader. Skaine makes an effort at cursory analysis, especially in the final six-page chapter titled “Analysis,” provides superficial context on the various conflicts, and gives unreliable biographical data on at least some of the women involved in these bombings. Over-generalized statements are tools of the trade in the book, including a tension between explanations that psychologize the women involved by focusing on personal trauma, explanations relying on collective ethnic or national subordination, and the ubiquitous situating of women from vastly different historical periods, conflicts, and cultural/political situations as the dupes of conniving men. In addition to lacking a guiding thesis, the research relies on secondary sources and interviews with security and military “experts” in the United States, whose at-times simplistic analyses are presented at face value.

*Blossoms on the Olive Tree* is Janet M. Powers’s contribution to feminist-oriented peace studies scholarship on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Powers’s “journey of awareness” began in 2002, when she visited Israel and the Occupied West Bank, so she is a relative novice on the conflict. Nevertheless, the book is well done in comparison to others in the women peace-builders across national/ethnic divisions genre. *Blossoms* avoids the pitfall of falsely equalizing the occupier and the occupied, a problem that marks a significant proportion of work in the same genre. The women interviewed, whether Israeli or Palestinian, are anti-occupation, antimilitarization, and in some of the Jewish women’s cases, anti-Zionist or at least ambivalent. Powers is interested in the values women share as mothers,
wives, grandmothers, and daughters, an orientation which often problem-
atically places men of the two groups into undifferentiated categories. The
book was confusing in its organization and logic. The first three chapters,
for example, address how women’s organizations on both sides of the
1949 Green Line have worked to bridge the racial, ideological, and power
divides between people in the Occupied Territories and Israel, and Jewish
and Palestinian women in Israel (“Ruth’s Story” and “Nazmiah’s Story”) who
have individually worked to bridge racial and political divides. Other
parts of the book are organized in a comparative geographic manner, with
individual women seemingly chosen because they were available to the
author to illustrate life in a particular place through photographs and first
person narrative. Consistent with such an organizational framework, Parts
II and III include chapters addressing, respectively, the history and gender
politics of a kibbutz and description of life in Palestinian refugee camps;
a discussion and comparison of living in West and East Jerusalem; life in
Ramallah and Tel Aviv; life in the cities of Bethlehem, Haifa, and Hebron;
women in the Israeli Knesset; Palestinian women’s organizations in the West
Bank and their political participation activities; and the obstacles women
in Israel and the Palestinian Territories face in running for political office
and participating in the “peace process.”

The Line by Cynthia Cockburn is a rich and scholarly study based on
her participant-observation with the indigenous Cypriot women’s organiza-
tion, Hands Across the Divide (HAD). Rather than working within a reified
“bi-communal” tradition, HAD developed a unitary social movement to
challenge the 1974 partition and the attendant exclusionary nationalisms
that have dominated Cypriot politics. Cockburn treats history seriously,
demonstrating the relevance of British colonialism and Greek, Turkish, and
U.S. maneuvers to the partition and the contemporary realities of Cyprus.
The Line also shows the degree to which these states and others were and
continue to be driven by their geopolitical interests, for example, during the
Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union, and currently
in debates about Cypriot and Turkish accession into the European Union.
In these circumstances, the well-being of Cypriots has been a secondary,
if not tertiary, consideration. Cockburn also addresses the impact of the
anticommunist and fascist nationalist movements that at times dominated
“pro-Greek” politics on the island. On both sides of the partition, Cockburn
discusses the mechanisms of women’s existence at the “political margins”
of nationalist and governing structures in a context where patriarchal ori-
tenations have been strong. The Line is particularly valuable as a teaching
tool in how it addresses, theoretically and empirically, the co-articulations
of ethnicities, nationalisms, sexualities, genders, and classes in Cyprus,
where different economic and political systems predominate in North and
South. The final chapter includes discussion and interviews with Filipina, Thai, and Sri Lankan migrant workers, and addresses the resulting race/class/gender tensions in southern Cyprus, which is more integrated into the international neoliberal economy.

