

# Was the Role of Women During World War


## Two a Turning Point?



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## Introduction

Many people believe that women played a huge part in Britain's success in World War II. Before the First World War, few women had jobs and those who did were restricted to the domestic jobs such as servants and housewives, in addition to factory jobs in textiles and clothing. Although a small number of women began their own careers, the majority of women were expected to carry on the traditional involvement in 'duties at home' and 'women's work'.

Women had <sup>did they?</sup> no voice during the early 20th century and there was no equality between men and women; they could not vote until 1918 after many suffragette movements. Even then women could only vote if they were over 30 with proper qualifications or as graduates of UK universities, whereas men could vote at 21 with no qualifications. Both World War I and II had many negative effects however there were some positive outcomes, as women gained more independence as they became indispensable for the mobilization of society's resources.

In this project, through the use of internet sites and books, I will be discussing the relevance of the roles of women during the Second World War and how this created a more positive and equal life for women. I will cover topics such as the different jobs that women were enrolled and personal accounts written by the women who joined the war effort at the time. In addition to this I will consider whether the role of women was a turning point in World War II; a turning point is when a very significant change occurs at a decisive moment.

## Background of the Second World War

World War Two was a global war that lasted from 1<sup>st</sup> September 1939 - 2<sup>nd</sup> September 1945 (6 years, 1 day), though related conflicts began earlier. It involved a vast majority of the world's nations - including all of the great powers - eventually forming two opposing military alliances: the Allies and the Axis. The Second World War was the most widespread war in history, and directly involved more than 100 million people from over 30 countries around the world. Marked by mass deaths of civilians, including the Holocaust (during which approximately 11 million people were killed) and the strategic bombing of industrial and population centers (during which approximately one million people were killed, including the use of two nuclear weapons in combat), it resulted in an estimated 50 million to 85 million fatalities. These made World War II the deadliest conflict in human history.

After 6 years of fighting, the aftermath was that the Allies gained victory; they established occupation administrations in Austria and Germany. The former became a neutral state, non-aligned with any political bloc. The latter was divided into western and eastern occupation zones controlled by the Western Allies and the USSR, accordingly. In an effort to maintain peace, the Allies



formed the United Nations, which officially came into existence on 24 October 1945, and adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, as a common standard for all member nations. ✓



**German Panzer I tanks near the city of Bydgoszcz, during the Invasion of Poland, September 1939**





## What were their Roles?

Women in World War II took on a variety of roles, as the roles were even more extensive than women's roles in World War I. In World War I, women gained experience and therefore confidence and opportunity, which extended their skill base. With this they could get better paid jobs and gain more independence rather than rely on their husbands to earn all the money. In 1943 there were nearly 8 million women in paid work; this was three million more than when the war had started. There were another one million in the Women's Voluntary Services. By 1945, more than 2.2 million women were working in the war industries, building ships, aircraft, vehicles, and weaponry. Women also worked in factories, munitions plants and farms, drove trucks, provided logistic support for soldiers and entered professional areas of work that were previously only enrolled by men. Furthermore, in Allied countries thousands of women enlisted as nurses serving on the front line. In 1943, nine out of every ten single women were doing some kind of war work.



**The Women of World War II statue in Whitehall, London, unveiled on July 9th 2005 depicting the uniforms and working clothes worn by women during the war.**

## Was it easy for women?

Even though women grew more confident, it was still not easy. In addition to the terrifying circumstances of being at war, they were still treated second best to the men and the traditional sexist attitudes did not go suddenly away. Women in the armed services were expected to operate under double standards. Men saw women as being feminine, however they also had to do tough, skilled and sometimes very dangerous jobs. They worked as mechanics, welders, pilots, carpenters and gunners on anti-aircraft guns - although they were not actually allowed to fire the guns.

The ATS was definitely the most dangerous of the services open to women; 335 women were killed and another 300 wounded. Women also served as ferry pilots, flying the newly built planes to their air bases. Some women hated the ATS and therefore deliberately got pregnant so that they would be dismissed from the army.

