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Kim E. Nielsen. *Un-American Womanhood: Antiradicalism, Antifeminism, and the First Red Scare*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2001. x + 219 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), \$22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-81425-080-8.

Mary C. Brennan. *Wives, Mothers, and the Red Menace: Conservative Women and the Crusade against Communism*. Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2008. xi + 197 pp. \$34.95 (hardcover), ISBN 978-0-87081-885-1.

Helen Laville. *Cold War Women: The International Activities of American Women's Organisations*. New York: Manchester University Press, 2002. xi + 220 pp. \$64.95 (hardcover), \$21.95 (paper), ISBN: 978-0-71908-044-9.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/essays/PDF/Kuhlman-Nielsen.pdf>

Reviewed for H-Diplo by **Erika Kuhlman**, Idaho State University

Women's history has evolved from the scramble to uncover women's lives from archival basements to attempts at changing historical periodization based on interpretations of those lives. Certainly in the era of the women's liberation movement, the choices made by many women's historians reflected their roots in social and labor history; Eileen Boris, Alice Kessler-Harris, and Gerda Lerner, all migrated from social history to form the foundation of women's history. Now, as women's history has evolved, many women's historians are—in addition to “adding men” to women's history by utilizing gender in their analyses—turning toward women conservatives to provide a more complete view of women's political history. Taken together, the three books under review here indicate the growth and intellectual vigor of the history of conservative women in the United States. For women's historians, they constitute important examples of women's history as U.S. history. For historians of U.S. foreign policy, they provide examples of myriad ways in which nongovernmental organizations interact and shape foreign relations. Since women have traditionally been by-passed as diplomats or political advisors, nongovernmental organizations constituted their only access to foreign relations.

Kim E. Nielsen broke new ground for historians of gender with her volume on conservative women during the first red scare. Her study refocuses the historiography of conservatism in the 1920s by placing gender at the crux of reactionary politics. Mary Brennan's work situates anticommunism not in the seat of government but within the American family.¹ Helen Laville's book demonstrates how female activists constructed a seamless web between the supposedly isolated public and private spheres: the U.S. government solicited the support of female activist organizations in its fight against communism, while women's groups often changed their internationalist and maternalist rhetoric to align themselves more closely with the federal government's anticommunist agenda. Both benefitted from the coziness of their relationships.

Nielsen argues that the reactionaries of the 1920s formed a community of activists against feminism, radicalism, and a strong central government. Both men and women joined in the movement to preserve what they saw as democratic principles and the patriarchal family from the dangers of a feminized society. The securing of the vote for women at the national level in 1920 provided the impetus to re-evaluate women's proper roles in American society. Conservatives conflated feminism with an activist government, which they often deemed bolshevist, in their reactions to 1920s legislation. Conservative activists interpreted child labor legislation, for example, as a restraint placed on the duties and obligations of fathers as heads-of-household. Red scare activists deemed the Sheppard-Towner Maternal and Infant Health Act as a threat to patriarchy, since it provided women with authority and a source of funding apart from their husbands. By the end of the decade, conservatives could count quite a few successes. The Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, an international pacifist organization, had been expunged from the National Council of Women for alleged radicalism, while members of the Daughters of the American Revolution stood accused of subversive activity and suffered numerous purges. Despite the absurdities of some of the material she had to deal with (radicalism in the D.A.R.??), Nielsen maintains her scholarly demeanor throughout.

