

Memories of War

NEW NARRATIVES AND UNTOLD STORIES

Women at Work in the Second World War

Learning Outcomes and Objectives

Key Stage 3:

Aims:

To engage with historical sources specifically primary sources, to be able to put them into historical context and assess them as separate subject fields. The students will learn to critically analyse the validity of the sources and their usefulness towards historical study. They will write small paragraphs using P.E.E. to improve literacy and evaluation techniques. The activities will also encourage group work and develop skills for working as part of a team. Ultimately they will summarise with their own version of telling an oral history, thus engaging them with the core subject.

Outline:

In 1938, when war was looming, the four main major women's voluntary organisations left over from the First World War were reborn. The four main services were renamed and redefined and although originally voluntary, would be made obligatory by 1941. These services became: The Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS), the Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF), the Women's Royal Naval Service (WRNS or Wrens) and the Women's Land Army (WLA). The women who joined these services carried out essential work for the war effort and although not remunerated or honoured in the same way as their male counterparts, their impact was immeasurably vital. Within this resource we will examine various sources to give first-hand accounts of the experiences of the women who worked in these organisations. Students will be asked to think through the perspective of these women and imagine what it would have been like to walk in their shoes (or army jackboots)?

Sources:

A range of original oral history sources including:

Source A, B, C & D are oral testimonies from women who worked in these arenas.

Source E, F, G & H are images, of either photographs or posters for the students to analyse.

Activities:

Starter: worksheet 1.

Read source A, B & C & D discuss the content in pairs and decide which service you would join if you were a woman in the Second World War and answer the questions on the sheet.

Main class: worksheet 2.

Part 1. Look at the images on source E, F, G, & H. Ask them to annotate them and ask what, when, why, where, who and how?

Part 2. Ask them to write a letter to a friend or family member explaining which service they chose and why.

Plenary: worksheet 3.

In small groups of 3-5 children, they should introduce themselves to each other using their new identities and talk about their wartime experience of working in their chosen field and what they have learned from the experience. This will show how they have engaged with the oral history and the subject itself.

Further Reading/viewing:

Mavis Nicholson, *What did you do in the War, Mummy?* - Women in World War Two (Random House, 1996, London)

The Land Girls, BBC TV

Jean Davis *My Time in the Land Army* available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kr1N45JGayU>

Key Words: Voluntary, Independence, Future, Civilian, Fear, Oral History.

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Activities

Starter: Understand and Remember

Even though it became necessary for women to take over from the men in civilian jobs such as in the factories, they were still considered not up to the job. They started off as voluntary workers and in 1941 this became compulsory, single women were conscripted and married women were encouraged to volunteer, later some married women were also conscripted. They often received half the pay and were usually still in subservient roles. These roles were aimed at keeping the country going, i.e. working in the munitions factories, on the farms or supporting the fighting men on land, air or sea. However, no matter what service the women joined, they were never to enter active combat.

Many men resented the women taking over their jobs and did not believe they would be able to do the jobs as well as themselves. They may also have worried that this would affect their status in the future and women might not want to go back into their domestic roles in the home after the war. It turns out that most women were very capable of carrying out the same jobs that men had been doing up till the war and even though not all of them wanted to, many of them did enjoy the work and found a new freedom and liberation from their husbands or fathers. After the war however, many women did not get to keep their jobs and had to get used to being wives, mothers and daughters again.

The women in these services often worked very hard and their contribution to the war was immeasurable. They had not been used to working in this way and had mostly expected to be looked after by their father until they married, when their husband would take on their care. The work in the services could be very hard and dangerous and they were always paid less than men. However, for many (not all) women, this was an exciting time and they experienced freedom and independence that would have been impossible before the war.

On the next page is a brief description of four of the women's services. Read these and answer the questions below.

Q1. Read sources A, B, C & D and discuss with your partner. How do you think the women felt, why did the men think they could not do the jobs, would they have been happy to do these jobs or not? How did they think about getting less important jobs than the men in the Services, would they be happy that they were safer or would they want to go and fight for their country?

Q2. Choose which service you would have liked to have joined if you had been in the war. Talk to your partner and tell them why you chose that service.

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The four main services women joined were:

The Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS) – Initially the women in the ATS often found themselves working as, cook, clerks, drivers and orderlies and were in all women units. By 1941 however, the ATS became a full military service. This involved the women being radar operators, in the military police or in anti-aircraft posts among other roles. Many women were killed, lost in action or harmed during the war and they were generally paid two-thirds what the men received.

The Women's Auxiliary Air force (WAAF) – When the service started in the early days of the war, women were also in roles, such as cooks, clerks and drivers but as the war progressed, their roles began to diversify. For example, they became mechanics, engineers, electricians and fitters for aeroplanes. They were also hugely important in helping to track and intercept enemy aircraft. Again there were many fatalities among the WAAF and they were paid a third less than the men in the Royal Air Force (RAF)

The Women's Royal Naval Service (WRNS or Wrens) – The Wrens were often recruited from places near naval bases. Originally they were not sent overseas but worked as telephonists, storekeepers and signallers. They were not in women-only service and worked in the men's units. In 1941 the decision was made to send the Wrens overseas and they took on more intensive positions for example, wireless telegraph officers and eventually secret naval communications and code deciphering.

