

MOTHERS IN WAR: “RESPONSIBLE MOTHERING,” CHILDREN, AND THE PREVENTION OF VIOLENCE IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY WAR

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ABSTRACT

The key concern of this article is to explore how the history of twentieth-century violence forces us to reflect on how we interpret the acts of those who find themselves attempting to *prevent* violence, as mothers have done in relation to their children, in the context of violence and atrocity. A focus on mothers and maternity redirects our analysis to gendered aspects of a history of violence and war that do not concentrate solely on bodily violent acts or physical inflictions upon women—crucial as these remain to histories of violence—but shifts the attention to examining women and violence within another aspect: that of women as active agents negotiating violent contexts. It builds on the considerable scholarship that argues that mothers in war have invariably been represented only as victims or spectators in war, and yet they have also demonstrated agency both individually and collectively. This is significant because to ignore this dimension of scholarly endeavor misses an opportunity to write women into histories of violence in ways that complicate their role in war and make them central to the story. To marginalize mothers in the broader canvas of war and violence, as scholarship often does, is also to narrow our focus of understandings of agency and the negotiation of violence itself. I explore these wider questions by focusing on the cataclysmic events of war, in the first instance in the context of a total war in the early twentieth century, the First World War, and in the second—the Greek Civil War—a civil war that took place in mid-century. Although these are vastly different conflicts, they both illuminate the decisions of mothers to attempt to prevent further violence in war, especially in relation to their children, and to highlight the contested notion of “responsible motherhood” in war.

Keywords: responsible motherhood, agency, violence, gender, Greek Civil War, First World War

My chief concern in this article is to explore the question: in what way does the history of twentieth-century violence force us to reflect on how we interpret the acts of those who find themselves attempting to *prevent* violence, as mothers have done in relation to their children, in the context of violence and atrocity?

Interpreting the acts of those in the past raises centuries-old questions—as old as the discipline of history itself. Leopold von Ranke proposed that historians should document only what actually happened and resist judging the past. E. H. Carr dismissed such views as naïve and misguided, pointing out that historians select their facts. History was interpretive, and not only a practice involving “mere chronicle.” The French historians of the Annales School looked upon the practice of history in interdisciplinary ways, drawing from other fields, looking



at total history, change over time, and drawing on Marxist theory of history to develop their own historical interpretations. The linguistic turn and challenges from feminism and postmodernism in recent times have further raised and debated questions about historical truth, the use of evidence, and perhaps more directly for our purpose, the place of debates about good and evil in historical writing. It is not my intention here to launch into such debates, nor into the themes that most commonly amplify these issues: the Holocaust, postmodernism, and historical truth.¹

Fundamental as such debates are to histories of violence, my focus is instead on the place of historical actors taking action to *prevent* violence. This article is first of all concerned to examine those who argued, in the context of war, that they were acting against violence and attempted to do something to prevent it through their actions. This is at least how they saw it, because arguably their actions could be interpreted as creating more violence and atrocity. Second, and related to this point, I consider how we can integrate these actions within a history of violence and why it is important to do so.

I explore these wider questions by focusing on the cataclysmic events of war, in the first instance in the context of a total war in the early twentieth century, the First World War, and in the second—the Greek Civil War—a civil war in mid-century. Although these are vastly different conflicts, they both involve the decisions of mothers in particular and the appeal to and by mothers to prevent further violence in war, especially in relation to their children. All wars and conflicts throughout the twentieth century across many countries and cultures have highlighted the dilemma of “responsible” mothering in wartime and how the meaning of this category is highly contested.² Both the examples I draw on for this article concentrate on the theme of the specific role of mothers in wartime, the issue of responsible mothering in the violence of war and the way they saw their moral and ethical responsibility *as mothers* in wartime. I have selected these examples because, although these events have drawn attention from historians, they have not been framed through the history of preventing violence and within the framework of examining the historically contingent notion of “responsible mothering” in war.

More broadly, a focus on mothers and maternity redirects our analysis to gendered aspects of a history of violence and war that do not concentrate solely

1. For an excellent summary of these debates, see Ann Curthoys and John Docker, *Is History Fiction?* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2006).

2. See *Motherhood and War: International Perspectives*, ed. Dana Cooper and Claire Phelan (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); M. Cinta Ramblado Minero, “Locks of Hair/Locks of Shame? Women, Dissidence, and Punishment during Francisco Franco’s Dictatorship,” in *Memory and Cultural History of the Spanish Civil War: Realms of Oblivion*, ed. Aurora G. Morcillo (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 405; Maya Eichler, *Militarizing Men: Gender, Conscription, and War in Post-Soviet Russia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), chap. 4; *Mothers under Fire: Mothering in Conflict Areas*, ed. Tatjana Takševa and Arlene Sgoutas (Bradford, ON: Demeter Press, 2015); Federica K. Clementi, *Holocaust Mothers and Daughters: Family, History, and Trauma* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2013); Hester Vaizey, *Surviving Hitler’s War: Family Life in Germany, 1939–48* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Lisa M. Budreau, *Bodies of War: World War I and the Politics of Commemoration in America, 1919–1933* (New York: New York University Press, 2010).