What had changed among conservative women by the end of the Second World War? Activists of both genders faced a better-defined enemy by the 1940s and 50s in Soviet communism, and the threat of a nuclear holocaust. Many working-class women found themselves shunted from their wartime jobs and unable to find work, while middle-class women were encouraged to start families. *Wives, Mothers, and the Red Menace* includes the ideological and practical reasons behind women's anticommunist activity, profiles of individual female activists (such as Margaret Chase Smith, and Phyllis Schlafly), the strategies activists utilized to mobilize other women to join the crusade, and the intersections between gender, sexuality, and anticommunist rhetoric and action. Brennan explores the roles female activists played alongside male anticommunists (most often as the wives of politicians), and in female-only organizations such as the Minute Women of

¹ Professor Kuhlman reviewed Brennan's book for H-Peace. The review may be viewed at <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=24003>

America and the American Women's Party. Like their foremothers, Cold War-era female conservatives saw their activism as an extension of their domestic roles and duties. Anticommunist women's successes were due in part to their ability to "assure their male colleagues that they wanted nothing more than the end of communism" (p. 9).

Brennan argues that anticommunist women accepted men's diminishment of their activism because they felt that their cause was more important than their individual efforts. In addition, their own anticommunist rhetoric reinforced traditional roles for men and women as a tool with which to fight communist infiltration. The irony, as Brennan points out, is that anticommunist women encouraged other females to participate in the crusade (to realize their "latent power," p. 92) at the grassroots level, even though this took them out of the domesticity that they claimed constituted women's proper realm.

Helen Laville's book also includes both the Minute Women and the American Women's Party, in addition to lesser-known organizations. Laville's interpretation of female conservatives in this era differs from Brennan's in two ways. First, Laville teases out a symbiotic relationship between women's organizations and the government under which they lived. Second, while Brennan views anticommunism primarily as a domestic concern, Laville finds its roots in international activism among women before and immediately after the Second World War. In this regard, Laville's book reflects a growing body of scholarship exploring women's work in international relations.

Laville begins by exposing the 1950s housewife as an "advertiser's dummy" (3). In addition, the author overturns the mythical division between the public and private spheres by demonstrating that women were much more than mere beneficiaries of a tranquil domesticity seen, for example, in the famous Kitchen debate between Vice President Nixon and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev. Women were, in fact, active participants in international relations in the postwar decades. Laville's book adds to the scholarship that challenges traditional notions of foreign relations as driven exclusively by the state.

Laville plundered records relating to an organization called World Organization for Mothers of All Nations, with the neat acronym WOMAN, and the Committee of Correspondence (CofC). These two groups illustrate different sides of the same coin. Laville's primary contention is that while female activists in the early cold war years proclaimed themselves participants in an international sisterhood of women, with a focus on women's supposedly common function of motherhood, they often collaborated quite closely with men's organizations and directly with the federal government. Despite their maternalist rhetoric, they proved themselves staunch nationalists and, at the very least, "hesitant cold warriors" (111). WOMAN advocated disarmament and peaceful coexistence with the Soviet Union. Its membership was premised on the notion that women have a special interest in providing a peaceful world for their offspring. Mainstream women's organizations opposed WOMAN's agenda and, Laville contends, were responsible for bringing the organization down. Meanwhile, the CofC countered the Soviet Union's

claims of U.S. militarism by promoting the advantages women enjoyed in the “free” world. The CofC found a fellow-traveler in the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), which began funding the CofC through various front organizations. Some CofC members finally admitted that the group no longer constituted a private organization. WOMAN’s agenda and rhetoric stood apart from the U.S. government, leading other women-only organizations to deem it too “un-American” to survive. After allying itself too closely with the CIA to remain an independent organization, the CofC was unable to effectively fight against communism. Both groups positioned women primarily as mothers. Motherhood, for many cold war conservative activists, was no longer viewed as an aspect of femininity that united women across national boundaries (as it had, for example, during and after the First World War). Instead, it became one of the reasons why American women joined the crusade against the communist world.

These books on conservative female activists will please instructors of history or political science courses who are searching for conservative voices to add to the cannon of scholarship on U.S. women’s activism. Nielsen, Brennan, and Laville have each contributed to women’s history by broadening our perspective of women’s interests, politics, and political activism in the twentieth century. In addition, Laville has placed women in the nexus of international activism during the supposedly “homeward bound” years of the early cold war.²

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² Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1987).