CHAPTER THREE

ESSENTIAL WOMEN, NECESSARY WIVES, AND EXEMPLARY SOLDIERS: THE MILITARY REALITY AND CULTURAL REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN’S MILITARY PARTICIPATION (1600–1815)

John A. Lynn II

Women’s participation with armies in the field changed dramatically in the second half of the seventeenth century. Before then, women in great numbers accompanied troops on campaign. In 1615, the military commentator Johann Jacob von Wallhausen (1615/1971, 7) cautioned: “When you recruit a regiment of German soldiers today, you do not only acquire 3,000 soldiers; along with these you will certainly find 4,000 women and children.” Yet during the eighteenth century a smaller proportion of women marched in the train of a company of troops. A Prussian circular of 23 August 1733, for example, commanded that the number of women with troops in the field could not exceed ten per hundred men (Haberling 1943, 53). Other armies allowed even fewer; the British often cut the number to six per hundred. To understand this decline in the numbers of women is not only to register change in the roles played by camp women; it is to comprehend the nature of major reforms in European military institutions and the conduct of war—the fundamental substance of military history.

Before 1650, camp women were essential to the character of armies and to the logistic system that kept them in the field; after that date, soldiers’ wives in the train of armies were not quite as fundamental to the conduct of war, but they were still integral to the health and well-being of their husbands’ units (Lynn 2008). They continued to perform the necessary, gender-defined tasks they had before, notably washing, sewing, and nursing, as well as serving as sutlers. Tracing this transformation requires that we return briefly to the era described by Mary Elizabeth Ailes in the previous chapter. While she covers a broad range of women and their contributions, however, this chapter emphasizes those plebeian women who lived a hard life alongside common soldiers in garrison and, particularly, on campaign.
Camp women, an ever-present reality with early modern armies, were little discussed at the time, but a great deal of public attention was, and is, lavished on the phenomenon of women who assumed male dress and identities to serve in the ranks as soldiers. Although the actual numbers of such female soldiers was very small in reality, they figured large in the European imagination. Today’s readers familiar with the existing literature on military women of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and early nineteenth centuries will be aware of the emphasis placed on these few extraordinary women. This chapter diverges from the usual treatment awarded them and instead stresses their importance as cultural rather than as military phenomena. Tales of their exploits attracted eager consumers who found them entertaining, but these stories also challenged their audiences, particularly men. The cultural representation of warrior women-in-arms certainly captured the public imagination, but the most important form of women’s military participation was more prosaic; not the polished steel of sword and bayonet but the dull iron of pot and shovel. Stalwart and formidable camp women deserve first place here, because any attempt to describe early modern warfare without reference to them is doomed to be at least incomplete and, most probably, distorted.

Essential Women with Aggregate Contract Armies before 1650

A woodcut from Johannes Stumpf, Schwytzer Chronica, published in 1554 portrays the pillage of a village by soldiers and women on campaign (Bory 1978, 143; Lynn 2008, 148). In the foreground, four men and five women carry bundles and baskets of household goods, fowls, and other foodstuffs to an overburdened cart. The women team with their male companions to loot the village of all they can carry. In the background, the body of what appears to be a villager lies in the dirt, grim testimony to the violence of pillage. These camp women are not only participating in pillage; they are essential partners in this enterprise.

Considering the early modern period as a whole, camp women made their most central contributions before 1650, in the era typified by what I have termed the aggregate contract army (Lynn 1996). Reforms after that date would create a new style of force, the state commission army, which limited the numbers and roles of women on campaign, although they would remain integral to the existence and well-being of forces in the field. As the previous chapter demonstrates, early modern armies were not com-