on bodily violent acts or physical inflictions upon women—crucial as these remain to histories of violence³—but shifts the attention to examining women and violence within another aspect: as active agents negotiating violent contexts. It builds on the considerable scholarship that argues that mothers in war have invariably been represented only as victims or spectators in war, and yet they have also demonstrated agency both individually and collectively. This is significant because to ignore this dimension of scholarly endeavor misses an opportunity to write women into histories of violence in ways that complicate their role in war and make them central to the story. To marginalize mothers in the broader canvas of war and violence, as scholarship often does, is also to narrow our focus of understandings of agency and the complexity and challenges of the negotiation of violence itself.⁴

A consideration of the role of mothers in war crucially turns our historical focus away from leaders, state actions, and political regimes and identifies the impact of violence not only on wider communities and societies, but also on the family. The experience of violence within the family is fundamental to broader histories of violence. Scholarship that considers the experience of family and violent upheavals throughout the twentieth century points to the actions and impact of violence at the most personal and intimate level, which invariably involved mothers and their children. Although feminist scholars have examined these dimensions, they have not always featured in histories of violence or understandings of how violence is understood, constructed, and examined.⁵

The first example I draw on relates to the First World War and to the extraordinary conscription campaigns conducted in Australia in 1916 and 1917. Australia was highly unusual in that it did not move to institute conscription for military service at the outbreak of war, and was one of the few countries in the British Empire to rely entirely on a volunteer army. This immediately raised moral and ethical questions about men volunteering to go to war. These campaigns intensified the spotlight on the key role of mothers in sending their sons to war. They became the focus of attention of anti- and pro-conscription campaigners regarding their ethical responsibilities *as mothers*. Mothers who argued on both sides of the debate believed they were arguing *against* violence and so insisted they were *preventing* more slaughter, death, and carnage of their men.

The second example I consider relates to the decisions of some mothers during the Greek Civil War, which took place from 1946–1949, whether to send their children out of war zones in times of violent warfare. Many mothers wrestled with what was the right decision to make in this context. The dilemma that confronted some mothers was whether to keep their young children close and with

3. For recent important work in this area, see *Gender Violence in Peace and War: States of Complicity*, ed. Victoria Sanford, Katerina Stefatos, and Cecilia M. Salvi (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2016); Robin Chandler, *Women, War and Violence: Personal Perspectives and Global Activism* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

4. Tatjana Takševa and Arlene Sgoutas, “How Conflict Shapes Motherhood and Motherwork,” in Takševa and Sgoutas, eds., *Mothers under Fire*, 2-3.

5. For a discussion of violence, family, and war throughout the twentieth century, see, for example, Paul Ginsborg, *Family Politics: Domestic Life, Devastation and Survival, 1900–1950* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 100-102, 385-389, 428-434.



them, and risk death, or to hand them over to Communist forces who took them into Eastern Bloc countries into an unknown, but arguably safer future.

That the choices mothers often made were also deeply informed by political persuasion and the allegiances of mothers to particular ideologies and causes is central to these considerations. I am suggesting that although this is crucial to understanding the decisions women made, my focus is to reposition these choices within the context of the history of violence and by so doing consider these instances as historical examples of efforts to prevent violence within the paradigm of the contested category of the “responsible mother.”

My argument within the context of these two examples is that when discussing historical acts to prevent violence, offering a moral or ethical history does not mean necessarily taking sides or offering a judgment of the rightness or wrongness of such acts. As I argue, an ethical history in this context involves attempting to understand the *agency* exercised by the historical actors in the violent circumstances that confronted them, and the decisions women made within the limited choices available to them.

THE FIRST WORLD WAR AND CONSCRIPTION

The connection among violence, gender, and war has been an enduring theme in studies of the First World War.⁶ Although the actions of mothers in wartime to prevent violence have not been a key consideration in this vast body of scholarship, discussions of violence and gender more broadly have been a major topic pursued by scholars. One aspect of the history of women, violence, and war has focused on the increasing depiction of violence to women during the Great War. As Nicoletta Gullace has argued, the representation of an international crisis in terms of a threat to the family and the social order did not begin during the Great War. But between 1914 and 1918, images of the violation and violence toward women, real and symbolic, assumed heightened international significance as the British government and the Australian as well attempted to present the war in terms of crimes against women and atrocity to the family. In a range of sources, graphic images of violence against women and children permeated British public discourse. Much of this was represented in sensationalist propaganda tracts that described in graphic detail mutilations, death of children, rape, and German soldiers accused of cutting off the feet, hands, or breasts of their victims. Violent accounts of atrocities by the enemy are clearly as old as warfare itself, notes Gullace, yet the First World War witnessed, she observes, “the dissemination of

6. See *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars*, ed. Margaret Higonnet, Jane Jenson, Sonya Michel, and Margaret Collins Weitz (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987); Nicole Ann Dombrowski, *Women and War in the Twentieth Century: Enlisted with or without Consent* (New York: Routledge, 1999); Jay Winter, *Cambridge History of the First World War*, volume 3: *Civil Society* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Susan B. Grayzel, *At Home and under Fire: Air Raids and Culture in Britain from the Great War to the Blitz* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Margaret H. Darrow, *French Women and the First World War: War Stories of the Home Front* (London: Bloomsbury, 2000).



