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Engendering Empire: The British Women's Military Services in India and the Middle East, 1939-1945

Natalie McDonald

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Reflective Essay
Claremont Colleges Library Undergraduate Research Award

Natalie McDonald, Pomona College '19

The story of my senior thesis begins less with a moment of inspiration than with one of idle curiosity. *Were there*, I wondered 15 months ago, *women's military services in the British colonies during the Second World War as there were in the U.K.?* A few quick Google searches led me to an online version of “We Were There,” a 2000 Ministry of Defence photographic exhibition chronicling the involvement of non-white British subjects in the armed forces from the seventeenth century through to the modern day.¹ The section of the exhibit devoted to the Second World War included a brief segment on “Women in War” featuring photographs of the Women’s Auxiliary Corps (India) as well as Middle Eastern members of the Auxiliary Territorial Service.

My curiosity was irreversibly piqued. The topic of colonial women’s service in the British military spoke to my burgeoning interest in the histories of twentieth century gender and empire. Why, given histories of imperial oppression, did Indian and Middle Eastern women choose to join the British services? I proceeded to WorldCat via the Claremont Colleges library catalog, eager to see what historians had to say on the subject. When multiple searches failed to turn up relevant results, I suspected this was indicative not of shortcomings in my research skills—well-honed thanks to a series of tutorials with Adam Rosenkranz over the past four years—but of something much more interesting: a historiographic silence. As it turned out, the only existing studies devoted exclusively to colonial women’s service in the British army during the Second World War are *Hebrew Women Join the Forces* by Anat Granit-Hacohen² and *West Indian Women at War* by Ben Bousquet and Colin Douglas.³

If the scholarship was not going to shed light on the overseas women’s services, I would, I realized, have to turn to the archive. Thanks to my familiarity with the Claremont Colleges library catalog, I was able to navigate those of the British Library, National Archives, and Imperial War Museum, only to discover that each was home to a plethora of primary sources on the overseas

¹ Ministry of Defence (U.K.), “The We Were There Exhibition,” The National Archives, May 23, 2005, <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20050523230947/http://www.mod.uk/wewerethere/exhibit.html>.

² Anat Granit-Hacohen, *Hebrew Women Join the Forces: Jewish Women from Palestine in the British Forces during the Second World War* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2017).

³ Ben Bousquet and Colin Douglas, *West Indian Women at War: British Racism in World War II* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1991).

women's services. With the support of two Pomona College grants, I was able to spend four weeks conducting research in London archives over the summer of 2018.

I was in my element reading through dense files of official government policy, letters, and diaries. However, I quickly became aware that something was amiss. At the National Archives, government memos enumerated regulations for the overseas women's services. The private papers at the Imperial War Museum and British Library were those of British women who served in the Middle East or India. I could, in other words, find no sources in which colonial women's voices were directly represented; rather, the archives seemed to be "circling" the Indian and Middle Eastern members of the overseas women's services. "I think I'm encountering a rather significant gap," I wrote my advisor, Professor Helena Wall, after my first week in the archives, "I'm trying to think if there is a way to either work with that gap, or fill it in."

I ended up choosing to work with the archival "gap." Despite the sources' limitations, I realized it was possible to become attuned to some of the complexities of Middle Eastern and Indian women's experiences in the services by reading hundreds of pages of primary sources "against the grain." A wide variety of scholarly sources—all accessible to me thanks to Interlibrary Loan—allowed me to contextualize my evidence in a scholarly conversation about the gendered exertion of imperial power in the late-British Empire. Elisa Camiscioli, for example, has called on historians of gender and empire to transcend additive historical frameworks that represent the "addition of women to male-dominated historical narratives; and, more specifically, the addition of white women to historical accounts of empire."⁴ Instead, Camiscioli suggests that we turn to "the scene of erasure to elucidate the micropolitics of imperial rule."⁵ In many ways, my thesis might be read as an attempt to trace the erasure from collective memory of Middle Eastern and Indian women's participation in the overseas women's services during the Second World War.

As one of six Pomona College Humanities Studio Undergraduate Fellows, I have had the opportunity to consider my thesis through the lens of the Studio's annual theme: "fail better." Initially, I was interested in considering what happens when a history *fails* to survive in collective memory. However, the process of researching and writing my thesis has ended up revealing my own inevitable failure as a historian to tell the story I want to tell. The thesis I set out to write would look very different from the one that follows. But, in encountering the colonial archive, I

⁴ Elisa Camiscioli, "Women, Gender, Intimacy, and Empire," *Journal of Women's History* 25, no. 4 (2013): 139.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 144.

came up against inescapable silences that prevented me from exploring the wartime experiences of colonial women as expressed in their own voices. At the same time, however, I realized that those archival silences can become productive if historians read both *against* and *along* the archival grain in order to shed light on the continuous and ongoing negotiation of imperial power.⁶

That being said, the fact that I chose to work with the archival “gap” instead of filling it in does not preclude the possibility that further research might unearth local women’s diaries and letters—absent from the British colonial archive—in India or Israel. Indeed, as a result of my archival research, I have come to recognize that linguistic aptitude opens epistemological windows by allowing historians to access sources in languages besides the colonial tongue (hence my intention to study Arabic in graduate school). As such, I recognize that my thesis is far from the whole story of Indian and Middle Eastern women’s wartime experiences. But it is one narrative thread, one that I hope might add to the increasingly rich and complex tapestry of writing on gender, imperial power, and the nature of historical erasure.

⁶ As called for by Ann Laura Stoler in *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

**ENGENDERING EMPIRE:
THE BRITISH WOMEN'S MILITARY SERVICES
IN INDIA AND THE MIDDLE EAST, 1939–1945**

Natalie D. McDonald
Pomona College
Department of History

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I am most grateful to the Pomona College History Department and Summer Undergraduate Research Program for generously awarding me grants that made it possible to conduct research at London archives over the summer of 2018. Upon my arrival at Heathrow, a Border Force officer asked what had brought me to the U.K for four weeks. When I told her I would be researching Indian and Middle Eastern women's service in the British military during the Second World War, her face lit up. This is precisely the kind of story, she said, that needs to be told in Britain today. Her gracious welcome and heartfelt encouragement made all the difference as I settled into an unfamiliar life of academic research abroad. My sincere appreciation goes to the staff at the Imperial War Museum, British Library, National Archives,

and National Army Museum, for generously assisting a novice archive-user. Moreover, local knowledge is invaluable to any researcher, and in London, nobody is a better source of such intelligence than a taxi driver. To the cabbie who suggested I visit the National Army Museum's archives: thank you.