Even though women were doing equal work to what the men would have done if they had not gone to war, they were still not getting equal pay. The government finally agreed to give women equal pay in 1944 however, this did not report until 1946. In 1943, the average male manual worker's wage was £5.70 a week while the wage for women was £3.00. Throughout the 1950s, women workers continued to campaign for equal pay. In 1961 female teachers and civil servants were the first to get equal pay; however these victories only applied to women and men doing the exact same job.

Most women in the public sector had jobs that were gender segregated and where no men were employed in roles, such as secretaries, cleaners and typists. Women in these workplaces remained excluded from any of the on-going debates about equal pay, as did women who worked in the private sector.

1968 was a significant year in the struggle for equal rights. Women sewing machinists who sewed car seat covers at the Ford car factory went on strike, as they were being paid 13% less than the male workers. Eventually, the women accepted an increase which took their pay to 92% of the men's' pay. This was followed by other strikes over equal pay across the country and finally these campaigns led to the passage of the Equal Pay Act in 1970. This applied to the public and private sectors where men and women were engaged in the same or broadly similar work.

## Factory Work

As men were called up to fight for their country in places throughout Europe and the Pacific, women made an immense contribution in the factories. ✓

Factories were left abandoned with no workers, so women stepped up to produce the heavy machinery needed for the war and at home to keep the country running. Women quickly picked up and excelled at historically male-dominated trades such as welding, riveting and engine repair. Women were essential for the production and supply of goods to our troops fighting abroad. ✓ good.

Women showed up at the factories to offer their services for the war effort however some employers still tried to deny them equal pay. Before the war, employers often classified work into "male" and "female" jobs, paying the "female" jobs less. When the war came, employers automatically classified the newer positions as "female" jobs so they would not have to pay as much. Some union officials went against these classifications and demanded, "equal pay for equal work". These officials were not only interested in securing fair pay for the women, but they were also concerned that after the war, veterans would return to work and find that they had suffered pay cuts and reductions because their jobs had been reclassified as "female" positions while they were fighting overseas. ✓

After the war, many women faced problems when their jobs were given to male veterans who were returning to work. Women who wished to remain in the workforce were transferred back to "female" jobs, which received less pay, and often did not have union representation. ✓



**Getty Girls at a South Eastern Command munitions factory, preparing shells for use**



## The Women's Land Army

Likewise to World War I, women were additionally called to help on land; the Women's Land Army, also known as the WLA or 'the Land Girls', was formed in July 1939. The prospect of war was becoming more likely, and therefore the government tried to enlist more women so that they could increase the amount of food being grown in Britain. In August 1940, only 7,000 women had joined but with the crisis caused by Hitler's U-boats, a huge drive went on from this date on to get more women working on land. The government tried to make out that the work of the WLA was glamorous and adverts showed it as this. In fact, the work was hard and young women usually worked in isolated communities. Many lived in old farm worker's cottages without running water, electricity or gas. Winter, in particular, could be hard especially as the women had to break up the soil by hand ready for sowing. However, many of the women ate well as there was a plentiful supply of wild animals in the countryside - rabbit, hares, pheasant and partridges. They were paid 32 shillings a week, which would be about £1.60 today.

Amelia Edeson joined the WLA in March 1942 where she, and many other young women, contributed to the war effort through doing jobs on farms such as thistle bodging, stone picking, hay making, stacking corn, building hay and wheat ricks, loading the carts and leading the horses for the ploughing. Not everyone was happy about women taking up the men's' jobs however, as Amelia has written in her personal account of her experience during the war. "We were taken round to meet some of the farmers, who weren't too keen to have us, but we were cheap labour, and it was war times. I expect their thoughts were mixed when they saw us town girls, most of us were around five feet two inches and weighed about eight stone. They must have thought 'they'll not last', they were wrong, we tackled all the jobs although I expect many of us hadn't seen a spade let alone used one". This is primary evidence as it has been written by someone who experienced being in the WLA and it portrays one of many women who were keen to help as much as they could during the Second World War. Furthermore, as she had experience and confidence, Amelia was able to get other jobs after the war had ended along with many other women.