these images on an unprecedented scale, as well as the conscious use of gendered violence to justify military, foreign, and domestic policy.”⁷

Gullace argues that representation of German atrocities in this way provided British propagandists with powerful images that could be mobilized to support a version of international law. She states that a focus on the brutalization of women and children domesticated the meaning of British foreign policy and privileged a set of familial and sexual messages to uphold militarism. Importantly, “the articulation of Britain’s foreign-policy goals around the issues of domestic safety, the sanctity of the family, and the inviolability of a woman’s body considerably complicated the task of securing public acceptance of certain methods of waging war.”⁸ In the same way that appeals to violent domestic images began to be used to convey international law and indeed support for the war—to combat such violence—so too was violence of war used as a way to present the antiwar case—and the prevention of violence—to the wider public.

I begin this discussion of mothers and their perceived responsibilities in war with this focus on violence and propaganda, for the precise argument that was directed toward mothers during the conscription campaigns focused on their role in *averting* the violence as depicted in the often violent propaganda generated during the war. This was no more evident than in the campaigns launched in 1916 and 1917 in Australia. The issue of conscription arose because of a decline in voluntary enlistments. The rate of enlistment was initially high, with 52,000 men enlisting in 1914. This rose to 166,000 in 1915, but then declined sharply to 45,000 in 1917.⁹ With increasing casualties and decreasing voluntary enrollments, Prime Minister W. M. Hughes saw the solution in introducing conscription. He put the question to a public referendum. The first, in October 1916, resulted in a vote narrowly against the introduction of conscription. Hughes took the referendum to the people for a second time, in November 1917, but was defeated again, this time with a larger margin.¹⁰ At the very center of this fierce campaign was the question of the responsibility of mothers to send or not to send their sons to war, and thus those who opposed and those who supported conscription both argued that mothers had a responsibility in preventing more violence. Hughes himself bitterly cited “the sentimental vote of the women” as one of the reasons for the defeat of the referendum.¹¹

7. Nicoletta F. Gullace, “Sexual Violence and Family Honour: British Propaganda and International Law during the First World War,” *American Historical Review* 102, no. 3 (1997), 715.

8. *Ibid.*, 716.

9. Stuart Macintyre, *A Concise History of Australia* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 160.

10. *Ibid.*, 162.

11. Quoted in L. F. Fitzhardinge, *The Little Digger, 1914–1953, William Morris Hughes: A Political Biography* (London, Angus and Robertson, 1979), II, 306. For a broad discussion of the conscription referendum, see K. S. Inglis, “Conscription in Peace and War, 1911–1945,” in *Conscription in Australia*, ed. Roy Forward and Bob Reece (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1968), 22–65; Robin Archer, “Labour and Liberty: The Origins of the Conscription Referendum,” in *The Conscription Conflict and the Great War*, ed. Robin Archer, Joy Damousi, Murray Goot, and Sean Scalmer (Melbourne: Monash Publishing, 2016), 37–66; and Joan Beaumont, *Broken Nation: Australians in the Great War* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2013).



Women were seen to play a key role in the debate for many reasons. Those who opposed conscription argued along essentialist lines that women's nurturing qualities were incompatible with the carnage of war, and should be mobilized against mass human destruction. The anti-conscription activist Jennie Scott Griffiths wrote that women were "guardians of the life of the nation and must want peace rather than war." War forced women to endure "unspeakable agony"—of waiting, loss, and bereavement. It imposed on men more immediate and tangible terrors, she insisted—crippling and slaying them—arming them with murderous weaponry, making them act like beasts and devils, until "life was hell itself." As life-producers, the anti-war argument went, mothers must neither urge their own sons, nor compel other mothers' sons, to fight and to kill.¹²

Those who supported conscription believed it was a matter of an enforced equality of sacrifice, where conscription would lessen the casualty rate by providing relief for those already at the front, and hasten the end of the war itself. They too saw their actions as *preventing* more violence. This line of argument was advanced especially by military doctors, who appealed to mothers specifically to do their duty to avert further death because it was only by increased numbers that wounded men could be saved at the front and manpower replenished. In an open letter to mothers in October 1916 asking whether a woman could "send another woman's son to his death?" the medical profession argued that "nothing lessens the war wastage of life so surely as sufficiency of men."¹³

Propaganda on both sides directly confronted mothers and their moral obligations to prevent violence as *responsible* mothers. *The Blood Vote*, an antiwar and anticonscription pamphlet, became an iconic piece of propaganda conveying this message. A poem in the pamphlet, written by the antiwar socialist W. R. Winspear, who had held anticonscription views before the war, became the emblem of the anticonscription campaign. It eloquently captures the moral dilemma of a mother sending a man to his violent death by voting for conscription and powerfully confronts the mother who would do such a thing. In a poetic and lyric style reminiscent of William Blake, it goes:

Why is your face so white, Mother?
 Why do you choke for breath?
 O I have dreamt in the night my son
 That I doomed a man to death
 Why do you hide your hand, Mother?
 And crouch above it in dread?
 It beareth a dreadful brand my son,
 With the dead man's blood 'tis red
 I hear his widow cry in the night
 I hear his children weep
 And always within my sight
 O God!
 The dead man's blood doth leap
 They put a dagger into my grasp
 It seemed but a pencil then

12. *Daily Standard* (Brisbane), February 28, 1917, 3.

