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Civilians in a World at War, 1914-1918

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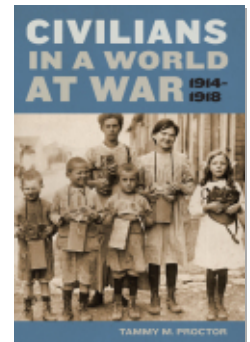
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Introduction

In war, civilians are cheap things at best.

—Ellen LaMotte, *The Backwash of War*

“I would make a good soldier,” twelve-year-old Elfriede “Piete” Kuhr confided to her war diary on August 4, 1914, in her East Prussian town of Schneidemühl.¹ That same month on the other side of the developing battle lines, ten-year-old Yves Congar was playing with his toy soldiers when the Germans marched into his home town of Sedan, France.² Across the Channel in England, a teenaged Girl Guide packed a special bag with provisions, which she tied around her waist at night in order to “be prepared” for the call to active service in the war.³ Meanwhile her fellow Girl Guides in Poland faced invasion of their country and banning of their organizations, while Russian Jewish children found themselves on train cars, deported to an unknown future. All these children were civilians in a world at war, faced with the sudden mobilization and militarization of their lives.

Like their adult counterparts, children found themselves caught up in a wartime world that was transforming before their eyes, forcing them to find a place in this transformed world. The actions that ordinary people decided to take in the face of war help frame the central question of this book: what does it mean to be a civilian?

This seemingly simple query delves into the heart of our modern notions of war, morality, heroism, and sacrifice. In recent wars, most



This French family is equipped for the dangers of industrial warfare with gas masks.
U.S. Signal Corps, National Archives and Records Administration.

notably in the United States' war in Iraq begun in 2003, the generic term "civilian" almost always refers to Iraqi civilians, living in the war zones. While technically American citizens were also civilians in this war, they are rarely referred to as such. In fact, the experiences of Iraqi civilians and American civilians are nothing alike. Showing abstract "support for our troops" has little in common with the threat of roadside bombs, rolling power outages, or the presence of armed soldiers in the streets. Even U.S. civilian contractors live removed from the Iraqi civilians, under the protection and control of the American military, yet still defined as separate from soldiers, both by their pay and by their titles.

For some, war is a present and daily reality. For others, it is a distant echo, perhaps even a vague annoyance. For yet others, war blurs the lines between civilian and military identities, putting ill-prepared citizens into uniforms and calling them soldiers while simultaneously uniforming

other personnel and naming them noncombatants. These odd juxtapositions and relocations, the disruptions of war, reshape identities fundamentally, but sometimes only temporarily. A civilian drafted into service as a soldier who is captured in his first battle and put in a prisoner-of-war camp looks little different than a civilian man of military age interned because he could be a soldier in his own country. Both have little experience of war or of killing, but their perceptions of self are somewhat different since one has actually worn a military uniform. Given the significance of military service as a symbol of masculinity in the twentieth century, even being a soldier for a day or a week sets a man apart from one who has never shed his civilian status.

Using World War I, the first modern, global war, as a lens, this book examines the different ways civilians work and function in a war situation. The years between 1914 and 1918 witnessed the invention of the modern “civilian,” the first mentions of the “home front,” and the advent of a totalizing war strategy that pitted industrial nations and their citizenries against each other. For the generation born in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, civilians’ role in warfare became both more and less central. In actual experience, civilians were crucial to maintaining modern industrialized warfare, yet rhetorically, armies defined civilians as separate from battle and in need of protection. World War I heralded a new era of warfare, which consolidated and expanded changes that had been building throughout the previous century, but it also instituted new notions of war. The 1914–1918 conflict witnessed the first aerial bombing of civilian populations, the first widespread concentration camps for the internment of enemy alien civilians, and an unprecedented use of civilian labor and resources for the war effort. Humanitarian relief programs for civilians became a common feature of modern society, while food became as significant as weaponry in the fight to win. Vast displacements of civilian populations shaped the contemporary world in countless ways, redrawing boundaries and creating or reviving lines of ethnic conflict.

