CHAPTER 21

The Iconography of Gendered Sacrifice: Women’s Army Corps Memorials in Israel and Great Britain

Judith Tydor Baumel-Schwartz

Introduction

‘Memory is never shaped in a vacuum; the motives of memory are never pure’ (Young 1993, 2). James Young begins his path-breaking study about the texture of memory with this warning, reminding us of the multifaceted ‘lives’ of national memorials and monuments, those sites of remembrance which act as historical markers honoring the dead while also embodying national myths of beginnings. Cautioning us against reading a monument or memorial as a text without referring to its related subtexts, Young stresses how one must view a memorial’s formation as part of a seamless process that begins with the genesis of the memorial idea, advances through its physical creation, and continues throughout the metaphysical interaction between the memorial and its viewers. In spite of the fact that scholars refer to memorials as inanimate edifices that relieve viewers of their burden of memory, it is little wonder that one nevertheless speaks of a monument’s ‘birth’, ‘growth’, and ‘performance’, as if it were an animate object with a seemingly never-ending lifespan of its own.

Continuing his discussion of memorial significance, Young now focuses on the process by which a monumental piece of inert mineral attains its élan vital, its vital spirit: ‘By themselves, monuments are of little value, mere stones in the landscape. But as part of a nation’s rites or the objects of a people’s national pilgrimage, they are invested with national soul and memory.’ (Young 1993, 2). By locating the memorial within an ongoing process of national ritual, rite, and pilgrimage, the anthropomorphic progression is complete when a piece of stone is finally endowed with memory, national soul, and even the chance of eternal life.

This article focuses upon the mechanism by which this process comes about: the creation of national memorials, and in particular national military memorials, which are often located at the apex of collective national memory. Commemorating national sacrifice, these memorials are the tangible plastic expression of the sacrifice that took place during wartime, in battle, or during a nation’s continuous and ongoing periods of military strife. In order to examine
this process in depth, I have chosen to concentrate on two countries, Israel and Great Britain, and on the process by which they conceived the idea of creating a memorial for their Women’s Army Corps and brought it to fruition. In both cases, this was the most recent national military memorial constructed in each country. In both countries, it was the result of a long drawn-out process that involved government bureaucracy, military foot dragging, contests between civilian artists, and public pressure to financially complete the undertaking.

Here I will discuss the history and iconography of the two memorials—the last military memorials for national army corps erected in each country to date—and the significance of their commemorative dynamics in understanding each nation’s interpretation of the term ‘gendered sacrifice’. ‘Sacrifice’ is a term with many meanings ranging from ‘the offering of an animal, plant, human life, or some material possession to a deity as in propitiation or homage’ to ‘the surrender or destruction of something prized or desirable for the sake of something considered as having a higher or more pressing claim’.¹ By potentially being willing to surrender human life—that of members of a country’s military forces—for the sake of something having a higher and more pressing claim—the continued existence of the country, its inhabitants, their beliefs and way of life—‘sacrifice’ becomes the apex of national heroism, the final act which all soldiers should be willing to perform for their country.

‘Gendered sacrifice’, which stands at the core of this article, is a more complex term, distinguishing different types of sacrifice through a gendered prism, that which expects people to behave according to socially constructed roles that a given society considers appropriate for men and women. Although women have served in the armed forces in many countries during the 20th and 21st centuries, in most countries they have only recently become eligible for battle duties. Consequently, they are not automatically associated with the concept of ‘military sacrifice’, a gendered term usually pertaining to men. Here I will concentrate on the unusual—the commemoration of the gendered military sacrifice of women in Western society—and the creation of its plastic component. In addition to this being a study of the iconography of sacrifice, such memorials are also touchstones for understanding a more comprehensive sociological concept: the broader role to which local women are relegated by the agents of national memory in each state. Consequently, our discussion is located at the crossroads of several variables—national commemoration, collective memory, gender, and the military—each of which has repercussions on the commemorative dynamics that we will now begin to explore, which are