## **The Women's Voluntary Service (WVS)**

Not all women's work was dangerous however it was still very important. The Women's Voluntary Service provided fire fighters with tea and refreshments when the clear up took place after a bombing raid. The WVS had one million members by 1943. Most were quite elderly as the younger women were in the factories or working on farms and were too exhausted to do extra work once they had finished their shift. The WVS also provided tea and refreshments for those who sheltered in the Underground in London.

In addition to this, the WVS also looked after people who had lost their homes from German bombing and provided shocked people with support. When the WVS was not on call, they knitted socks, balaclavas etc. for service men. Some WVS groups 'adopted' a sailor to provide him with warm knitted clothing. ✓



**A group of nurses at Guy's Hospital in London get cups of tea from the canteen, poured for them by members of the Women's Voluntary Service.** ✓

## **Conscription**

In 1941, women were given the choice of joining one of the armed forces or working in the factories. They could join either the Women's Royal Naval Service known as the Wrens (WRNS), the Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF), or the Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS). The WRNS was the most popular of the three services, followed by the WAAF. In practice, women who were ✓

conscripted had no choice as to which service they joined. However, the WRNS and the WAAF already had waiting lists so all the new conscripts had to join to join the ATS. In 1944 there were 450,000 women in the services, 212,000 of them in the ATS. This allowed many men to do combat duty and in my opinion this was an important part of women's contribution to the war effort. ✓



This poster called for the conscription of women in the military because the military needed for workers. It targeted many women who were married or single. ✓

## The Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS)

Like the soldiers, the women in the Auxiliary Territorial Service wore a khaki uniform. However, women expected the job to be glamorous as that was what the recruiting posters showed it as. The first members of the ATS often acted as drivers, worked in mess halls where many had to peel potatoes, acted as cleaners and they worked on anti-aircraft guns. However, Winston Churchill forbade ATS women from actually firing an AA gun as he felt that they would not be able to cope with the knowledge that they had shot down and killed young German men. ✓

As more men joined the war effort, it was decided that Britain need to increase the size of the ATS, with numbers reaching 65,000 by September 1941. Women between the ages of 17 and 43 were allowed to join, although these rules were relaxed in order to allow WAAC veterans to join, up to the age of 50. By July 1942, the ATS had 217,000 women in it and as the war went on, women were allowed to do more exciting jobs such as become welders, carpenters or electricians. ✓

At the age of 20 in 1941, Hilda Dison left home and boarded the train to 'Reaseheath', an Agricultural College near Nantwich in Cheshire. Her first job in the WATS was on a farm in Hevingham in Norfolk, where she worked during the summer of 1941, stooking corn and hay-making. She enjoyed the working on the farm; her reason for joining the Land Army was "because I loved the countryside and animals, and wanted to help in the war effort. The uniform was very attractive, and the whole world seemed to beckon me, full of adventure - a new life begun". Her jobs on the farm would include plucking chickens, milking cows by hand, riding cart horses, cleaning shippens and stables, clipping sheep, and feeding the animals including the bulls and pigs. She also learnt how to make cheese and cream in the dairies. "We were given an excellent grounding in farm work. We also had lessons concerning crops etc. in the classrooms during the day". ✓

good - for  
a lot of women  
it was  
exciting!

This primary evidence indicates that a vast majority of women enjoyed doing their jobs and were dedicated to keeping their country running. Hilda was one among many who contributed immensely to the war, as without women like her, farms would stop producing crops and therefore food for the country to eat. Consequently this would mean that men would have to return to their jobs rather than fight, resulting in a smaller army. ✓





**Eveline Fletcher & Hilda Dison, 'Happy Milkmaids', Reaseheath Agricultural College, near Nantwich, Cheshire, 1941**

### **Women's Royal Naval Service (WRNS)**

The WRNS was the most popular of the three services and it was the women's branch of the United Kingdom's Royal Navy. It was first formed in 1917 for the First World War; however it wasn't revived again until 1939 at the beginning of the Second World War. Throughout the next 54 years it remained active, and in 1993 the WRNS integrated into the Royal Navy. Being in the WRNS did not always mean that you were on ships; WRNS included cooks, clerks, wireless telegraphers, radar plotters, weapon analysts, range assessors, electricians and air mechanics. ✓