This thesis, though most immediately the product of one year's worth of intensive research and writing, is also the result of four rich years of historical study at Pomona College. Endless thanks to each and every one of the professors who have encouraged my love of the past. Before arriving at Pomona, I was fortunate to attend a high school that valued the humanities. To my teachers at Vistamar: you played a crucial part in setting me down the historian's path I am pursuing today. Thank you.

And finally, words cannot express sufficient gratitude to my parents. For sharing articles, essays, and books that made you think of my research, and also for instilling me with a deep love of both the past and the written word: thank you from the bottom of my heart. This is dedicated to you.

INTRODUCTION
Gender, Empire, and the Second World War:
The British Women's Services in India and the Middle East

English women's participation in the war effort between 1939 and 1945 is well remembered and widely recognized. Mostly forgotten, however, are those who served in the women's branches of the British military in imperial possessions overseas. Both English and local women were employed in "auxiliary" duties ranging from clerical to medical as members of the Women's Auxiliary Corps (India) (WAC(I)) and—in Egypt and Palestine—the Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS) and Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF). The overseas women's services represented the simultaneous diffusion of English women into the empire and the inclusion—albeit tenuous inclusion—of local women into the imperial fold. Proceeding from the premise that "after World War I, the importance of women to any comprehensive strengthening of the empire was fully accepted by the government for the first time in British history,"¹ this work investigates how the establishment, experience, depiction, and memory of the overseas women's services in India and the Middle East shed light on the continuous and ongoing negotiation of British imperial power.²

My work contributes to a literature that highlights the imperative of analyzing British imperialism through a gendered lens.³ Historians Philippa Levine and Susan Grayzel have argued

¹ Brian L. Blakeley, "The Society for the Oversea Settlement of British Women and the Problems of Empire Settlement, 1917-1936," *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies* 20, no. 3 (1988): 421. Blakeley considers women's interwar role as agents of imperial consolidation in the context of the Society for the Oversea Settlement of British Women, a government agency charged with sponsoring the emigration of English women to the Dominions. Barbara Bush has made a similar argument, noting that after World War I, women were seen as "Empire Builders"; see Barbara Bush, "Gender and Empire: The Twentieth Century," in *Gender and Empire*, ed. Philippa Levine (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007): 77-111.

² Ideally, my study would encompass the recruitment of West Indian servicewomen to the Auxiliary Territorial Service; however, I have chosen to limit the scope of my argument to India and the Middle East because these two regions have traditionally been considered the "geopolitical gateposts of Britain's empire in 'the East'"; see Maya Jasanoff, *Edge of Empire: Lives, Culture, and Conquest in the East, 1750-1820* (New York: Vintage, 2005), 6.

³ This historiography was initiated three decades ago with Margaret Strobel, *European Women and the Second British Empire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), and Nupur Chaudhuri and Margaret Strobel, *Western Women and Imperialism: Complicity and Resistance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992).

that “changing labour practices and policies, the experience of total war, and the expansion and subsequent decline of the British empire were all phenomena where gender more than mattered: where it was, in critical ways, definitive.”⁴ By considering how gender interacted with the exertion (and resistance) of imperial power in the overseas women’s services, I aim to transcend an “additive” historical framework—a framework that, per the definition of Elisa Camiscioli, represents the “mere addition of empire to a nation-based story; the addition of women to male-dominated historical narratives; and, more specifically, the addition of white women to historical accounts of empire.”⁵ Camiscioli argues that historians should instead consider “contact zones,” or “network[s] of negotiation and exchange...as the medium through which raced, sexed, and gendered bodies interact with one another and with systems of domination.”⁶ By doing so, she claims, we can subvert false dichotomies between colonizer and colonized on the one hand, and metropole and periphery on the other. The overseas women’s services in India and the Middle East might be considered one such “contact zone.”

Indeed, my methodology is informed most explicitly by the new imperial history, an analytical framework that emphasizes dynamics of exchange between Britain and its empire. We can only understand the evolution of the overseas women’s services by recognizing the parallel but opposing vectors between metropole and periphery, periphery and metropole. Such an approach requires the interweaving of top-down and bottom-up—that is, institutional and social—perspectives, and therefore the analysis of sources running the gamut from official state memorandum to personal diary. Through such a survey, it becomes clear that the colonial and military patriarchy coopted the labor and bodies of British as well as local women to enact imperial

⁴ Philippa Levine and Susan R. Grayzel, Introduction to *Gender, Labor, War and Empire: Essays on Modern Britain* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 10.

⁵ Elisa Camiscioli, “Women, Gender, Intimacy, and Empire,” in *Journal of Women's History* 25, no. 4 (2013): 139.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 141. Camiscioli attributes “contact zones” to Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992).

power in India and the Middle East. Because servicewomen variously abetted and resisted such power, the overseas women's services occasioned the contestation, defense, and eventual expansion of the boundaries of imperial belonging. That being said, my analysis suggests that local recruitment for the services represented a flawed process of inclusion. As will be explored in the Conclusion, "imperial inclusion" as manifested in the overseas women's services relied on simultaneous othering, tokenization, and erasure—the vestiges of which survive into our postcolonial moment.

