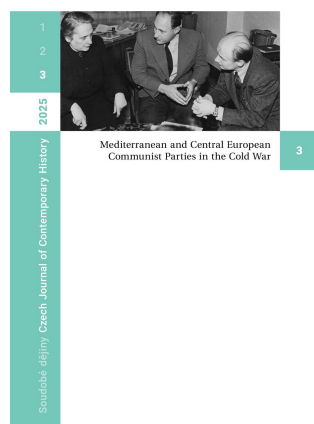


Zitierhinweis

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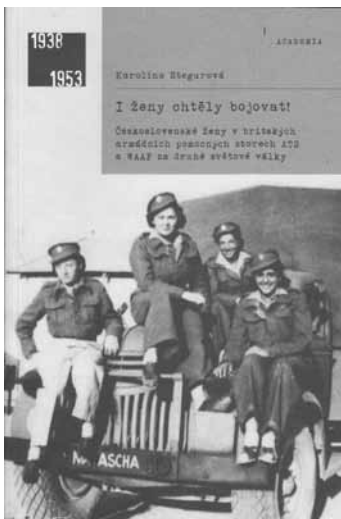
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Czechoslovak Women in British Uniforms during the Second World War

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STEGUROVÁ, Karolína:

I ženy chtěly bojovat! Československé ženy v britských armádních pomocných sborech ATS a WAAF za druhé světové války.

Praha, Academia 2021, 287 pages,
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The phrase “Vital to the offensive” stared out in block capital letters from posters affixed to the walls in public spaces. “Thousands of women needed now” was the appeal at recruiting centres and employment exchanges to enrol in the Army, the Navy or the Air Force. “No British woman will stand aside” was the War Ministry’s call, to which thousands of British girls who had just finished school and women who had been working in jobs responded. Nothing could match the sense of duty, patriotism and exhilaration that the prospect of joining the war effort meant, even if it was on the home front far from the battleline.¹ Refugee women from countries occupied by Germany responded as well, believing that

¹ *The National Archives* (London), Poster collection, Inf. 3/119; *ibid.*, AIR 2/6187, WAAF pre-entry training, 13. 9. 1941.

by joining the war effort in Great Britain they could help the liberation of their own country from Nazism.

Czechoslovak women who had emigrated to Great Britain or women who acquired Czechoslovak citizenship, for example by marrying Czechoslovak men, were among them. They joined the British army auxiliary units because they wanted to but also because they were prevented from being part of the Czechoslovak foreign army.

This is the background to Karolína Stegurová's study of the Czechoslovak government and the military administration's political and logistical reasonings and manoeuvrings in Great Britain during the Second World War with regards to women's engagement in the military units. The book's basic premise is that women wanted to join the Czechoslovak foreign army but, because they could not, they enrolled instead in the different units of the British army or air force which were open to them: the Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS) and the Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF). Independently of their capacities, women in general were prevented from direct employment in combat but as the war progressed and more men had to be drafted to the battlefield, women were recruited to replace men, filling vacancies in industries, in agriculture and in the service sector, some even in British intelligence.

The bulk of the book *I ženy chtěly bojovat! Československé ženy v britských armádních pomocných sborech ATS a WAAF za druhé světové války* [Women Wanted to Fight Too! Czechoslovak Women in the British ATS and WAAF Auxiliary Units during the Second World War] is comprised of exchanges of letters, information and arguments for and against the participation of Czechoslovak women in the war effort. Women rarely got a word in edgeways in this argument. The book touches on three war zones – Great Britain, the Middle East and the Soviet Union – juxtaposing the different rationale that led women to or that prevented them from participating in the war effort. This juxtaposition illustrates the argument that women wanted to be helpful in various capacities, to win the war on behalf of their country. One woman appealed to men on the battlefield to accept them as follows:

"Friends-soldiers! We salute you from one camp, 'somewhere in the Middle East'. We don't know how you view women's emancipation, but we believe that you were pleasantly surprised when you learned that we have decided to exchange our civil [clothes] for khaki. You don't have to be jealous, for the time being we shall not meddle in the affairs of cannons nor do we want to shoot down airplanes. But you must reconcile yourselves to the fact that we shall sit

behind the driving wheel, that you will meet us in hospitals, in warehouses or in offices.” (p. 154)²

But the impediment to women joining the Czechoslovak foreign army lay not with the “friends-soldiers”.

After a brief review of the state of the art and before broaching the crux of the book’s central issues, Stegurová gives a useful historical background to women’s participation in the war effort in several European countries prior to the Second World War and to the circumstances, the fears and the prejudices that surrounded their recruitment during the war. The Ministry of National Defence in exile preferred men without rank to fill the spots in the Czechoslovak foreign army. Around 1941, women began to join the ranks of their British counterpart. The initiative was undertaken by the Council of Czechoslovak Women (*Rada československých žen*) in Great Britain founded in the second half of 1941. Was the government in exile behind the initiative? We do not know. With the government’s acquiescence but without it taking much interest in their welfare, Czechoslovak women joined the auxiliary units of the British army and air force. They learned the ins and outs of handling weapons but were not allowed to use them. This rule could not always be enforced. Should the need arise, women did operate the guns.

