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Review Essay 73

Joslyn N. Barnhart and Robert F. Trager. *The Suffragist Peace: How Women Shape the Politics of War*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2023. ISBN: 9780197629758 (hardcover, \$29.95).

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At the turn of the twentieth century, women suffragists in the United States and Britain argued that because women were more naturally pacifist than men, allowing them to vote would lead to greater peace among nations. As the “givers and nurturers of life,” according to Lucia Ames Mead, who chaired the Peace Committee of the National American Woman Suffrage Association, women voters would “overthrow that hoary system which involves the grossest injustice to life which still survives from the barbaric past.”¹

Political scientists Joslyn Barnhart and Robert Trager investigate whether Mead was right. In *The Suffragist Peace* they analyze data from the United States, Britain, and beyond to determine whether giving women the right to vote does in fact lessen the likelihood that a country will go to war. They conclude that it does. “While it is too soon to characterize the full extent [of women’s political influence],” they write, “and impossible to know for sure, we find that women’s inclusion in democratic electorates has been a cause of peace in the modern era” (xii).

As a historian, as someone who believes in the complex, contingent, and contested nature of the past, such a sweeping generalization makes me uneasy. To their credit, Barnhart and Trager embrace the potential skepticism of their readers, and they are quick to address several possible critiques. “You might argue that the world does not look all that peaceful,” they begin, acknowledging that the threat of nuclear war looms larger now than it did at the end of the Cold War. Despite that, their evidence shows that “individuals in certain parts of the world have been far less likely to die in war in the twenty-first century than in any century in the past” (xiv). They head off questions about both gender essentialism and the value of democracy itself (briefly in the introduction but at greater length later in the book). The idea that women are naturally more pacifist may make readers cringe, they admit, but there is both sociological and biological evidence supporting such a claim. As for the efficacy of democracy, they admit that it does not always work as it should, but they argue that “issues of war and peace...take on unusually high salience among voters,” and that elected officials ignore voters’ will at their peril (xvii).

The book’s seven chapters can be roughly divided into three parts. Chapters 1 and 2 lay out the history of suffrage in Britain and the United States to show that despite the predictions of thinkers like Immanuel Kant and Thomas Paine, greater democracy in itself did not lead to peace. In Britain, the expansion of male

¹ Lucia Ames Mead, *What Women Might Do with the Ballot: The Abolition of the War System* (New York: National American Woman Suffrage Association, 1909), 4.

suffrage over the nineteenth century actually led to greater violence, sometimes against the wishes of elected leaders. Women suffragists in these two countries, by contrast, centered many of their campaigns on the promise of women's pacifying influence.

Chapter 3 breaks from the historical narrative to lay out the evidence for women's inclination toward peace. Drawing on voting and polling data—largely from the United States, but supplemented by international studies—as well as sociological and biological studies of gender, the authors conclude that “women appear to be more pacific than men across a range of contexts as a result of both underlying biological differences, and the way those differences shape and are subsequently shaped by the external environment” (65).

The next three chapters examine how women's preference for peace played out in world politics over the course of the twentieth century. Chapter 4 takes on the adage that democracies do not go to war with each other. Barnhart and Trager have compiled impressive data to show that this assumption is in need of modification; it holds true only for democracies in which women vote (80-81). Chapter 5 points to the 1916 and 1984 US presidential elections and the British appeasement of Nazi Germany's Adolf Hitler at Munich in 1938 as examples of moments where political pressure from voting women led leaders to avoid direct conflict. Chapter 6 presents an important caveat; while women on average prefer peace, women *leaders* are actually more likely than men to pursue aggressive policies, a fact the authors chalk up to gendered expectations of leadership and women's need to overcome stereotypes of feminine weakness.

Finally, the book's last chapter and conclusion attempt to demonstrate that Barnhart and Trager's argument applies outside the United States and Britain, providing three instances of women's successful political influence for peace in Lebanon, Liberia, and Japan. Overall, they assert, women's suffrage has made nations less likely to fight each other, which in turn has enabled “communities of more pacific countries to form. Often comprised of suffrage democracies, these alliances reinforced other processes to promote peace, leading some to ask whether the world as a whole has entered a new era of peace” (159). The authors do not specify the communities or countries they have in mind, nor do they indicate who exactly has suggested that the world may now be at peace.