This project is not a military history, but a social history set against the backdrop of war.⁷ I recognize that the women's services represent a privileged form of participation in the wartime economy; the majority of British, Indian, and Middle Eastern women were employed in less "glamorous" labor, including on farms, in factories, and as sex-workers.⁸ Nonetheless, as an institutional space where the socio-political community is imagined and citizen-subject belonging enacted, the military is an essential stage on which to consider imperial power dynamics—both their exertion and their resistance. Indeed, it is essential the reader understand from the outset that this work should not be read as a history of colonial loyalty to the British Empire. To do so would be to grossly oversimplify a story of cross-cultural interaction in a fraught socio-political arena where power and identity were negotiated on a daily basis.⁹

With race, gender, and class interacting in complex and unpredictable ways, the overseas women's services must be understood as a matrix of power relations defined not by orderly stratification, but by persistent ambiguity. Indian WAC(I)s, for example, were primarily upper class,

⁷ Cynthia Enloe's theory of warfare as a "socio-economic process" justifies such an approach. See Yasmin Khan, "Sex in an Imperial War Zone: Transnational Encounters in Second World War India," *History Workshop Journal* 73, no. 1 (April 2012): 243.

⁸ Khan, "Sex in an Imperial War Zone."

⁹ For a discussion of the contested nature of British identity in the metropole during the Second World War, see Sonya O. Rose, *Which People's War?: National Identity and Citizenship in Britain, 1939-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

while the European Jewish women of the Palestinian ATS and WAAF defied racialized constructions of the traditional non-white colonial subject. And what about English women? Although the overseas women's services represented their incorporation into the imperial project, their diffusion into the empire also challenged the premises of British imperialism, traditionally gendered male. Indeed, we might consider British women's service overseas a facet of imperial "feminization," a process that Barbara Bush argues manifested following the First World War in the literal diffusion of British wives into the empire and also "in an increasing emphasis on welfare and development" as opposed to (masculine) domination.¹⁰ Moreover, as Chapter II will explore, the overseas services provided British women with an opportunity to escape the limits gender and class imposed on them at home; in the Middle East and India, they had status and freedom by virtue of their (racialized) nationality.

This work offers a strikingly different perspective on the Second World War than that underpinning the collective memory of the vast majority of the Western world. The period between 1939 and 1945 is best understood as a multiplicity of wars, playing out not only in Europe, East Asia, and the Pacific, but also—due largely to Britain's imperial reach—in the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia. Moreover, a truly global assessment of the conflict must move beyond the battlefield to consider its wide-ranging socio-political repercussions. Indeed, the Second World War marks a watershed in the history of both India and the British Empire. In her landmark monograph, *The Raj at War: A People's History of India's Second World War*, Yasmin Khan highlights the vast Indian contribution to the British war effort. At the outset of war, Whitehall assumed "India would come to the aid of the motherland, and the state would draw on manpower and resources as it saw fit,"¹¹ as it had during the First World War a

¹⁰ Bush, "Gender and Empire: The Twentieth Century," 80.

¹¹ Khan, *The Raj at War: A People's History of India's Second World War* (London: Vintage, 2016), xi.

quarter of a century earlier. And it certainly did so again, relying on Indian labor, industry, and resources from 1939 to 1945, especially as Japanese invasion of South Asia loomed. However, Khan argues, the Second World War also spelled the end of the Raj: “It heightened nationalism, both in India and in Britain, so that older forms of transnational solidarity became dated and obsolete.”¹² The war, therefore, defined a period of dramatic transition in the Raj, as an analysis of the WAC(I) will further elucidate.

Whereas Anglo-Indian military cooperation was a tradition stretching back to the 17th century, the Second World War was the first (and last) conflict the Empire faced with Palestine as a territorial possession.¹³ By 1940, the British mandate government had spent two decades negotiating between Palestine’s Arab and Jewish populations in an attempt to maintain a tenuous truce, while simultaneously promoting their own imperial interests. Michael J. Cohen has argued that, on the one hand, Whitehall deemed Jewish Palestinians—most of whom were recent immigrants from Central and Eastern Europe—convenient “proxy” imperialists to be charged with carrying out Britain’s “civilizing” project among inferior Arab “natives.”¹⁴ On the other hand, it was essential that Whitehall appease the Arab population in order to protect British interests in other Arab-ruled Middle Eastern countries.¹⁵ By increasing the stakes of imperial loyalty and political identity, the Second World War—and specifically the German army’s advance through North Africa—brought these dynamics into stark relief, as will be assessed here within the con-

¹² Ibid., xvi.

¹³ As part of the territory mandated to Britain by the League of Nations following the First World War, Palestine did not, strictly speaking, belong to the Empire; however, it was far from immune to colonial dynamics. James L. Gelvin has argued that “the mandates system was little more than thinly disguised imperialism”; see *The Modern Middle East: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 181. Also see see Michael J. Cohen, *Britain's Moment in Palestine: Retrospect and Perspectives, 1917-48*, *Israeli History, Politics and Society* 55 (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2014). Ashley Jackson has pointed out that the historiography of the imperial war has thus far focused on the Dominions and the Raj. “A truly imperial perspective,” she claims, “must also consider...the war of the sixty million people of the Colonial Empire—the red-on-the-map *not* including the Dominions and the Raj”; Palestine was, in fact, red on the map. See Ashley Jackson, *The British Empire and the Second World War* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2006), 23.

¹⁴ Cohen, *Britain's Moment in Palestine*, 42.

¹⁵ Ibid., 3.

text of the women's services. Both Jewish and Arab women were recruited to the ATS and WAAF, which maintained an active presence in Palestine as well as Egypt throughout the war.

The only existing studies devoted exclusively to colonial women's service in the British army are *Hebrew Women Join the Forces* by Anat Granit-Hacohen¹⁶ and *West Indian Women at War* by Ben Bousquet and Colin Douglas.¹⁷ Granit-Hacohen positions her book as a "test case in the study of gender and nationalism" deeply rooted in Israeli history.¹⁸ She focuses on the Jewish women who joined the Auxiliary Territorial Service in Palestine, arguing that their enlistment served nationalist and feminist aims. While the British preferred mixed ATS units, Yishuv authorities insisted upon Jewish-only units with "a nationalist-Hebrew character"¹⁹ and required recruits to wear armbands identifying them as Palestinian.²⁰ In this way, colonial women's service, Granit-Hacohen claims, became a way of asserting nationalism within an imperial framework. She highlights feminist as well as nationalist motivations for joining the British services, claiming that Yishuv women's decision to enlist should be seen as "an independent ideological expression and as the fulfilment of a lengthy struggle for their position in Yishuv society."²¹ In other words, they served to improve their local socio-political status.²² While Granit-Hacohen places the ATS within the history of Israeli nationalist feminism, I place it within the social history of the British Empire. I do so not to suggest that Yishuv women served in the British army out of loyalty to the mandate government, but because I believe the overseas women's ser-

¹⁶ Anat Granit-Hacohen, *Hebrew Women Join the Forces: Jewish Women from Palestine in the British Forces during the Second World War* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2017).