Most strange in this new warfare was the split between civilian and soldier that emerged in popular understanding and came to define twentieth-century warfare. After all, what really separated an enlisted civilian male who donned a military uniform and carried a gun from a civilian

male who made guns in a war factory under military control? Both contributed to the war effort, both were subject to governmental demands and restrictions on their lives, and both defined themselves as patriots working for the war effort. One of these men lived at the “battle front” and the other at the “home front,” but nonetheless the lines between these imagined entities were not entirely clear. Civilians in the First World War were not immune from the violence of war, nor were they uninvolved in sustaining it, despite rhetoric to the contrary.

Historically, notions of what constitutes a civilian and what the civilian’s role in war should be have remained almost constantly in flux. Non-combatants have never been clearly distanced from the ravages of wars. As European armies marched off to crusades in the Holy Land, they persecuted heretics and Jews in their paths, burning buildings and humans in their zeal for violence and purification. Ancient and medieval towns suffered the pain of living under siege and saw their crops destroyed by invaders time and again. Certainly destruction of civilian lives and property was a feature of the Mongol expansion across Eurasia, and during the Thirty Years War, noncombatants suffered terribly at the hands of armies living off the land and trading atrocities. Even relatively small-scale conflicts in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries between professional armies of mercenaries involved the raiding and pillaging of homes and villages in the paths of the forces.

Despite such numerous examples of attacks on unarmed populations in time of war, the term “civilian” suggests a protected category of people who live apart from war. News reports in our world speak with outrage of the “collateral damage” inflicted on civilian lives and property, and pains are taken to distinguish between military and civilian deaths in official statistics. Clearly the word “civilian” has evolved to mean a person protected from war or an innocent victim of war. The gendered imagery of modern war is significant here. While civilians are both men and women, “civilian” assumes a particularly strong feminine connotation as it becomes a sort of shorthand for the phrase “innocent women and children.” The term “civilian man” becomes an oxymoron, as states try to mobilize all adult men for service to the state. This stance stigmatizes those needed behind the lines or those unfit for service, but it bolsters the idea that soldiers (men) protect civilians (women and children) in war. These male

soldiers live at the front, apart from civil society, while women and children live at home, apart from the war. Civilians in the First World War are central to the maintenance of a sense of moral outrage for populations at war, but that psychological role as justification for battle (“we must protect our women and children”) mandates that civilians have nothing to do with war. They must be ideological “bystanders” to the conflict, both incapable of their own defense and divorced from the battle lines themselves. Such dichotomies played well in the propaganda produced during the war, but they failed miserably in accurately capturing the multiple identities and experiences of war that both soldiers and civilians (of both sexes) faced.

This definition of a civilian as a nonmilitary person protected from war is a relatively recent one. In English usage, the term “civilian” has undergone a transformation from the early modern period to the present. The word “civilian” does not appear in codes and laws of war explicitly until after the First World War; instead the monikers used are “unarmed inhabitants, non-combatants, and the enemy or occupied population.”⁴ Popularly in the late medieval and early modern periods, the word “civilian” meant a practitioner of civil law, as opposed to canon or common law. Later, as Britain’s empire expanded, the word was used to describe nonmilitary men in India (members of the East India Company). Only in the nineteenth century do references begin to appear that suggest that a “civilian” is any nonmilitary person, and it is not until the twentieth century that this definition of a civilian as a noncombatant became common parlance. In French, the term moves from its meaning of citizen or civil law to include by the 1830s the notion that *un civil* is a nonmilitary person.

As this etymological transformation was occurring, parallel developments were affecting the meaning of militaries in European societies.⁵ Armies were professionalizing and shedding their rough image of the past—simultaneously becoming both more and less civilian. They were becoming more “civilian” in personnel as mandatory conscription led to the incorporation of nonprofessional soldiers into armed forces for short service periods. These citizen-soldiers were increasingly housed in purpose-built barracks rather than billeted with families, and the army emphasized military service as an exceptional period in a man’s life, a

short interlude of work for the nation. Military service was even used as an argument for denying full citizenship through suffrage to women because they were excluded from this service to the state.