13. *Advertiser* (Adelaide), October 14, 1916, 18.



I did not know it was a fiend a gasp
 For the priceless blood of men
 They gave me the ballot paper
 The grim death warrant of doom
 And I smugly sentenced the man to death
 In that dreadful little room
 I put it inside the Box of Blood
 Nor thought of men I'd slain
 Till at midnight came like a whelming flood
 God's word—and the Brand of Cain
 O little son! O my little son!
 Pray God for your Mother's soul
 That the scarlet stain may be white again
 In God's great Judgment Roll

How could a mother condemn a man to death, it asks? What mother would perform such a horrifying act? In the verse, the mother appeals to her own son for forgiveness and redemption from her own act of violence by voting for conscription. In another antiwar propaganda piece, the famous antiwar song, "I Didn't Raise My Son to Be a Soldier," the tone is more sentimental, but again appeals to mothers to prevent violence, in the way mothers alone can:

I didn't raise my son to be a soldier
 I brought him up to be my pride and joy,
 Who dares to put a musket on his shoulder,
 To kill some other mother's darling boy?
 The nations ought to arbitrate their quarrels –
 It's time to put the sword and gun away:
 There'd be no war today,
 If mothers all would say –
 "I didn't raise my son to be a soldier"

In exercising this agency, the lyrics powerfully suggest, mothers could stop violence and indeed war itself, an enduring message from those on the left and in feminist and pacifist circles. At one of the countless rallies against the war, the feminist and socialist Adele Pankhurst urged women to give the matter consideration and exercise their agency as mothers: "For the sake of the boys who had gone and were going to war, for the love of country, and who would die for their mothers' sake, let the mothers be up and doing. Let the mothers protect their sons, as the sons would protect their mothers. Let them be prepared to do anything to bring this awful war to an end. They could do it easily if women would only stand together till the cause of all wars disappeared. . . ."14

This message aimed to counter the government view that sending men to the war was not an act of perpetrating violence, but in fact constituted heroism of the highest order. During the conscription campaigns, a mother's sacrifice was seen as synonymous with heightened citizenship and patriotism.¹⁵ Those on the

14. *Daily Standard*, November 15, 1915.

15. Joy Damousi, *The Labor of Loss: Mourning, Memory and Wartime Bereavement in Australia* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 26-45.



conservative side argued that it was incomprehensible that women should stop men from volunteering to assist those who had already gone to the front. These issues did not of course operate only at the level of abstraction. The impact of the violence of war inflicted on families and mothers in particular was profound. It represented a cruel and enduring loss by those such as mothers who continued to live with the shadow cast by war. Their journey of mourning is one of the most significant legacies in our study of the histories of violence. Even for mothers who believed the sacrifices should be made, the thought of the death of their sons was unthinkable and deeply distressing.

It is somewhat ironic that while both sides argued that they were preventing more violence, the conscription campaigns produced the most violent public meetings, especially between women. Rowdy and boisterous meetings were common during the campaign—as the debate gained momentum, so too did the numbers who gathered and participated in it. Indeed, the home front itself became the source of public violence and brawls as soldiers disrupted public meetings by pacifists and anticonscriptionists. Women in particular were the subject of physical attack and verbal abuse. In 1916, at one such meeting on the Yarra Bank in Melbourne, female activists were accused of being “dressed up as women . . . parasites and crawlers,” and, suggesting rape, one soldier was reported as saying “if the men here did to the women what Germans have done to Belgian women I would stand by and watch them do it with pleasure . . . the soldiers cheered and not one of them made the slightest effort to protect the women from insult.”¹⁶

Both pro- and anti-conscription forces appealed to mothers to prevent more death and violence: on the one hand, by refusing to send men, and on the other, by sending them to defeat the enemy and assist those men already at the front. How do we consider the dilemma facing mothers—uniquely in Australia—who could choose not to send their sons to battle—either through voting no, or by preventing them from enlisting? And what do we say about women who did send their sons to war despite the increasing carnage and slaughter that became relentless? Women exercised their agency in making their choice for what they believed best prevented and contributed to ending war and the violence it unleashed.

Looking at agency is one way of examining the choices women made: another is to examine emotions in the context of averting violence. The moral complexity involved in the decision by mothers whether to send men to war was further heightened by the aesthetic and artistic power of propaganda in works such as *The Blood Vote* and “I Didn’t Raise My Son to Be a Soldier,” which aroused deeply emotional responses on both sides of the debate.

Mothers’ grief and trauma at losing their sons, for instance, came to the surface from both sides, which led to violent encounters between women. In one such meeting in Brisbane in July 1917, a group of conservative women—called by one witness “fighting tigresses”¹⁷—physically attacked women pacifists, such as one of the leading activists against war, the secretary of the Queensland Women’s Peace Army, Margaret Thorp. In press reports of this incident, women physically

16. Joy Damousi, “Socialist Women and Gendered Space: Anti-Conscription and Anti-War Campaigns,” *Labour History*, no. 60 (May, 1991), 1-15.