¹⁷ Ben Bousquet and Colin Douglas, *West Indian Women at War: British Racism in World War II* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1991).

¹⁸ Granit-Hacohen, *Hebrew Women Join the Forces*, xiii.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 45.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 49. About 150 Arab women also joined the services, but Granit-Hacohen gives them only cursory attention.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² This interpretation suggests Granit-Hacohen views Yishuv women's service in the ATS as Meir Chazan does their advocacy for inclusion in kibbutz guard duties during the Arab Revolt (1936–1939): a bid to participate in state-building on equal terms with men, and more generally, to create a society defined by gender equality. See Meir Chazan, "The Struggle of Kibbutz Women to Participate in Guard Duties during the Arab Revolt, 1936–1939," *Journal of Israeli History* 31, no. 1 (March 2012): 83–108.

vices—including the ATS in Palestine—can shed light on the shifting nature of Britain’s late-imperial project.

Bousquet and Douglas come closer to my historiographic approach in *West Indian Women at War*, which considers the women from the Caribbean who crossed the Atlantic to join the ATS in Britain. Bousquet and Douglas frame their short study as a work of Black history that investigates why West Indian women chose to serve in the British forces given long-term imperial oppression.²³ It is worth noting that they highlight the key role oral histories played in their research, remarking that “it was not enough just to thumb through War Office records and documents about the Caribbean.”²⁴ Indeed, an imperative of social history is to approach events from the “bottom-up”; to do so in histories of warfare, Khan argues, “involves a moral dimension.”²⁵ That is, to focus on the human experience of war is to refrain from a Manichean interpretation of warfare (“enemy versus ally” or “good versus bad”), to instead focus on “the social costs of war and the coercion that accompanies such massive military commitment.”²⁶ Therefore, as much as possible, I seek to consider not only the contributions of colonial women to the “war effort,” but also the impact both empire and war had on their lives.

By drawing on government documents, Chapter I reveals that War Office and Air Ministry officials were forced by wartime labor pressures to reconsider the gendered and imperial boundaries of British identity. Although we see an expedient move toward inclusivity with the gradual inclusion of non-white colonial women into the public sphere, the creation of the overseas women’s services was overall defined by attempts to maintain imperial power dynamics in India and the Middle East. Chapter II turns to the personal accounts of British ser-

²³ Bousquet and Douglas, *West Indian Women at War*, ix.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

²⁵ Yasmin Khan, *The Raj at War*, xiv.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, xiii.

vicewomen (letters, diaries, and oral histories) in an attempt to illuminate the lived realities of gendered and colonial power dynamics in the overseas women's services. This bottom-up perspective allows us to consider the extent to which the services recreated women—both British and local—as imperial subjects, but more importantly, it also sheds light on servicewomen's resistance to imperial power. I return to a top-down approach in Chapter III, this time questioning how the overseas women's services were coopted by British media in an attempt to preserve the empire. Newsreel footage and print journalism allow us to see that local recruitment had, by the end of the war, evolved into a propagandistic reaction to rising anti-colonial tensions in India and with the Jewish community in Palestine.

Bousquet and Douglas preface their brief study by noting “the decades of historical neglect” suffered by the West Indian women who served in the British army; “hopefully historiography,” they write, “when less blinded by racism and sexism, will one day acknowledge that role as deserving its rightful place in the main text.”²⁷ Ideally, my work would bring colonial women's stories a little further into the “main text” of history, from which they have been absent for too long. The colonial archive and the limited set of voices represented there, however, makes this project difficult—hence the Conclusion, in which I will consider how Indian and Middle Eastern women's service during the war has been largely forgotten. I do so by analyzing the colonial archive itself as an institutional source that perpetuates gaps in both collective memory and scholarly discourse. As it is, my sources are inescapably British in perspective, including the personal papers and oral histories featured in Chapter II. By reading these “against the grain,” we can become attuned to some of the complexities of Middle Eastern and Indian women's experiences in the services. It remains to be seen whether further research might unearth local women's diaries and letters—absent from the British archive—in India or Israel.

²⁷ Bousquet and Douglas, *West Indian Women at War*, 5.

My work participates in an ongoing conversation among historians of the twentieth century British Empire devoted to complicating the memory of the Second World War as a purely national victory. In fact, as Ashley Jackson points out in *The British Empire and the Second World War*, “notwithstanding the Eurocentric manner in which it is often remembered, [the war] was viewed at the time as an imperial struggle, not only by the politicians and senior servicemen responsible for grand strategy, but also by many ordinary people around the world.”²⁸ Only 47.6 percent of British divisions were raised in the UK; the Empire and Commonwealth raised the rest.²⁹ However, as Jackson points out, there is a striking asymmetry between the contemporary perspective and recent memory. In his essay on the non-white male members of the Royal Air Force, Martin Francis notes historian Paul Gilroy’s argument that the “potent grip of the war on the nation’s culture and self-understanding created a myth that in 1940 Britain had attained a sense of national integration and purpose, to which ‘the chaotic, multicultural present’ would always be compared, and forever be found wanting.”³⁰ Both Francis’ non-white aircrew and the colonial women who play a central role in my project show that the war was *not* white and limited to the nation, but instead multicultural and imperial in scope. Thus, I hope this work participates in the “deconstruction” of “an uncontested and unitary sense of Britishness in the twentieth century.”³¹ By remembering the colonial and female dimensions of the Second World War—and how they were used to “engender” empire—we may come closer to eliminating the last vestiges of imperialism as manifested by the continuing fear of a “chaotic, multicultural present.”

²⁸ Jackson, *The British Empire and the Second World War*, 7.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 38.