So while ordinary male citizens lost their civilian status with conscription, the civilians who had traditionally supported armies were also purged. It was a common sight in European armies of the past to see non-combatant men selling food or driving wagons, while women guarded baggage, carried water, or sold spirits at battle fronts, and military wives were paid to cook, clean, sew, nurse, and do laundry for regiments from at least the seventeenth century to the late nineteenth century. For example, British army regulations mandated the maximum number of “official” wives allowed to accompany regiments, but many more “unofficial” women also traveled with armies in the field.⁶ In fact, the British army legitimized women’s presence “on the strength” (meaning that they were recognized by the army as part of the unit) by paying them for their work and subjecting them to military justice. As historian Holly Mayer has noted, “Women were ineligible for military service but not for service to the military.”⁷

However, as the military professionalized in Europe in the nineteenth century and began to change its image, wagoners, sutlers (vendors), and “camp followers” were increasingly pushed out of their traditional roles as the armies incorporated such labor directly into formal battalions and services. Barton Hacker describes the process in this way: “As armies became more professional and bureaucratic—they became, in fact, more exclusively military—they also became more exclusively male, as striking parallel to the contemporary masculinization of medicine. . . . By the time of the First World War the once integral place of women in Western armies had faded from memory.”⁸ Hacker astutely points out that as professional history was emerging as a field in the late nineteenth century, “civilians” had already been purged from many armies, so they were virtually invisible to the military historians chronicling the wars of the past.⁹

Part of the reason for professionalizing armies was to make them more efficient and to provide better central control. Stricter military codes emerged with more standardized regulations, and the men and women civilians who had served in various capacities were excluded. Noncombatant services increasingly fell to male army battalions created for that

purpose (e.g., Army Transport Corps or Quartermaster's Services), while medical services developed that funneled men into roles as physicians and women into nursing corps; other women's participation in army life became confined to sexual services in regulated brothels. Those women who were still hired to do domestic work for armies, such as cooking, sewing, and laundry, worked increasingly through offices charged with hiring and managing civilian contractors.¹⁰ These changes in civilian access to war were further shaped by the demands of the war machine between 1914 and 1918, which led to unprecedented needs for civilian service and labor.

Civilians also served an important rhetorical purpose in modern, industrial, total warfare. Nation-states would find it difficult to mobilize troops of noncareer soldiers (ordinary civilians) to fight in an increasingly bloody and protracted war without advertising the necessity for protection of unarmed civilians. Soldiers needed a reason to fight that touched their personal lives. The "home front," in fact, served as a vital complement to the "battle front," and as an important ingredient in governmental propaganda machines. The First World War was not only a battle of strategists, generals, and ordinary soldiers, but it was also a war of bureaucrats, who orchestrated the creation of the civilian/soldier dichotomy to help sell war. The war drew in people from around the world in a variety of supporting roles. Civilians were required to produce the necessary goods for war and to fund the war effort itself, so their lives needed to be managed and monitored, just as those of the citizen-soldiers were managed. Both military and nonmilitary personnel faced rationing, conscription (either for soldiering or for work duties), restrictions on movement, and invasion of privacy (through censorship and identification papers). In short, World War I militarized civilian populations and mobilized people and resources worldwide in a way that changed understandings of warfare.

This book tells the story of the civilian as a counterpoint to the story of the soldier in the Great War, but it also asks questions about the meaning of these roles (civilian and soldier) by teasing out the nuances of the civilian experience of war during the 1914–1918 conflict and letting many of the voices from the period speak for themselves. It aims to be a broad, "global" work that demonstrates that despite differences of political struc-

ture, language, age, race, gender, class, and geographical location, civilians in all countries faced many of the same challenges in making sense of the war and their place in it. The First World War was an international conflict that crossed national, religious, and ethnic boundaries, but few historians have attempted to synthesize the various national accounts of the war. Yet this cross-national story is an important one because it captures the messiness of the wartime displacements and upheavals, many of which ignored the boundaries that scholars set for themselves in their studies.