By 1939, there were 3,000 personnel; those who served were nicknamed "Wrens". Wrens with language skills were sent to stations around the coast to intercept and translate enemy signals. Although, few served at sea, Wrens did operate small harbour launches close to shore, and in addition to this, some took smaller ships across the Channel and towed disabled vessels back into the port for repairs, often carried out by WRNS mechanics. ✓

Most Wrens served in Britain, however a few did get postings overseas to places such as Singapore. The number of women in the WRNS peaked in 1944 at 75,000 and in total 100,000 women served. Sadly, 303 Wrens were killed during World War Two. In my opinion they were making a positive contribution to the war and without them, many men would have had to return to England to work in the Navy. Consequently, there would be fewer

people fighting abroad and this could have led to defeat.

At the young age of 19, Gwen Haggis nee Morgan was called up to the WRNS. She lived in Islington with her mother and father, one brother, who was called up in 1939, and three sisters. Gwen's father ran the dairy along with her sister's help; therefore she was not called up. Her other two sisters both had jobs helping in the war effort such as working in the Security Office and at the Ministry of Defence, subsequently neither of them were called up either. However when she was only 19, Gwen signed up to be in the WRNS. This information gives us the impression that women were eager to work and gain independence and confidence. Gwen would have worked alongside thousands of other women, the majority of which would have been very young. ✓



**WRNS women in 1943**

## The Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF)

The Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF), whose members were invariably referred to as WAAFs, was the female auxiliary of the Royal Air Force during World War Two, established in 1939. At its peak strength, in 1943, WAAF numbers exceeded 180,000, with over 2,000 women enlisting per week. Conscription of women did not begin until 1941 and only applied to those between the ages of 20 to 30. ✓

Women in WAAF did similar jobs to those in the ATS such as cooking, and clerical work however there were more opportunities to do more exciting work; some got to work on spitfires and others would work in the new radar stations used to track incoming enemy bomber formations. This was considered a very dangerous job, as these radar sites were often the first targets for Stuka dive-bombers. The women who took jobs in this line of work were the early warning ears and eyes of the RAF during the Battle of Britain.

On the other hand, women were still not allowed to train as pilots of warplanes. However, women were able to become members of the Air Transport Auxiliary (ATA), which flew RAF planes from the factories that they were built in, to a fighter squadron's base. There were 120 women in this unit out of 820 pilots in total. The women had fewer crashes than the male pilots nonetheless the traditional sexist opinions had not changed. Women were not always welcome, as the editor of the magazine "Airplane" made clear; "women do not have the intelligence to scrub the floor of a hospital properly" and he claimed that they were a "menace" when flying. ✓

During the Second World War a woman named Joyce Anne Deane nee Morley was posted to Digby, near Lincoln, a fighter sector station in 12 Group. Only 3 weeks after leaving school, she was plotting the Battle of Britain from the safety of Lincolnshire.

This primary evidence states how important the women were, particularly in the Battle of Britain. In my opinion, the Battle of Britain was an immense turning point during the Second World War, as the outcome defined whether Germany would be able to invade Britain. The RAF was Britain's main line of defence during the summer and autumn of 1940. The German objective was to gain air superiority over the Royal Air Force, however, through the incredible aid of women across the country the RAF was able to defend Britain, forcing Hitler to postpone and eventually cancel Operation Sea Lion, a planned airborne invasion of Britain. The failure of Germany to achieve its objectives of destroying Britain's air defences, or forcing Britain to negotiate an armistice or even an outright surrender, is considered its first major defeat and a crucial turning point in the Second World War. ✓

✓ Good link to another turning point





**A member of the Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF) tracking aircraft via radar in 1944.**



Eileen (also Didi) Mary  
NEARNE, MBE (Civil)  
Croix de guerre avec Palme,  
bronze