³⁰ Martin Francis, “Men of the Royal Air Force, the Cultural Memory of the Second World War and the Twilight of the British Empire,” in *Gender, Labor, War and Empire*, 180-181.

³¹ Levine and Grayzel, Introduction to *Gender, Labor, War and Empire*, 9.

CHAPTER I: FORMATION

Mapping Imperial Power onto the Overseas Women's Services

As the Second World War placed increasing demands on British manpower, women were encouraged—and, as of 1941, required¹—to participate in war work. While many labored in factories, on farms, or as nurses, others chose to enlist in the women's branches of the British military, including the Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS) and Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF).² They were stationed throughout the United Kingdom and were employed in “auxiliary” duties ranging from clerical to medical. By 1941, the War Office and Air Ministry had begun to receive inquiries from both the Colonial Office and individual women from British colonies inquiring whether the ATS and WAAF were accepting colonial recruits. S.J. Cole of the Colonial Office wrote a colleague at the War Office in November to ask if there was “an urgent need for recruits from the colonies for the ATS? There may be colonies,” Cole noted, “in which no local uniformed organization has yet been formed and the women may be anxious to enroll themselves.”³ Indeed, while some colonies had raised women's services, not all had; the Women's Auxiliary Corps (India), for example, would not be established until 1942. Nonetheless, the War Office replied citing “strange [foreign] conditions” and limited “shipping space” as reasons why they were not seeking colonial recruits.⁴

However, both the War Office and the Air Ministry had been sending British ATS and WAAF servicewomen into the empire for months. In September 1940, Francis Marion Hayes, a Wing Officer in the WAAF, was sent to the Middle East “to investigate the possibilities of

¹ The Armed Forces Act of 1941, passed by Parliament in December of that year, allowed unmarried women between the ages of 20 and 30 to be conscripted for war work.

² See Jeremy A. Crang, “The Revival of the British Women's Auxiliary Services in the Late Nineteen-Thirties,” *Historical Research* 83, no. 220 (2010): 343–57. Crang emphasizes “the part women themselves played in pressurizing the armed forces to readmit them into their sphere” (356).

³ S.J. Cole to W.G.D. Knapton (WO 32/10653, The National Archives, hereafter TNA), November 12, 1941.

⁴ Knapton to Cole (WO 32/10653, TNA), undated draft.

setting up a WAAF organisation in that Command.”⁵ After a sea journey characterized by unfamiliar tropical weather and the fear of torpedo attack, Hayes arrived in Cairo. Here, she was met by Group Captain Forbes, Senior Personnel Staff Officer for the Royal Air Force Headquarters in the Middle East (HQRAFME). Forbes had been eagerly awaiting Hayes’ arrival, for she represented the potential solution to a pressing personnel shortage in his cypher offices caused by the impending evacuation of British civilians from Cairo. With the establishment of a WAAF squadron in the Middle East, a steady supply of “womanpower” would be secured and Forbes’ problem solved. When such a squadron was successfully established the following year, only British women were permitted to join; some were local (chiefly the wives and daughters of colonial and military officials), while others were sent overseas from the U.K.

This chapter examines the formation of the overseas women’s services. An institutional history, it draws upon official government documents including correspondence, memos, and minutes in order to illuminate the ways in which Whitehall mapped imperial power onto the British women’s services in the Middle East and India. Although we see an expedient move toward inclusivity with the eventual recruitment of non-white colonial women, the creation of the overseas women’s services was overall defined by attempts to maintain imperial power dynamics. In fact, for the first few years of the Second World War, the women’s services were carefully constructed as a space in which imperial authority was represented and engendered by white British women. This is indicated by British authorities’ careful control of both the labor and image of British women, as well as their attentive maintenance of imperial power structures upon the commencement of local recruitment.

⁵ “The Diary of Wing Officer Hayes’ Official Visit to Middle East” (Documents.7260, Imperial War Museum, hereafter IWM), September–October 1940.

Service Overseas: Controlling the Labor and Image of British Women

Initially, the militarization of women's labor in the Middle East did no more than eliminate the precarity involved in maintaining a civilian labor force in wartime. Forty female cypher (code) officers and seventy secretaries were employed on RAF stations in the Nile Delta, allowing the men who would traditionally occupy such positions to serve at the front.⁶ In her official report to RAF Headquarters following her visit, Hayes stressed that the advantages of establishing a WAAF squadron included increased discipline, efficiency, and mobility.⁷ Headquarters echoed the same sentiments in a subsequent report to the London Air Ministry, with Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief Arthur Longmore noting that it was "desirable to create a more organised force subject to service discipline and who could be accommodated wherever the headquarters moved in case of necessity."⁸ Due to heightened military activity in the vicinity of Cairo, civilian evacuation of the city loomed, threatening to dislocate the female cypher officers and secretaries on whom RAF stations relied. "At present," Longmore's report emphasized, "any of these who are wives or daughters of officers may be called upon to be evacuated and throw the headquarters completely out of gear. This would not be possible with WAAFs."⁹ To incentivize civilian women to join the WAAF—and therefore subject themselves to increased discipline and minimized freedom—the RAF offered higher rates of pay. Longmore's report to the Air Ministry noted that civilian cypher officers had "received a nominal sum of £E.15 [Egyptian pounds] a month. This payment has hitherto been accepted

⁶ F.M. Hayes, "Report on the Possible Formation of a Squadron of the WAAF Officers and Other Ranks for Duty in the Middle East" (AIR 23/6058, TNA), October 13, 1940, p.1.

⁷ Hayes, "Report on the Possible Formation of a Squadron of the WAAF."

⁸ Arthur Longmore, "Proposed Formation of Women's Auxiliary Air Force Unit in Middle East Command" (AIR 23/6058, TNA), October 16, 1940, p.1.