Within this broadly global context, the chapters focus on the variety of meanings of “civilian” in wartime, showing the descriptive limits of the term. Citizen-soldiers of the Great War were rarely well-trained military professionals, and many of them maintained their civilian perspectives and aspirations, despite the interruption of the war. Chapter 1 describes the process of creating soldiers out of civilians in World War I, which involved unprecedented mobilization of resources in this era of mass armies. As the first large-scale and sustained test of the notion of the “nations in arms” since the French Revolution, the First World War demonstrated the difficulty of turning conscripts and volunteers into killers. As John Horne has noted, not only was this a military exercise; it also required a degree of political and cultural mobilization of the masses in order to succeed.¹¹ In some nations, such mobilization was relatively straightforward and featured the willing participation of citizens in 1914, while other governments relied on more coercive measures to uniform their nations.

Part of the transformation of civilians into soldiers required states to assign to these men special status as “warriors,” creating the problem of finding labor for the less thrilling logistical work of war. Some civilian workers also enlisted or were drafted into the war effort, but as a temporary measure designed to demonstrate patriotism and service to nation. Both the soldier conscripts/volunteers and worker conscripts/volunteers coexisted in war zones, staging areas, and behind the lines, and the notion of a pure separation between civilian and military labor was a fantasy. Here, as the second chapter discusses, nations turned to gender, class, and race as lenses for separating “fighters” from “workers.” States utilized their colonies, minorities within their nations, and civilians deemed unfit as soldiers (women, children, elderly men) in the support work of war,

carefully maintaining the divide between “soldiers” and “noncombatants” in official descriptions. These divisions proved impossible to maintain, especially as armies relied on the labor of prisoners of war and deportees as well, leading to blurring of categories of labor.

While some of this work occurred in war zones and staging areas, much of it happened on what became euphemistically known as the “home front,” which implied a domestic noncombatant zone. As a construction, the “home front” encoded the gendered language of modern war, implying a parallel but separate “civilian” effort that supported the “real” front. This home front encompassed diverse territory and experience, from the relatively untouched civilian homes of the United States to the families in France that went to bed each night to the sound of guns and the fear of invasion. Chapter 3 probes this concept of home fronts in more depth. The dual idea of home/battle front implied a neat divide between two easily defined zones, obscuring not only the overlaps between the two but also the movements between them. Civilians visited battle fronts, soldiers went on leave. Many psychological and real connections existed between the two, yet the home front had a cultural power in popular imagination in the immediate postwar period and continues to dominate understandings of the place of civilians in the First World War today.

The home/battle front divide also renders invisible the people who inhabit neither zone, those caught between the fronts or between the lines of conflict. The fourth chapter exposes these shadowy figures by examining those civilians living in occupied or operations zones. Many of these men and women found their services conscripted, as armies required food, lodging, entertainment, and work. Whether in war zones, occupied territories, or staging areas, civilians living with the daily reminders of war suffered the indignities of requisitions, billeted soldiers, forced labor, and, in some cases, terror. Their resistance to and/or collaboration with the militaries nearby put them in a different category of civilian experience than those living at home fronts that were more removed from the fighting.

In addition to those caught between the lines, there was a large group of people who moved from battle front to staging area to home front, from military to civilian and back in the course of the war: those involved

in medical services. Chapter 5 examines ambulance drivers, doctors, nurses, and other medical personnel, who traversed the various theaters and fronts of the war, enjoying official “protected” status but often sharing the dangers and discipline of military life. Some were officially classified as civilians, others were pseudomilitary auxiliaries, and still others were military personnel, but their frequent crossing of civil/military boundaries and their uncertain status within the armed services made identifying their role difficult. Given their mission to save lives rather than to end them, medical personnel were often marked by the media as civilians rather than soldiers. Closely affiliated with and often coordinating with medical workers were those involved in other forms of aid and comfort during wartime, such as humanitarian workers, providers of food and clothing relief, intellectuals, scientists, clergy, and “experts” in a variety of fields. These volunteers and paid professionals physically and emotionally supported soldiers and civilians in wartime, repairing the tattered lives of those caught in the crossfire. Chapter 6 examines this shadow army of experts and volunteers who managed the war. Together, these categories of neutral humanitarian workers, experts, and medical personnel often found themselves to be civilians living among soldiers, under military oversight and negotiating the complex world of civil-military relations.