### Secret Agents

Women were additionally used as secret agents. They were members of the SOE (Special Operations Executive) and were usually parachuted into occupied France or landed in special Lysander planes. Their work was exceptionally dangerous as just one slip could lead to capture, torture and death. Their work was to find out all that they could to support the Allies for the planned landings in Normandy in June 1944. The most famous female SOE members were Violette Szabo and Odette Churchill. Both were awarded the George Cross for the work they did - the George Cross is the highest bravery award that a civilian can get. Both were captured and tortured. Violette Szabo was murdered by the Gestapo while Odette Churchill survived the war. ✓

## Nursing

The Cadet Nurse Corps trained 124,000 young women as nurses during WW2, including 3000 black women, as there was a limited amount of black women able to join. Nurses worked closer to the front line than they ever had before. They served under fire in field hospitals and evacuation hospitals, on hospital trains and hospital ships, and as flight nurses on medical transport planes. The skill and determination of these nurses contributed to the extremely low post injury mortality rate among the military force throughout the war.

Six months after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, there were 12,000 nurses on duty in the Army Nurse Corps. In July 1943, a formal four week training course for all newly commissioned Army nurses. This program stressed Army organization, military requisitions and correspondence, and property responsibility. From July 1943 through to September 1945, approximately 27,330 newly inducted nurses graduated from fifteen Army training centers. ✓

H. Mary Goodhand nee Stretch was a nurse during the Second World War at the young age of 18. She recalls being able to see fires from out of the hospital windows and they received many air raid casualties from surrounding areas, including those from city hospitals. It eventually became necessary to evacuate hospital patients from some of the wards in order to make room for air raid victims and much later for military personnel from various campaigns. Emergency units had been set up in small cottage hospitals and convalescent homes throughout the surrounding area to accommodate the evacuated patients. Some of the injuries sustained by air raid victims would have been devastating and made an everlasting impression on the young student nurses involved in their treatment. "The memory of some tragic cases remain with me to this day" Mary reminisces. ✓



**World War Two nurses being shown how to fit a baby into a gasmask.**

## Gains and losses for Women after WWII

### Gains:

In the late 1940s, the government launched campaigns to encourage women to stay in the labour market, and encouraged the migration of workers from British colonies to fill in the labour shortages.

The welfare state created many more job opportunities for women in what was seen as "women's work", such as nurses, midwives, cleaners and clerical staff.

Banking, textile and light industries such as electronics also expanded during this period and provided women with secretarial and assembly work.

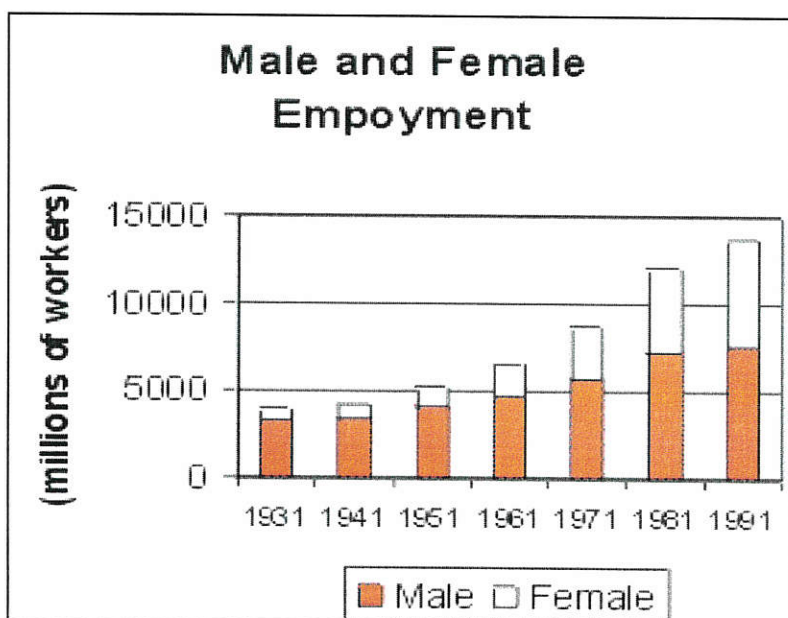
The proportion of women in the labour force as a percentage of working women of working age (15-64) increased from 45.9% in 1955 to 51% in 1965. ✓

### Losses:

Despite the increase in the rate of women's employment, they were still considered to be 'secondary workers'.

