CHAPTER ELEVEN

A DIFFERENT KIND OF HOME FRONT: WAR, GENDER AND PROPAGANDA IN WARSAW, 1914–1918

Robert Blobaum and Donata Blobaum

This chapter deals with a peculiar type of propaganda directed at and about women in Warsaw, itself a peculiar place during the First World War. Warsaw was not a typical capital city, nor did it bear the attributes of a typical home front during the years of the Great War. In fact, it was not really a capital city at all before the war and most of the city’s Polish and Jewish residents had come to accept Warsaw’s status as the third city of the Russian Empire. It was in this capacity that the city briefly took on the appearance of a wartime home front in 1914. However, Warsaw’s close proximity to the fighting and limited access to available sources of food and fuel would eventually undermine the spirit of endurance and endeavor, proudly trumpeted in the fall of 1914 in the mainstream Polish press following the first unsuccessful German assault on the city.\footnote{For example, see Zdzisław Dębicki, “Warszawa,” Tygodnik Ilustrowany 44 (31 October 1914): 730–731.} With the passing of the front in the summer of 1915, Warsaw took on a new role, first as the seat of the German occupation regime, and slightly more than a year later, as the capital of successive quasi-state structures built and altered under German auspices.\footnote{For a discussion of the origins and evolution of Imperial German thinking about Warsaw’s role in these structures and its impact on the city’s development, see Marta Polsakiewicz, “Spezifika deutscher Besatzungspolitik in Warschau 1914–1916,” Zeitschrift für Ostmitteleuropa-Forschung 58, 4(2009): 501–537.} As these products of German state-building became increasingly autonomous over the war’s last two years, the city could envision itself as the once and future capital of a sovereign and independent Poland.

The unique features of Warsaw’s wartime experience in turn did much to set and reset the “home front” as a stage for the city’s female actors. Of particular importance was the chronic crisis of Warsaw’s urban economy, which began immediately at the outbreak of the war and was subsequently exacerbated by the exactions of Russian evacuation and German occupa-
tion. The city's demographic feminization resembled that of other capital cities, although the increasing preponderance of women over men in Warsaw's population—which reached 32% by January 1917—owed less to military conscription than it did to voluntary and involuntary male labor out-migration.³

Elsewhere in Europe, as well as in the United States, the war promoted both the quantitative and qualitative growth of female labor force participation. This was the case in the capital of practically every belligerent state—more so in Berlin and Petrograd perhaps than in London or Paris—but proportionally significant regardless and the main source of women's social power during the war years.⁴ In this regard, Warsaw was dramatically different, as female participation in the industrial labor force declined precipitously in terms of numbers employed, and remained unchanged in proportion to men as a consequence of the collapse of industrial production in the city. Before the war, 18,420 women, 23.9 per cent out of a total of 77,809 industrial workers, were employed in Warsaw's factories. By early 1916, that number had already dropped to only 3650 women out of a total industrial labor force of 14,632, or 24.9 per cent of all workers.⁵

These basic realities form the backdrop to various wartime efforts to mobilize and influence Warsaw's women who, broadly speaking, can be divided into two categories. The first, to use Belinda Davis's term in reference to wartime Berlin, were the “women of lesser means,”⁶ who in the case of Warsaw as well as Berlin comprised the vast majority of women. This included the laboring poor, but more significantly the female unemployed, particularly former domestic servants who before the war comprised the largest number of employed women in Warsaw and whose jobs were lost due to the evacuation of Russian officials and the growing impoverishment of middle-class and intelligentsia households. Joining these “women of lesser means” were single mothers and wives left temporarily or permanently without male partners due to wartime circumstances.

³ Krzysztof Dunin-Wąsowicz, Warszawa w czasie pierwszej wojny światowej (Warsaw, 1974), 196.
⁵ Archiwum Główne Akt Dawnych (AGAD), Szef Administracji przy General-Gubernatorstwie w Warszawie (SAGGW) 5, Vierteljahrsbericht des Verwaltungschefs bei dem General-Gouvernement Warschau für die Zeit vom 1. Januar 1916 bis zum 31 März 1916, appendix III.