Perhaps the civilians with the most ambiguous status were those confined to internment camps around the world during the war. Imprisoned as “enemy aliens” or “undesirables,” these individuals were targeted by governments concerned with policing the nation and its inhabitants, an increasingly significant role for states in World War I. Chapter 7 examines the global experience of internment from 1914 to 1920, which became a precursor for other modes of internment, detention, and concentration of civilians. The surveillance state cracked down not only on foreign elements but on internal subversion, which by the end of the war had exploded into civil unrest, labor union activity, and even revolution in various countries. The last chapter delineates some of the pressures and tensions of war that helped shape such civil disturbances. The years of 1918–1920 witnessed a rash of civil wars, revolutions, strikes, and political realignments, many of which were tied to wartime shifts. Even in areas where civil unrest did not reshape the postwar realities, conflict simmered. World War I redefined civil commemoration of war service, lead-

ing to state compensation initiatives for soldiers and widows, memorials to the dead, and a cult of memory centering on warriors and a few civil martyrs. Yet, civilians in all their variety and with their ambiguous status fit uneasily into the memory of the glorious war dead, and their postwar experiences were as likely to center on recrimination and denunciation as they were to result in a medal for war service.

On the central question of the book—what does it mean to be a civilian in wartime?—the scope of the problem should be clear. By defining civilians by what they were not—namely, not members of the armed forces—military and civil leaders left much room for ambiguity and interpretation. As Hugo Slim has persuasively argued, civilian identity “does not turn on a distinction between people as being armed or unarmed but on more complex notions of involvement and participation, including the subtle attributes of sympathy, incitement, encouragement, support, potential, coercion and choice.”¹² These questions of identity raise the specter of responsibility for sustaining war, and they can easily undermine civilian status and identity, turning the notion of civilian protection into one of civilians as targets. If the whole nation is “in arms,” then the whole nation must be targeted in a modern total war situation.¹³ Cutting off food supplies, bombing cities, taking hostages, forcing labor—all these become not only acceptable means of making war but even indispensable requirements of the waging of war. As this book demonstrates, few remained unaffected by war despite rhetoric to the contrary. Civilians managed, funded, supplied, and derided the war effort from their vantage points at the home front and at the battle front and in between, so their importance in the state’s ability to wage war cannot be underestimated.

In the First World War, perhaps the only people who rejected the war entirely were absolute pacifists who refused to labor in any way for the war effort. John Brocklesby, a religious conscientious objector in Britain, recounted his realization that the penal servitude to which he had been condemned, breaking stones, was actually a war activity. The stone, he found out, had been used to repair and build a road to a new naval aerodrome. From that point on he refused work, citing his sense of betrayal over having been tricked into working for the war. Finally, he was put to work in the prison laundry.¹⁴ American conscientious objector Ernest Meyer tried to reason through this same question in his postwar memoir:

Introduction

I object to the whole game of war, and not the mere business of shooting guns. There is no essential difference between being a soldier and patching up other men in hospitals to go out and continue the slaughter . . . to be consistent, I should commit suicide. I suppose in wartime almost all of our actions aid war in some measure. . . . [All] I can do is die, or draw a line somewhere. I've drawn a line.¹⁵

As Meyer notes, complicity is a tricky thing, and it seems hard to believe that war could function without the ideological and actual conscription of civilians. After all, can anyone really opt out of a modern war? Ellen LaMotte might see civilian lives as “cheap” in wartime, but nonetheless, history demonstrates that those lives are necessary to war’s maintenance and success in the modern world.¹⁶