⁹ Further correspondence (AIR 2/8261, TNA) indicates RAF officials' desperation that the Air Ministry subject the Middle Eastern WAAF to full military discipline in order to curb high rates of resignation; the Air Ministry was hesitant to do so, fearing political backlash in the U.K.

more as a token payment...and was clearly an inadequate consideration for the work performed and hours worked by these ladies,” he concluded.¹⁰

However, there was an additional imperative for increasing servicewomen’s pay. In order to maintain an imperial hierarchy in Egypt, British officials considered it essential that British women’s reputations be protected.¹¹ In her report to RAF Headquarters, Hayes noted that “pay must be brought up...[because] the standard of living in this Command makes it imperative that the status of British women should be upheld.”¹² In fact, protecting British women’s status was considered more important than maintaining traditional military hierarchies within the services. In Longmore’s report to the Air Ministry, he expressed bafflement that “no rate of servant allowance is included, as native servants are required...for officers of the WAAF...since other ranks cannot be employed in a menial capacity in this country.”¹³ Along similar lines, Longmore noted that WAAF lodging allowances should be comparable for both officers and other ranks, because “little differentiation can be made from the requisite accommodation of the officer class from those of the other ranks.”¹⁴ In other words, it was imperative that all British servicewomen, regardless of rank, be housed well in order to maintain the optics of colonial superiority.

As WAAFs began to arrive in the Middle East from the United Kingdom—“for dispersal amongst the various branches” of locally recruited servicewomen¹⁵—the British authorities demonstrated increasing concern about managing the optics of “the servicewoman abroad.” In

¹⁰ Longmore, “Proposed Formation of Women’s Auxiliary Air Force Unit in Middle East Command,” p.3.

¹¹ Egypt had been nominally independent from British rule since 1922, following 40 years of occupation. However, the British maintained a military presence in the country, and—among other things—dictated Egyptian defense and foreign policy. See James L. Gelvin, *The Modern Middle East: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 187. Egypt’s persistently imperial aspect in the British imagination is revealed by a line in Olivia Manning’s novel of wartime Egypt, *The Danger Tree*: “They [young British soldiers] arrived in Egypt, fresh and innocent, imbued with the creed inw hcih they had been brought up. They believed that the British empire was the greatest force for good the world had ever known. They expected gratitude from the Egyptians and were pained to find themselves barely tolerated.” See *The Danger Tree* (New York: Atheneum, 1977), 23.

¹² Hayes, “Report on the Possible Formation of a Squadron of the WAAF,” p.1.

¹³ Longmore, “Proposed Formation of Women’s Auxiliary Air Force Unit in Middle East Command,” pp.3–4.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.4.

¹⁵ Hayes, “Report on the Possible Formation of a Squadron of the WAAF,” p.2.

October 1941, Hayes sent a telegram to the Command Press Office requesting that “before photographs of WAAF personnel are submitted to the Press they should be approved by the...WAAF.”¹⁶ Here, we see concern about media depictions of British servicewomen; however, Hayes betrayed a similar preoccupation with image when she wrote to the Chief Signals Officer that she was “not happy” about the existing code and cypher watches. A 1:30am watch change, she protested, “necessitates women waiting about in doorways or in the street [for transport], at an hour when European women of respectable habits do NOT wait about unchaperoned in this Country.”¹⁷ Hayes may well have been concerned about servicewomen’s safety, but the adjectival phrase—“European women *of respectable habits*”—suggests she was also anxious that British WAAs not be mistaken for prostitutes. This raises the following question: for whom were the British authorities so carefully tailoring the image of “the servicewoman abroad”?



Figure 1. Four British WAAF officers shortly after their arrival in Egypt.
© Imperial War Museum. Source: www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205208809

Gendered and imperial reasons for protecting British women’s “prestige” were inextricably intertwined; British authorities were anxious to maintain what Yasmin Khan calls

¹⁶ Hayes to the Command Press Office (AIR 23/6059, TNA), October 3, 1941.

¹⁷ Hayes to W.E.G Mann (AIR 23/6059, TNA), October 17, 1941.

“white women’s sacred inviolability,” a symbolic phenomenon at the heart of European imperial practice.¹⁸ In a March 1941 letter to Air Chief Marshal Longmore, one of his Vice Marshals advised that “employment out here presents special problems largely because of the outlook in the East to women.... In a country like Egypt they must be adequately supervised or else serious trouble may ensue and their health needs special safeguarding in certain respects.”¹⁹ Clearly influenced by “popular narratives of miscegenation [that] evoked images of predatory ‘oriental men,’”²⁰ he proceeded to call for the necessity of an administrative “hold over [servicewomen]” in order to ensure “their care and supervision” and prevent “epidemics of ‘regrettable incidents’”—presumably pregnancies. Certainly, having a “hold over” and “supervising” servicewomen suggests the circumscription of their individual agency. Longmore echoed the Air Officer’s admonishment in a letter to Philip Babington at the Air Ministry, adding that “the outlook regarding women generally in the East might do infinite harm to our good name and prestige.”²¹ British members of the WAAF serving in the Middle East were therefore subjected to increasing control over not only their labor through militarization, but (implicitly) over their bodies in order to protect their “sacred inviolability.”

Longmore’s letter to Babington was written in response to one sent him in January of 1941, asking about his views on “whether WAAFs should be sent overseas.”²² “At the present time,” the Babington noted, “no WAAF officer is commissioned and no WAAF airwoman is enlisted, with the result that they can, and do, resign in fairly large numbers.” As such, the

¹⁸ Khan, “Sex in an Imperial War Zone,” 254. Barbara Bush has considered how, in the Dominions, “virtuous white womanhood...reflect[ed] women’s central role in ‘domesticating the heart of the wild’, taming marauding ‘frontier masculinities’, and securing the stability and racial purity of the white Empire”; see Barbara Bush, “Gender and Empire: The Twentieth Century,” in *Gender and Empire*, ed. Philippa Levine (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007): 87.

¹⁹ Air Vice Marshal to Longmore (AIR 23/6058, TNA), March 4, 1941.

²⁰ Bush, “Gender and Empire: The Twentieth Century,” 86.

²¹ Longmore to Philip Babington (AIR 23/6058, TNA), March 4, 1941.

²² Babington to Longmore (AIR 23/6058, TNA), January 5, 1941.

