CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“GERMAN WOMEN HELP TO WIN!” WOMEN AND THE GERMAN MILITARY IN THE AGE OF WORLD WARS

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The word “people’s army” (Volksheer) has a wholly different meaning and content now than in previous times. The change began with the coining of the terms home army (Heimatheer) and home front (Heimatfront), which did not exist before the war, and in which the “army of labor” for the first time played an explicitly military role, whose execution helped to determine the fate of the outer front. This new type of people’s army is the vehicle of permanent war, whose distinguishing feature is the mobilization of the entire people in a thousand ways. (Lüders 1937, 15)

With these words Marie Elisabeth Lüders, a former leader of the Federation of German Women’s Associations (Bund Deutscher Frauenvereine, BDF), who was responsible for the national organization of female labor for the war industries during World War I, described the changes in the relationship between home and front that had occurred during this war in her 1937 book Volksdienst der Frau (Woman’s Service for the People). She argues in the book that due to the industrialization of warfare the home front was increasingly important for the failure or success of the new form of “total” or, as Lüders calls it, “permanent war.” The whole population had to become a “people’s army” and thus women too had to be mobilized for this new form of industrialized mass warfare. She believed that to a far greater extent than in the First World War, in the next war all segments of the population would have to play their specific roles in supporting war, and that the lines

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*I would like to thank Pamela Selwyn for her help with the translation. This chapter is a shortened and modified version of a longer article published under the title “Mobilizing Women for War: The History, Historiography, and Memory of German Women’s War Service in the Two World Wars,” Journal of Military History 75:3 (October 2011): 1055–1093.

† Marie Elisabeth Lüders (1878–1966) had lost all of her administrative positions after the Nazi Party came to power in January 1933, because she had represented the liberal German Democratic Party (DDP) in the Reichstag, and had belonged to the executive board of the BDF, which had dissolved itself in 1933 in order to avoid Gleichschaltung, or being forcibly brought into line with Nazi ideology. She nevertheless believed that German women had to support a future war if the “fatherland was again in danger.”
between front and home would become more fluid still than in the last war. In order to prepare for this eventuality, she proposed the introduction of a “compulsory service year for women” parallel to “men’s compulsory military service,” which the Nazi state had reintroduced in 1935 (Lüders 1937).

In fact, women in the Third Reich had to support the Second World War that started only two years after the publication of the book far more actively than scholars have long assumed: through a compulsory service year for all German girls, through deployment in the wartime economy, where they increasingly had to replace drafted men, and through their wartime nursing activities and work as army auxiliaries (Wehrmachtshelferinnen). Nearly 400,000 German Red Cross (DRK) nurses and nurses’ aides and 500,000 army auxiliaries were deployed during the war, not including 400,000 female antiaircraft auxiliaries (Reichsluftschutzhelferinnen). The central institutions of the National Socialist policy of persecution and extermination such as the police, Gestapo, and the SS also trained their own female auxiliary corps (Helferinnenschaften). Some 10,000 women were active in the SS alone (Maubach 2007, 93f). The scale of women’s deployment far outstripped that during the First World War.

To be sure, in the age of the world wars all the belligerent powers needed women’s active support, as the contributions by Kimberly Jensen and Margaret Vining in this volume show. A comparative approach, however, indicates that this mobilization was particularly marked in Nazi Germany. At the end of the Second World War, there was one woman for every twenty male soldiers in the German armed forces. As “army auxiliaries” these women were subject to military law and military discipline, but they never officially attained the status of soldiers. This would have clashed too sharply with the official Nazi ideal of womanhood. Rather, every attempt was made to maintain gender boundaries, at least rhetorically and symbolically, even if everyday life in wartime meant that they were continually breached and increasingly challenged (Schwarz and Zipfel 1998, 2–3).

Not only the National Socialists themselves but also the postwar German public in East and West, and even historians, long overlooked the importance of women for the conduct of the First but above all the Second World War. The relevance of “gender” for the understanding of both wars as “total wars” was thus ignored for many years. According to the current scholarship, “total wars” are ideal-typically shaped by the interplay of four elements: the “totality” of war aims, methods, mobilization and control, which leads to an abolition of the boundary between the military and civilian realms, between “front” and “homeland”. The “homeland” becomes a front