Mothers of young children were once again discouraged from working and most state funded nurseries set up in WWII were closed down by the post-war Labour government.

By 1960, 38% of married women worked but were routinely sacked when they got pregnant and continued to be paid less than men even if they did the same jobs. ✓





## Timeline 1938 - 1944

- 1938: The (U.S.) Naval Reserve Act permits the enlistment of qualified women as nurses.
- 1941: The Canadian Women's Army Corps was established.
- 1942: The Women's Royal Canadian Naval Service was created.
- 1942: The Women's Reserve of the U. S. Coast Guard Reserve program (officially nicknamed the "SPARs"), was first established in 1942.
- 1942: YN3 Dorothy Tuttle became the first SPAR enlistee when she enlisted in the Coast Guard Women's Reserve on the 7th of December 1942.
- 1942: The Marine Corps Women's Reserve (MCWR) was authorized by the U.S Congress in July 1942 to relieve male Marines for combat duty in World War II.
- 1942: U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the Public Law 689 creating the Navy's women reserve program on 30 July \*1942.
- 1942: The U.S. Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC) was founded.
- 1942: The name of the U.S. Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC) is officially changed to Women's Army Corps (WAC).
- 1943: The U.S. Women's Army Corps recruited a unit of Chinese-American women to serve with the Army Air Forces as "Air WACs," referred to as the "Madame Chiang Kai-Shek Air WAC unit." The first two women to enlist in the unit were Hazel (Toy) Nakashima and Jit Wong, both of California.

1944: Public Law 238 granted full military rank to members of the U.S. Navy Nurse Corps, who were then all women. ✓

## Conclusion

good ✓ To conclude, the role of women during the Second World War is justified as an immense turning point, as in my opinion, we would not have been able to win the war without them. If women had not taken up the men's jobs then Britain would either have no one to farm the crops and keep the country running or men would have to return home from war, consequently resulting in there being a smaller army to defeat the enemy. However, personally, I believe that this was not only a turning point in the war however additionally in the lives of British women.

✓ Likewise to before the war, single women would still have had to earn a living, just as they had done previously. There were already many women working as teachers, nurses, in offices, banks, shops and factories, and this would have continued after the war.

However, married women who had taken war work were encouraged to go back to being housewives, which many were quite glad to do, although some missed their jobs. In 'America's women' Gail Collins writes:

'Within a few years of the ending of the war in 1945, employment of women was back to its wartime peak, and still climbing. However, the jobs that they were holding down were not, for the most part, careers. Women were typists and sales clerks and telephone operators and receptionists, doing the low-paid and unglamorous work no returning veteran would want to snatch. The housewives who moved to the suburbs felt, for the most part, that they were escaping a slavery to the time clock and setting up their own shops in brand new houses filled with new conveniences.'

On top of earlier roles, women were much more accepted in the work force. This was because many had to supplement the work force with the massive drain of working men during the war into military roles overseas. ✓ Once on the job, having proved their productivity, the acceptability of women doing many jobs was changed forever. The next phase was for women to enter white collar roles in force - first, in the 50s and 60s as teachers, then in the 70s and 80s women started moving into more traditional roles, and today, women make up a higher percentage than men in many professional graduate schools such as law. Moreover, women are taking a more active role in the armed forces such as they are currently fighting on the front line alongside male soldiers. Additionally, they do not only fly military planes and fighter jets, women also are commanders of Naval Vessels which would never have happened prior to the war.

Furthermore, I believe that the role of women during the Second World War was a turning point however it did not occur suddenly but instead gradually aided throughout the 6 years. ✓ Whether the war would still have been won

without the help of the women is unknown although in my opinion, the role of women was crucial to the outcome and therefore if the Allies had been defeated, the world would currently be very different. ✓



**Children enjoy a street party to celebrate the end of the war in 1945.**



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### **Books**

- **Hodder 20<sup>th</sup> Century history – 2<sup>nd</sup> World War**