Government had requested “examined” the possibility of “completely militaris[ing] the WAAF by proper commissions and enlistment, thus making them liable to the Air Force Act and discipline in every respect.” Longmore’s reply suggests his agreement that the WAAF should be “completely militarise[d]” in order that “full control...be assured over women coming overseas.” It is not entirely unexpected that concern about maintaining “white women’s sacred inviolability” in “the East” led to women—eventually non-British as well as British women—being officially integrated into the military sphere, where their labor, image, and bodies could be more easily controlled. As Khan has argued regarding the wartime Raj, “the way that women’s labour was harnessed to war subordinated them to the war effort, locking them into a patriarchal web of militarization and military intervention.”²³ Historian Karen Garner has similarly highlighted the tenuousness of wartime feminist “progress,” claiming that “even when they take on soldering duties, women and other feminized populations remain subordinated to the males in charge of the militarized realms.”²⁴

Local Recruitment: Maintaining Imperial Identities

Imperial power dynamics are further illuminated by turning to local recruitment. On October 21, 1940, the Commanding Officer at RAF Headquarters in Aboukir received a letter from Miss Virgine Khayat. Khayat had learned of the potential formation of a WAAF squadron and was writing to express her interest in applying. “For your information,” she wrote, “I am a graduate of the American Mission School, Alexandria, possessing a good knowledge of the Arabic, English and French languages. I am of Egyptian Nationality.”²⁵ Khayat was clearly a highly qualified candidate for the WAAF. However, the reply she received from the RAF noted

²³ Khan., “Sex in an Imperial War Zone,” 242.

²⁴ Karen Garner, *Women and Gender in International History: Theory and Practice* (London, UK: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 11.

²⁵ Virgine Khayat to Commanding Officer HQRAF Aboukir (AIR 23/6058, TNA), October 21, 1940.

that “no action can be taken in connection with your application as persons of British Nationality only can be enrolled. The offer of your services, however,” it was added, “is greatly appreciated.”²⁶ The WAAF would only recruit British women, despite the qualifications and eagerness of numerous non-British women such as Khayat. Why? The nominal reason was security. Security may indeed have been one reason for rejecting non-British recruits; however, Khayat and many similar applicants were also turned down in the interest of maintaining imperial power structures. Indeed, for the first few years of the Second World War, the women’s services in the Middle East were carefully constructed as a space in which imperial authority was represented and engendered by white, British women.

Only a week before Khayat sent her letter, RAF officials had established that only British women would be recruited for the WAAF; if not enough could be found locally, “suitable” women would be “imported” from the United Kingdom, Dominions, and colonies. In her October report to Longmore, Hayes noted that there “are sufficient wholly British women in the Delta area who would be willing to join the WAAF as wastage replacements.”²⁷ However, upon receipt of Hayes’ report, the Air Vice Marshal noted that “this is the one point on which I cannot agree. There are plenty of female clerks in Cairo etc. but a very limited number of competent ones of British birth and at present the shortage is most acute and incurable.”²⁸ In other words, there were “plenty of female clerks” of non-British birth, but apparently it went without saying—so far as the Air Vice Marshal was concerned—that these women were not suitable recruits for the WAAF. Longmore explicitly articulated the ostensible reason for the British-only policy a few days later, when he wrote to the Air Ministry that, “unfortunately in the interests of secrecy

²⁶ C.S. Moore to Khayat (AIR 23/6058), October 31, 1940.

²⁷ Hayes, “Report on the Possible Formation of a Squadron of the WAAF,” p.2.

²⁸ Air Vice Marshal to Longmore forwarding Hayes’ “Report on the Possible Formation of a Squadron of the WAAF” (AIR 23/6058, TNA), October 13, 1940.

it is not desirable to employ the many competent ladies of non-British nationality. It is thought, therefore, that it will be possible to increase the present strength from the Dominions and Colonies if enrolment of the WAAF were passed.”²⁹ Presumably Longmore preferred to recruit in the Dominions and Colonies instead of the United Kingdom so as to avoid increasing demand on the British “supply” of “womanpower.” In this way, imperial networks proved useful—networks of not only people, but also imagined networks of British identity.³⁰ Implicit in this correspondence is, of course, a racialized assumption whereby it was taken for granted that white women from the Dominions and colonies were more loyal than local non-white women; the former were “of British nationality” whereas the latter were not, despite the fact that all were subjects of the British Empire.

A similar conversation began in London the following year, making it increasingly clear that British military authorities were hesitant to invest in the labor of women from the imperial periphery—whether white or non-white. In an October 1941 letter to the Colonial and Dominions Offices, the War Office noted that “there would, of course, be no objection to the formation of Women’s Colonial Corps in other territories where the expense is borne by the Governments concerned.”³¹ Regarding colonial recruits, however, while “the Council would welcome suitable volunteers from any Dominion or Colony for the Auxiliary Territorial Service...they are, at the same time, anxious to avoid any interference with local recruiting for any women’s organization.” The letter continued to stipulate that volunteers from the colonies or dominions would be required to pay their own passage and repatriation. It does not require much

²⁹ Longmore, “Proposed Formation of Women’s Auxiliary Air Force Unit in Middle East Command.”

³⁰ As Ashley Jackson argues, “The war was something of an imperial heyday, though it is more often remembered as the swansong of Empire. During the war, the Empire approached the otherwise elusive status of a formidable, efficient and effective power system, prepared to exploit its apparently limitless resources, and able to deploy large-scale fighting forces simultaneously throughout the world.” See Ashley Jackson, *The British Empire and the Second World War* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2006), 22.

³¹ War Office to the Colonial Office & Dominions Office (WO 32/10653, TNA), October 4, 1941.

by way of reading between the lines to determine that the War Office was exceedingly hesitant to invest in colonial women's labor. Given the increasing demand for "womanpower," it would seem the War Office would consider local recruitment a worthwhile investment. But clearly the prospect of incorporating women from the imperial periphery into the British services was deemed unwise and impracticable. Why?