Barnhart and Trager's ambition with this book is admirable, as are their intellectual candor and forthright, accessible style. But their argument is ultimately unconvincing. They present their conclusions as universal, but the book focuses almost exclusively on the United States and Britain. Their examples of women's peaceful influence in chapters 5 and 7 feel cherry-picked. And throughout the book they stress that who votes matters, but they pay no attention to race, ethnicity, or other categories of identity. Not all US women got the right to vote in 1920. What impact would that fact have on their conclusions?

But my main concern is that their definition of peace is one of the narrowest possible, one whose sole measure is the fact that women's suffrage democracies do not *declare war on each other*. By that standard, the United States has been at peace since 1945—an absurd statement of course, but one Barnhart and Trager do not discuss. They address readers' skepticism about whether the world is peaceful by acknowledging that nuclear war remains a threat, but they make no mention of the actual wars the United States has waged since the end of World War Two. Neither Korea nor Vietnam is mentioned. They discuss Iraq and Afghanistan in passing, but not in the context of the US wars in those countries. Over 100,000 Americans have been killed in foreign wars since 1945, a number which pales in comparison to the millions of Koreans, Vietnamese, Iraqis, Afghans, and others who have died in the course of those wars.

In the name of maintaining “peace,” the United States has dispensed hundreds of billions of dollars in military aid since 1945, arming, supplying, and training armies that are then expected to protect US interests, often by force. It has overthrown democratically elected leaders and propped up ruthless dictators. It has established more than 800 military bases around the world, more than three times the number controlled by all other countries combined, even though the US Army itself has concluded that establishing more bases

abroad leads to more wars. By David Vine's count there were only two years between 1945 and 2020 when the United States was *not* engaged in some form of combat action.² It is difficult to understand how this constitutes a “new era of peace.”

Nor do Barnhart and Trager explore the notion, which has been propounded by countless historians, peace scholars, and activists—especially women and people of color—that peace is more than the absence of war.³ The average US citizen today may not be likely to die in war, but more Americans died in gun-related incidents between 1968 and 2017 than service members in all US wars up to that point.⁴ Peace without security, without justice, without equity, without a basic guaranteed standard of living, is unworthy of the name. Jane Addams—the US suffragist and peace activist whose efforts to mediate an end to World War One Barnhart and Trager discuss in chapter 2—knew this, as did the women who gathered with her in 1919 at the first meeting of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. In addition to a just settlement at the Paris Peace Conference and suffrage for women, the attendees demanded greater regulation of the world economy, protections for the civil and political rights of minorities, an end to child labor, and universal disarmament.⁵

Barnhart and Trager need not have adopted this expansive conception of peace. But a more transparent acknowledgement of the limitations of their own would have been welcome. It is difficult to fully grasp or even imagine the impacts of women's suffrage without taking into consideration the realities of how far the world is from true peace.

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² David Vine, *The United States of War: A Global History of America's Endless Conflicts, from Columbus to the Islamic State* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2020), 2-3; 342-345. The two years were 1977 and 1979. See also Mary L. Dudziak, *War Time: An Idea, Its History, Its Consequences* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

³ See, for example, Joyce Blackwell, *No Peace Without Freedom: Race and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, 1915-1975* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2004); Amy Swerdlow, *Women Strike for Peace: Traditional Motherhood and Radical Politics in the 1960s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

⁴ “More Americans Killed by Guns Since 1968 Than in All U.S. Wars—Combined,” *NBC News*, October 4, 2017, <https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/las-vegas-shooting/more-americans-killed-guns-1968-all-u-s-wars-combined-n807156> [accessed May 19, 2023].

⁵ *Report of the International Congress of Women, Zurich, May 12 to 17, 1919* (Geneva: Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, 1919), 2243-246; see also Kathryn Kish Sklar, “Some of Us Who Deal with the Social Fabric: Jane Addams Blends Peace and Social Justice, 1907-1919,” *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 2, no. 1 (January 2003): 80-96.