17. *Daily Standard*, July 19, 1917, 8.



attacked one another by pulling hair, biting and scratching, and kicking. The *Daily Standard* headline of the report was “Wild Women” and described how Thorp had been attacked in a “vicious and cowardly manner.”¹⁸ Thorp was pulled from the rostrum, “punched and scratched, thrown off the platform, rolled on the floor, kicked, punched, and scratched again, and at last was carried, pushed, or thrown out of the doorway.”¹⁹ Among the women leading the violence were several who had lost sons and relatives in the war, as the members of the Women’s Compulsory Service Petition League (WCSPL) were “mourning the loss of some dear one who has either gone down in the conflict or will only come to them maimed or impaired to face again the struggle of ordinary life.”²⁰ According to the secretary of the WCSPL, Josry Reid, many of these men would have been alive had they been “properly supported,” meaning more men being sent to the front. They argued for equality of sacrifice, for all men to serve.²¹ Implicit in their anger was that their violent deaths could have been averted had more reinforcements been made available. Most of the women at the meeting, observed the *Daily Mail*, “have had sons or brothers killed in war” and so were not “in the mood to brook contradiction.”²² Their fury at women arguing against conscription undermined their sacrifice in giving their sons. The incident inspired this report of a conversation among women:

Mr. Airey writes:— Here are a few things overheard at the women’s conscription meeting on Wednesday evening —

Mrs. A.: “Just to think of a young thing of 16 at our last meeting telling us she wanted ‘Peace at any Price.’ And me with my boy killed last week in France.”

A Voice: “Seems to me she has the peace and you poor mothers pay the price” . . .

Mrs. D.: “I have three boys there. At least, I had but one was lost, at Bullecourt. It’s time those others did a bit.”

Mrs. E. (who mounted the platform in deep mourning) : “I’ve got a telegram today to say my boy was killed last week!” The meeting rose in respect to the dead boy’s memory.²³

Grief at war loss was transformed into aggression, fury, and violence. The moral complexity of the debate, where some mothers argued for equality of sacrifice to prevent further deaths, and the emotional intensity coalesced here around grief that drove violent behavior and verbal and physical attacks by women who argued for conscription against those who argued against it.²⁴ One speaker in support of conscription believed, referring to the Women’s Peace Army, “any woman who asked for peace until Germany was beaten, was not fit to be called a woman.”²⁵ For anticonscriptionists, the issues at the heart of this public outburst

18. *Daily Standard*, July 10, 1917, 5

19. *Ibid.*, 6.

20. *Daily Mail*, July 11, 1917, 4.

21. *Ibid.*

22. *Daily Mail*, July 20, 1917, 4.

23. *Daily Mail*, July 21, 1917, 6.

24. Raymond Evans, “‘All the Passion of our Womanhood’: Margaret Thorp and the Battle of the Brisbane School of Arts,” in *Gender and War: Australians at War in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Joy Damousi and Marilyn Lake (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 248.

25. *Daily Mail*, July 26, 1917, 5.



were freedom of speech and a disgraceful display of physical violence, intolerance, and irrationalism.²⁶

On the broader discussion of sending men to war, motherhood and “responsible mothering” was thus highly contested—sending or not sending sons to death to prevent more violence—and it paradoxically generated violence between women of opposing sides. On both sides women exercised their agency in taking action in an effort to *prevent* more violence by promoting their respective cases for the no and yes sides for conscription. This perspective positions women and mothers as active participants in matters of life and death in narratives of war around the notion of the “responsible” mother. In the Australian context, these debates were conducted on the home front, outside of the bloody battle-lines of the conflict in Europe, but this did not diminish the intensity, urgency, and desperation of those mothers engaged in the debate about whether to send their sons to what increasingly and very rapidly became a mass slaughter abroad in the killing fields of Europe. These themes emerge in the next example I wish to draw on—that of mothers attempting to save their young children in another context of war—that of the Greek Civil War.

GREEK CIVIL WAR AND MOTHERS

In 1948, during the height of the Greek Civil War, Communist forces fighting the Greek army evacuated 28,000 children in the northern region of Greece. They were taken to Poland, Albania, Bulgaria, Rumania, Yugoslavia, and Czechoslovakia in a mass exodus. The Greek government also orchestrated its own evacuation of children from the war zones, and the Greek Queen Frederica led the campaign to prevent children from being carried by Communists over the borders of northern Greece.²⁷

This episode in modern Greek history has captured the attention of historians who have sought to understand these remarkable events and to grapple with consequences that have resonated through subsequent generations. The *paidomazoma*—the removal of children, as it has been termed—has engendered wide scholarship and much controversy, especially regarding whether these children were abducted by Communist forces against their will, or were voluntarily given up by their parents to escape the horror and destruction of war. Coming at a time when the lines of Cold War allegiances were hardening, the case of the fate of these children was vehemently debated at the United Nations during the 1940s as the Greek government sought assistance and intervention from the international community to prevent what it described as Communist forces abducting children.²⁸

26. *Daily Mail*, July 11, 1917, 4.