The book delves into the negotiations between the British War Office and the Czechoslovak Ministry of Defence regarding the issue of female volunteers who wanted to join the war effort. While the Czechoslovak military establishment in Great Britain was unwilling or incapable of organizing the women’s units attached to the Czechoslovak foreign army, the British were unwilling to let the Czechoslovaks meddle in British affairs by allowing the formation of Czechoslovak women’s units within the British army. Women could join the auxiliary units but on an individual basis.

When probing into the situation of Czechoslovak women in the Middle East, Stegurová gives a more intimate portrayal of the women who joined the land force. Mainly spouses of officers, these women became an economic burden to the government, which wanted to evacuate them, separating them from their male partners. Enrolling in the army was not only the fulfilment of a perceived duty and of their desire but a way not to be removed from the locations which they shared with their men. It was true that men’s bias against women wearing uniforms was ever-present. The war disrupted the traditional social order, women either abandoned their traditional role or had to combine their engagement in the war effort with that of being mothers, homemakers and wives. If in the process

² The translation from the original Czech is mine.

women felt emancipated, that was an unintended consequence of any government's political and economic decision.

Czechoslovak women in the USSR war zone illustrate the complexity of the phenomenon. Legally, women were prevented from belonging to the army, but Lieutenant Ludvík Svoboda (later General and Czechoslovak President) encouraged them to participate in the war effort, independently of what the Ministry of Defence and the government in London might have thought. Indeed, according to Svoboda's memoirs, President Edvard Beneš and the Minister of National Defence, Jan Sergěj Ingr, had no interest in strengthening the Czechoslovak army in the Soviet Union in any way so that the liberation of Czechoslovakia did not come from there. A women's fighting force would not have made a difference, but this might have been one element in putting the brakes on women joining the battlefield, or Svoboda might have thought so.³ But Svoboda ignored the legalities of women's participation in the war effort and women went to the front.

In Great Britain Czechoslovak women participated in the war effort shoulder to shoulder with British women, usually in the service sector: they trained together and they went to dances together. But overall, the information regarding their day-to-day hardships and joys is thin. True, these women left piecemeal testimonies which did not allow the author to reconstruct a coherent war time experience. However, the existing testimonies of British women with whom the Czechoslovak women served in the same units would have helped to fill this void. Therefore, Stegurová's book deals more with men's board room discussions than with women's experiences. It is also true that war was the realm of men, but the reason why we are given more from the world of diplomacy than of women's lives on the ground lies in the methodology and sources adopted.

Karolína Stegurová states at the outset of the book that her conceptual approach is one of "traditional historical analysis" (p. 19), not gender theory. Indeed, her method is a critical analysis of sources and literature, providing the reader with a detailed description of the protracted decision-making processes of Czechoslovak bureaucracy regarding women's participation in the Czechoslovak foreign army. This document-based historical research thus becomes an accumulation of opinions and rhetoric. The advantage of sticking rigorously to the facts is that Stegurová leaves no room for speculation. However, it would have been useful to pause from time to time and to provide reflections and elucidations of the primary sources so as to engage the reader in a dialogue.

Stegurová's book follows on from Ivan Procházka's *A královskou korunu měly* [Those with the Royal Crown], which is a useful register of women in British

³ I thank Prokop Tomek for this insight.

military units, however not a thorough investigation.⁴ This makes her study a pioneering incursion into uncharted territory but at the same time it is a missed opportunity to advance the field of gender studies.⁵ Stegurová's bibliography shows that she is aware of that path but decided not to take it.

Finally, Karolína Stegurová delves into women's return to liberated Czechoslovakia. The Red Army received a warmer welcome than the women arriving from the Middle East or from Great Britain. One reason was that the official end of the war was marked on 8 May 1945, so by the time most of these women were demobilized and returned home, the celebration was long over. Consequently, their period of service was recognized as lasting only until 8 May 1945, even though they might have been demobilized a year later. This was not an insignificant subtraction from their service sheet because every year deducted was a year less to be counted for their pension. After the war, women were accepted into the Czechoslovak army, an option denied to them during the war. But the change in regime in 1948 altered the original meaning of women's desire to participate in the armed forces and their numbers subsequently decreased.

In sum: the war had a drastic impact on gender roles, on emancipation, on gaining authority and power in the domestic realm, when male employees and workers, husbands and sons, were drafted to the frontline. Women gained access to public spaces and to employment previously closed to them. How did the gender roles of women who had returned from the war change in post-war Czechoslovakia? The examination of this question could perhaps be on the agenda for future research.

Keywords:

Czechoslovakia; Great Britain; Middle East; Soviet Union; Second World War; Czechoslovak resistance; British Army; Auxiliary Territorial Service; Women's Auxiliary Air Force; women and war; women in the armed forces

⁴ PROCHÁZKA, Ivan: *A královskou korunu měly: Stručný pohled na službu čs. žen v jednotkách britské armády za druhé světové války*. Praha, Vojenský historický ústav 2016.

⁵ See, for instance, SUMMERFIELD, Penny: *Reconstructing Women's Wartime Lives: Discourse and Subjectivities in Oral Histories in the Second World War*. Manchester – New York, Manchester University Press 1998; WINGFIELD, Nancy M. – BUCUR, Maria (eds.): *Gender and War in Twentieth-Century Eastern Europe*. Bloomington – Indianapolis, Indiana University Press 2006.