*Militarized Modernity and Gendered Citizenship in South Korea* by Seung-sook Moon is similarly concerned with the long-term consequences of a partition line, this one imposed by the United States and the Soviet Union to divide the Korean peninsula in 1945 following defeat of the Japanese in World War II. After the war, South Korea became a crucial frontline state in the U.S. Cold War with the Soviet Union, and the South Korean state and military were strong U.S. allies and even at times proxies for U.S. geopolitical interests. “Militarized modernity” was marked by a strong nationalist military based on male conscription, worker-exploitive industrialization, and the permeation of militarization in all South Korean social institutions. Both militarization and industrialization were facilitated by the policies and practices of previous Japanese colonization, which had imposed military, surveillance, and industrialization infrastructures and ideologies that were to large degrees adopted by elites (many of whom had served in various capacities under the Japanese) of the new state. Industrialization was seen by the South Korean state as crucial to combating poverty, which was understood to facilitate communism. Building on recent scholarship of plural modernities, Moon argues that articulation of South Korean national identity as anticommunist and the extensive state violence to destroy perceived enemies within were reinforced by the 1950–53 Korean War. Such violence was normalized until 1979–80, when the state responded to a local uprising against a military coup (supported by the U.S. government) with the Kwangju massacre. Moon argues that in the 1980s anticommunism was slowly delinked from democracy for many South Koreans, and this encouraged skepticism toward anticommunism as the basis for state repression, control, and surveillance. Part of militarized modernity was constructing Korean men and women as “dutiful” gendered nationals who were willing to forego “rights” for the nation. Young men were assigned to power the military through conscription, and male veterans powered the industrializing economy as “skilled” laborers who provided for the family. Indeed, by state law military service was a necessary precursor for any kind of male employment in South Korea. Intensified extraction of surplus value led to significant resistance from male workers in the 1970s. Moreover, as dramatic economic growth occurred, there was more resistance to male conscription. Since many jobs required military service, women could not apply for them and even when they could, veterans were better paid and rose through the ranks more quickly as a result of a military extra points system that was abolished in 1999 in response to women’s movement
demands and a democratizing legal system. Militarized modernity made women the targets of “family planning” (often coercive, permanent, and conducted on large scales beginning in the 1970s) and “rational” household management that stretched limited food resources in particular and insisted that “housewives” do their own housework rather than hire poorer domestic workers (since they were needed for other industries). While single women worked in gender-segregated and low-paid fields or went to college, they were excluded from vocational training programs and heavy and chemical industries in the 1970s and 1980s. From the mid-1980s, the emergence of service industries and the mobilization especially of single women for work in the so-called “light manufacturing” sector of the textile and electronics industries saw their explosion in the labor force (at half of men’s wages, on average). The democratic citizenship movements and subjectivities that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s were inflected by the gendered paths of state subordination and subjectification that were operative previously. Women’s movements were more cross-class and autonomous than men’s because women focused on gaining equal employment opportunities and improving their labor conditions. If college-educated, men emerged as citizen-subjects through citizen organizations of intellectuals and artists, while higher status working-class men developed “democratic labor unions.” Rather than focusing on “duties,” these movements have focused on such “rights” as peace, freedom, and unification and challenged anticommunism and militarization. In the 1990s, as a consequence, South Korean rulers focused on social development rather than militarized modernity, with attention to establishing a social welfare safety net that includes pensions, social security, health insurance, and a minimum wage. While women entered the South Korean military in the 1990s, this has not challenged the masculinized hierarchies inherent in the system. Nor has there been widespread resistance to male military conscription, although better-off men continue to have more avenues for avoiding the harshest types of military service. My students and I learned much from this idea-crammed book, although I would have preferred more editing in some highly detailed areas of the book, and fuller use and integration of individual narrative to better capture how different periods were experienced, felt, and analyzed by variously situated South Koreans.