27. Lars Bærentzen, “‘The Paidomazoma’ and the Queen’s Camps,” in *Studies in the History of the Greek Civil War 1945–1949*, ed. Lars Bærentzen, John O. Iatrides, and Ole L. Smith (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 1987), 127; Milan Ristovic, *A Long Journey Home: Greek Refugee Children in Yugoslavia, 1948–1960* (Thessaloniki: Institute for Balkan Studies, 2000), 11.

28. For a full account of the role of the United Nations, see Amikam Nachmani, *International Intervention in the Greek Civil War: The United Nations Special Committee on the Balkans, 1947–1952* (New York: Praeger, 1990); Bærentzen, “The ‘Paidomazoma’ and the Queen’s Camps,”



In 1947 the issue attracted major international attention that was to continue as Cold War politics was consolidated amid accusations and counter-accusations of child abductions. The Greek government condemned the Democratic Army of Greece for removing children by force and then indoctrinating them in neighboring communist countries to turn against their country and their parents. The Democratic Army accused the Greek government of the same treachery: of abducting children from villages that were supportive of Communism and then brainwashing them with pro-Royalist propaganda. By February 1948, the UN committee on the Balkans (UNSCOB) had sent representatives into the region to ascertain what happened. This was comprised of six observation groups, each composed of four observers and auxiliary personnel. The report concluded that the defining factor as to whether the children were handed over was their support for Communism and whether they were Slavic-language-speaking. The UNSCOB report of August 1949 stressed that in general, those in Slavic-language-speaking areas willingly (although reluctantly) allowed their children to be evacuated, while those in Greek-speaking villages did not. There is no doubt that in Greek villages there were efforts to convince mothers to hand over their children. A key aspect of this episode that deserves attention is the need for a sharper focus on the experience of mothers specifically deciding whether to relinquish their children in times of war.²⁹

This powerful episode, when placed within the context of the history of violence generally and efforts to prevent violence by mothers more specifically, can illuminate several issues. The point I wish to highlight is that mothers attempted to exercise some agency by either actively resisting or giving up their children. Whether they relinquished their children, or resisted efforts to do so, this act was the only power they could exert in a desperate situation. Framing the dilemma of mothers relinquishing their children in wartime within the history of violence, this perspective adds a further dimension to positioning mothers' actions in the center of violent conflict.³⁰ In doing so, I also extend the relatively uncomplicated representation of the decisions by mothers as reported by the United Nations, which argues that as far as could be ascertained, this decision was made on political grounds *alone*. By considering the limited agency of mothers in determining the fate of their children, I wish to add a further dimension in addition to political allegiance: that which is focused on understandings of "responsible" motherhood, a powerful theme in the memories and retelling by mothers involved in this event.

A study of the *paidomazoma* provides an opportunity to explore a unique relationship between violence and war, *averting* violence, and the traumatic dilemmas that the peculiarities of the Greek Civil War raised for mothers. Developing this

127-157; Herbert V. Evatt, *The Task of Nations* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1949); Evan Luard, *A History of the United Nations*, volume 1: *The Years of Western Domination, 1945-1955* (Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan, 1989), 121-129.

29. This theme has been dramatized in Nicholas Gage, *Eleni* (New York: Random House, 1983), but scholarly treatment of the issue awaits further examination.

30. I have discussed this issue in terms of memory and migration, but position it here within the context of a history of violence. See Joy Damousi, *Memory and Migration in the Shadow of War: Australia's Greek Immigrants after World War II and the Greek Civil War* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 141-144, 173-178.



perspective within studies of violence and civil war adds a particular gendered aspect of civil war that explores the impact on mothers and children. Accounts of violence and the Greek Civil War rightly argue that central to the brutal and relentless violence between Greeks during the course of this war was also a personal and local dispute or conflict that was resolved through violence. As Stathis Kalyvas argues, this resulted in heightened and brutal physical violence and the targeted slaughter of families, including children.³¹ Without detracting from this key point, what follows takes the familiar story of the *paidomazoma* and argues that efforts to prevent violence against children during this war was also a part of its history of violence. This aspect has not been included in discussions of the macro level and micro level of the violence in this civil war.³²

The dramatic events of 1940–1949 in Greece form the brutal and bloody backdrop to this example, and it is to these events I will very briefly now turn. Greece entered the Second World War when it was invaded by fascist Italy in 1940; it was then defeated by Germany in 1941. What followed was an armistice—or capitulation—as the German army occupied Athens and the first collaborationist government of occupied Greece was formed. Greece was then divided among the Axis powers: the Germans, who occupied central Macedonia, including Thessaloniki; the Bulgarians, who controlled Eastern Macedonia; while the rest of Greece—including the Peloponnese—remained under Italian occupation. It was under these circumstances that the Greek Communist Party emerged with considerable strength and support. The struggle for survival during the wartime occupation of Greece was intense, as were the five years of uninterrupted civil war that followed it. This period has been described as “probably the deadliest period in modern Greek history.”³³