The Women's Land Army (Land Girls) – Britain imported up to 70% of its food before the war started. This was under threat now as the seas were too dangerous for ships to bring food from abroad. So to make sure Britain was not starved into submission women took over the men's roles on the farms. They often stayed with families or in shared accommodation, which was not always satisfactory. They worked long hard hours in the fields, ploughing, caring for animals, driving tractors and harvesting crops.

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Activities

Main Class: Part 1

Analyse and Apply

Source sheet 1 – Sources A, B, C & D

Questions:

1. Look at these images and annotate (label) them. Try to establish: what, when, why, where, who and how in your notes and labels.

2. How do you think the women would feel, suddenly going from the safety of being 'looked after' by men to becoming the head of the house and carrying out important war work?

Things to consider:

Did they like their life the way it was?

Would they be excited to have a change?

What other concerns would they have had?

3. What is the message of the posters and images that you see here?

Things to consider:

Who created these posters and why?

What were things really like?

4. After the war, why were women expected to give up work and do you think they would want to?

Things to consider:

Now war was over, would everything be the same as before?

Men were returning from the war, would this make a difference?

Key Words: Combat, civilian, conscripted, subservient, domestic, code deciphering,

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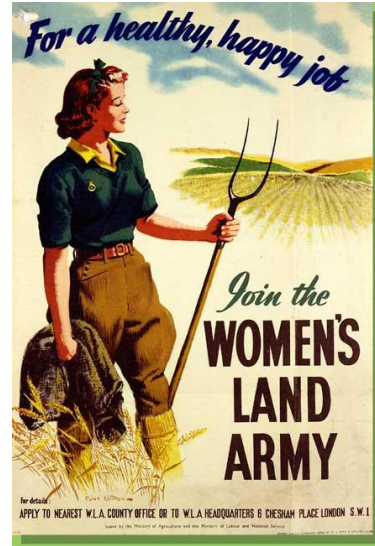
Source sheet 1.

Sources A, B, C & D

Source A



Madge Neal in the Women's Land Army (MoW)



Poster for Women's Land Army

Source B



Hilda Grady in the Women's Auxiliary Territorial Service (MoW)



ATS women run to their anti-aircraft battery

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Source C



Wrens' on deck (IWM)

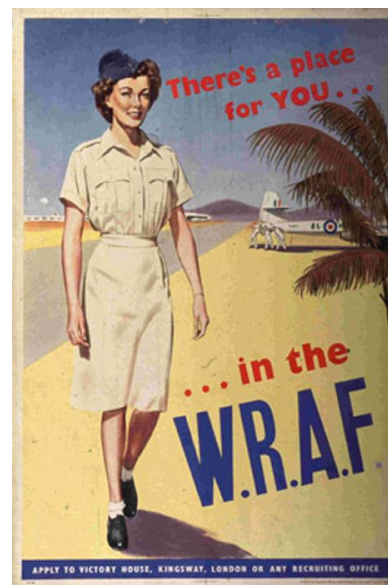


'Join the Wrens' poster (IWM)

Source D



Women's Auxiliary Air force (but would she be flying?)



WAAF poster (Royal Air force Museum)

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Source sheet 2

Source E, F, G & H

Source E:

Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF)

"It was frightening when I first went in. I'd never been in a factory. To see enormous machines and sparks flying. Tiredness was the worst thing. I used to get terribly tired. I felt under surveillance all the time"

"We did work equally as hard – we were in bomb alley – life was hard – didn't get a thank you. I've often thought about this – we were plodding on...for someone to say you didn't do so badly"

Elizabeth Pearce

Source F:

Women's Land Army (WLA)

"was the sharing in the hostel, you know, one bathroom, one shower, waiting to get the dirt off and, that was the only thing; the roughest part of it, waiting, you know. We had a washroom, but everybody wanted to be in there washing and getting theirs... there was no proper convenience, you know. Things were hanging in the washroom all the time, you know, you had to be careful someone didn't help theirself to it, you know."

Eileen West

Source G:

Women's Territorial Service (WRAC)

"I worked in the Food Office which was a reserved occupation, you see and I didn't think I was gonna get away. I thought everybody was going, you see, all my friends and everybody was going. Anyway, the government had decreed that ten percent of the staff in Food Offices between the age of twenty and thirty would have to go"

So she joined the army and after training was given 20 minutes to pack her kit bag and was taken to a ship, she did not know where she was going

"They wouldn't tell us, naturally, the war was on, it's '43. War was on and we've got troops. Not only us girls, they've got troops, you see. So there's no way they were gonna say where we were going. And off we went and it was very nice"

Eileen Powles

Source H:

Women's Royal Naval Service (WRNS / Wrens)

"Well, you waited at them at table and kept their rooms tidy, the actual cleaning was done by other WRENS but we made sure their beds were tidy, rooms were tidy. It wasn't too difficult work. I would have liked to have done something else. If I would have thought, as I'd worked in a stockroom I could have joined the supply section and I could have done that and I thought, well, if I do I got have to start all over again and they would send me elsewhere. That means you got to start making new friends so I thought, oh, I think I'll stay and stay as I am".

Kathleen Eames

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Plenary

Evaluate and Create

Now you have had some experience of what it was like for the women in the Second World War, it is time to introduce your new character to the rest of the class

With your new identity get into groups of three/four and talk about your experiences in the services, what made you joining that service, what you did and did not like. How were you treated and did you get paid the same as the men.