The experiences of war were compounded by the protracted civil war that took place simultaneously with, and then following, the Second World War. Two forms of civil conflict emerged at this time: the first between the collaborators (usually on the right) and resisters (on the left); the second from 1942, between the resisters themselves. Tensions between the collaborators and the resisters escalated, and when the Germans withdrew in September 1944, fighting between the two groups intensified; by 1946, violence had dramatically escalated. In the years that followed, and until 1949 when the civil war finally ended, the casualties rose dramatically and the country was in turmoil. By 1950, a strained peace set in, and it was arguably not until the collapse of the military junta in 1974 that there was genuine harmony. Estimates vary on the numbers of violent deaths

31. See Stathis N. Kalyvas, “Red Terror: Leftist Violence during the Occupation,” in *After the War Was Over: Reconstructing the Family, Nation, and the State in Greece, 1943–1960*, ed. Mark Mazower (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 142–183; Stathis N. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

32. For the concepts of macro level and micro level of violence in civil war, see Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*, 4.

33. See David Close, *The Greek Civil War, 1943–1950: Studies in Polarisation* (London: Routledge, 1993); David Close, *Origins of the Greek Civil War* (London: Longmans, 1995); Mark Mazower, *Inside Hitler’s Greece: The Experience of Occupation, 1941–1944* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993); and Andre Gerolymatos, *Red Acropolis, Black Terror: The Greek Civil War and the Origins of Soviet–American Rivalry, 1943–1949* (New York: Basic Books, 2004).



over this period, but there was an even greater loss of population caused by emigration.³⁴

At the center of the story of the *paidomazoma* is a powerful moral and ethical dilemma that emerges over and over again for those who experienced it. How could a mother ever “give up” her child? What sort of mother would ever do such a thing? How could that ever be considered to be “good mothering”? Both sides have mobilized this question of responsible maternity for their own cause. These memories were shaped by the subsequent political discussion of the events surrounding the civil war. The Communists insisted that this showed good mothering, as mothers who relinquished their children were protecting them from warfare by agreeing to have them removed from war zones. The Greek Government argued that no mother would ever relinquish her child voluntarily and cited instances where mothers were forced by Communists to sign letters allowing their children to be abducted; otherwise, they would lose members of their families, and/or have their villages burned.

The Greek government mobilized the notion of “irresponsible mothering” as a way of promoting anti-Communism during the war. The number of children removed by government authorities is often estimated as 15,000. This was undertaken largely through the efforts of Queen Frederica herself. Through the Royal Welfare Institution, established in July 1947, she aimed to transport 10,000–12,000 children. In March 1948, the intention was to evacuate 14,000 children to the South and the Peloponnese. In her memoirs, Queen Frederica represents Communist mothers as heartlessly abandoning their children for the cause. Frederica presents her cause as that of assisting mothers and saving their children.³⁵

Women’s organizations across the world were quick to frame this episode as “a mother’s pain” and demanded the prompt repatriation of the children. In May 1950, the United Nations, Economic and Social Council, Commission on the Status of Women, discussed the “problem” of the mothers whose children had not been repatriated, and insisted that efforts continue to put an end to “the agony of the Greek mothers” and that the UN find “new ways for the solution of this very important question,” in cases where the countries detaining the children had not returned them.³⁶

34. John O. Iatrides, “Greece at the Crossroads, 1944–1950,” in *Greece at the Crossroads: The Cold War and Its Legacy*, ed. John O. Iatrides and Linda Wrigley (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 1–30. The figures most commonly cited are: Greek government forces: 16,753 killed with 4,527 missing, presumed dead; Greek rebel forces: 38,000, but other estimates put this as high as 50,000; Greek civilians: 4,289 killed by Communist forces; Greeks displaced as refugees: 700,000. See Howard Jones, “A New Kind of War”: *America’s Global Strategy and the Truman Doctrine in Greece* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); Edgar Ballance, *The Greek Civil War: 1944–1949* (London: Praeger, 1966).

35. Queen Frederica of the Hellenes, *A Measure of Understanding* (London: Macmillan, 1971), 138–139.

36. United Nations, Economic and Social Council, Commission on the Status of Women, fourth session, 18 May 1950, “The Problem of Greek Mothers whose Children have not been repatriated,” Text of resolution adopted by the Commission on 17 May 1950, Repatriation of Greek children, Series Number A6530, (A6530/2), Australian Archives, Canberra.



The UN documentation based on eyewitness accounts identifies the anguish and pain experienced by mothers but does not capture the moral dilemmas they may have felt in attempting to assess what action to take under these circumstances. Although the argument has been largely accepted by scholars that these decisions were made on political lines—that children in pro-Communist villages were given up and those in Greek villages were not—a missing aspect of this is the way in which these were not simply political decisions, but also involved assumptions about “responsible” motherhood. Oral testimonies and memories of mothers are rare, scant, and fragmentary. Whatever decisions mothers arrived at, they provided mothers with some agency.

The decision to relinquish children was not simply or exclusively made on political lines, as this was an issue mothers in particular faced. Even for those who may have been supportive of the partisans, the decision whether to relinquish or keep their children was not easily made, according to some accounts. In her memoirs, Lena Duketovski recalls the torture of having to make the decision regarding her two sons, Vasil, five, and Laso, two, in the village of Trna in northern Greece. She frames her recollection of this incident in terms of the “test” and responsibilities of motherhood in war: “[The children] were taken to places where there were no bombs dropping. They did not travel with their mothers. This was a real test of motherhood. Do you love your child enough to give them up to others to care for, with only the promise that they will be safe from war?” She described the justification and rationale for her actions in the following terms: “To be a real mother, you must love your children enough to leave them in a field and trust that, by letting them leave their home that had become a theatre of war, you would be saving their little lives. You did not want to think about dangers before them. Just that they would live, even if you did not.”³⁷

For her, “real” motherhood involved relinquishing them in order to save them. But would she relinquish one son and keep another in the village? How would you decide? “A mother has no favorite,” she notes. “Which child would you choose? Which do you give up? It’s like deciding which finger to cut off. How do you decide?” In her recollections, she noted it was a profound dilemma:

Life was to deal her a situation where she had to give up her children in order to save them. Her choice was made in accordance with age. Vasil was older and, she felt, better able to make the journey. Lazo was only two and Vasil five. What a choice for a mother to make? How old is five? How brave is a five year old? How can he do without his mother? But as the villages began to be shelled, there was no place to hide from the terror, Lena felt that she had no choice. The civil war was on the way. Lena promised Vasil that he would be back soon, that he was going away. It would be only for a very short time. It would be an adventure. . . . Taking the child’s little hand, Lena could only imagine the journey her little boy would be taking. During a chilly spring evening in 1948, Lena trekked to the fields on the outskirts of the village where the children bleated like lambs for their mothers. This surreal sound could be heard from miles away. There was only heartbreak here.³⁸

37. Pandora Petrovska, *Picture on the Mantelpiece: A Biography Recounted by Sefo and Lena Duketovski to Pandora Petrovska* (Wareemba, NSW: Pollitecon Publications, 2008), 66.

38. *Ibid.*, 68-70.



For Lena, the decision did not come with ease and led to much indecision, but she was also swept up by the actions of others. She had discussed the situation with her mother-in-law over and over, who also did not know what action to take.

Are they right, will the bombs destroy everything? Is the evacuation the only way to save their little lives? What sort of mother keeps her children by her side when she knows that they will be in desperate danger? When it became clear that they could no longer procrastinate, they were swept along with the actions of other villagers. . . . It was like being swept up by a torrent, which she had no power to stop.³⁹

In contrast, other mothers refused to succumb to arguments about the need to give up their children, believing that “responsible mothering” involved keeping their children with them in war. Other mothers recall how they were not prepared to give up their children in a war zone.⁴⁰

The “responsibility” of motherhood was then highly contested in this war. Among those who remember it, the civil war created a particular understanding of motherhood that was defined by the notion of “responsible maternity.” In these accounts, the notion of “responsible” motherhood pervades the narrative. For our purposes, it provides a justification for their actions and agency in attempting to *prevent* violence to their children. It is a notion that is mobilized by both sides of the political spectrum in the war. The mothers themselves frame their recollections through this paradigm and in so doing provide not only an explanation for their actions, but also a further dimension to the dilemma confronting mothers in the midst of war.

As we reflect and engage with histories of violence, efforts to avert further violence in times of warfare are, I am suggesting, a rich part of that history. I have argued that for those who were caught up in making decisions to prevent violence, this was not always a straightforward process, such as in the cases I have presented on the contested notion of “responsible mothering” in wartime.

A focus on this theme situates women and children centrally within the story of violence and war and shows that rather than being passive observers to some of the most violent events in twentieth-century history and playing a negligible role, mothers were at the forefront of deciding matters of life and death. They were identified as having a special role to play. Whether giving their sons to fight, or rejecting calls to violence, as some saw it; whether removing children from sites of violence or staying with them, notions of the “responsible mother” came into play. How that is defined, and how that is understood in wartime is complex, for it is not simply a political but also a moral decision as well as one arising from a deeply emotional response. As Allan Megill reminds us, “It is unsurprising that the interpretation of many acts surrounding violence is laden with controversy, for conflicted historical events give rise to conflicting interpretations.”⁴¹ If we are to make any sense of the choices people made under specific violent conditions

39. *Ibid.*, 69

40. Damousi, *Memory and Migration*, 183.

41. Allan Megill, “Two Para-Historical Approaches to Atrocity,” a review essay of *Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century*, by Jonathan Glover; and *Long Shadows: Truth, Lies, and History*, by Erna Paris, *History and Theory* 41, no. 4, Theme Issue 41 (2002), 105.



such as those I have been outlining, then we need to understand the conflicting choices of mothers. On a broader canvas, opposition to violence, such as that exercised by mothers—whatever form it took—should underpin the enterprise of the history of violence. The very enterprise of writing about decisions relating to twentieth-century violence, I have been suggesting, raises questions about the centrality of mothers to the narrative of war and the decisions they exercised in attempting to *prevent* violence. This perspective centrally positions women in negotiating violence and attempting to prevent the inevitable devastation upon their children once it was unleashed.

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