A few weeks later, the same debate began in the Air Ministry, prompted by the receipt of a letter from Sierra Leone. Miss Eva Wright was writing because, after applying to the WAAF, she had "received a letter telling me that my application was much appreciated & would be considered if I went to England subject to my Medical & suitability for service. They also told me that facilities for enrolment in this branch of service were very limited & only emanated from Gt. Britain & Northern Ireland. That was quite enough for me [&] I decided to go."³² Wright encountered difficulty booking her passage, since it had to be authorized in Liverpool. But, she wrote, "I'm *very* keen on doing my little bit & would so much like to join up," hence the inquiry as to whether there was any other means by which she might enlist in the WAAF. Clearly the immediate issue was the lack of local recruitment machinery. This cannot have been the only thing at stake, however, for Wright's letter sent the Air Ministry into turmoil. W. J. Bigg of the Colonial Office was the one to explicitly pinpoint the real issue in a minute dated November 26, 1941: "This is not a passport or travel question. The question at issue is whether colonial women can be enrolled in the WAAF...."³³ His attitude here is more explicit than in the letter he ended up writing to the Air Ministry, in which he noted that "the War Office attitude on this point is, I think, an unwise one, and they will, I feel sure, find it quite impossible when the war is over to

³² Eva Wright to the Air Ministry (WO 32/10653, TNA), October 30, 1941.

³³ W. J. Bigg, "Minute" (CO 323/1828/51, TNA), November 26, 1941.

maintain the attitude that such volunteers cannot be repatriated at the Government's expense."³⁴ In other words, Bigg doubted both the wisdom and practicality of the War Office's policy—articulated the previous year—that volunteers from the colonies or dominions would be required to pay their own passage and repatriation. He was subtly suggesting the Air Ministry pursue a different approach.

Indeed, in light of this ongoing debate in the War Office and Air Ministry, the Colonial Office advocated for the right of colonial women—including non-white colonial women—to enlist in the ATS and WAAF. Wright, it emerged, was black. "We assume," Ivor Cummings of the Colonial Office wrote in a December letter to the Air Ministry, "that in accordance with the general policy announced in October 1939 relating to the eligibility of coloured personnel for service in the Armed Forces of the Crown, there is no colour bar in the WAAF and that coloured women who are in this country and who are medically and otherwise suitable are just as eligible as white women for service in that Force."³⁵ In addition, Cummings called for the implementation of "local recruiting machinery" in the colonies.³⁶ This exchange would certainly appear to suggest the Colonial Office was more inclusive than the War Office, as claimed by Bousquet and Douglas.³⁷ Or was their advocacy for the recruitment of "coloured" women due to no more than an acute awareness of the public relations involved? "There may be a few Colonies," Cummings continued, "where it would be possible to obtain white volunteers only without raising delicate colour questions, but if the appeal is to be a general one, there can, of course, be no question of a colour bar."

³⁴ W. J. Bigg to P.N. Shone (WO 32/10653, TNA), December 2, 1941.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Such "machinery" had apparently already been set up for men, as both Wright and Cummings refer to RAF recruits from Sierra Leone arriving in England.

³⁷ See Ben Bousquet and Colin Douglas, *West Indian Women at War: British Racism in World War II* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1991).

The Air Ministry, however, was meanwhile attempting to limit local recruitment in the imperial periphery, implying that the prestige and status of the women's services could only be ensured by women from the metropole. In a minute to RAF Headquarters in the Middle East dated November 1941, an Air Ministry official expressed that "I am not anxious that you should recruit excessively locally and would prefer to supply from here and thus avoid risk of nepotism and engagement of unsuitable people with peculiar ideas which are hitherto foreign to WAAF."³⁸ There is, unfortunately, no hint as to what these "unsuitable," "peculiar," and "foreign" ideas might be, but the reference is certainly tantalizing. Might the Air Ministry be referring to anticolonialism? Zionism? Regardless, Headquarters' Senior Personnel Staff Officer replied with the assurance that he had "only recruited locally a small percentage into the commissioned ranks of the WAAF and...I have no intention of increasing the number of those locally enrolled into the WAAF. [...] I can assure you that my staff have done and will do their utmost to ensure that the very high standard now existing in the WAAF is maintained in the personnel locally enrolled as officers."³⁹ Clearly, London was concerned that women of the imperial periphery—even white, British-born women—would not maintain a sufficiently "high standard," thus endangering the imperial status quo.

However, the WAAF's recruitment policy in the Middle East was characterized by decided ambiguity; slippages in official correspondence over the next few months suggest instability in official understandings of who counted as "British." In February of 1942, the "local supply" of British women was officially deemed "exhausted." Hayes traveled to Nairobi in order to hold a WAAF selection board in that city, the requirements for recruitment being: "Age limits 18 to 42. Both Parents must be British by birth. Candidates should be reliable, discreet,

³⁸ Air Ministry to HQRAFME (AIR 23/6059, TNA), November 25, 1941.

³⁹ HQRAFME to Air Ministry (AIR 23/6059, TNA), November 28, 1941.

methodical, and accurate, with liking for simple arithmetic.”⁴⁰ Here we see the implementation of Longmore’s idea—initially proposed in October 1940—of using imperial networks to the WAAF’s advantage; if insufficient (white) British women were to be found in the Middle East, they would be found in Kenya. In the meantime, RAF 207 Group sent a message to Headquarters about an “American born candidate” for the WAAF. Headquarters replied noting the “present ruling is that locally enrolled officers this Command must be British by birth.”⁴¹ 207 Group, however, protested that “this application has been subject of public discussion and press comment. Suggest there can be no objection to American of British antecedents.”⁴² Whether Headquarters deemed the American sufficiently “British” for acceptance to the WAAF is unclear, for on March sixth, a message was received from the Air Ministry commanding they stop “recruiting any more WAAF anywhere.”⁴³

By 1943, a shift in policy began, characterized by the recruitment of non-British women in Palestine. As early as December of 1941, Chief Signals Officer William Mann had noted local cypher ladies’ superior “standard” and “efficiency.” “I think,” he wrote, “that it is unfortunate that the percentage of locally enlisted officers was not made much greater. We are very short of WAAF officers, and the standard of Signals security has been lowered by the employment of WAAF officers from the U.K.”⁴⁴ By suggesting increased local recruitment, Mann was resisting London’s conceit that women from the U.K. were more reliable and of a higher standard than local British women. One year later, on New Year’s Eve 1942, RAF Headquarters in the Middle East received a message from Air Headquarters in the Levant: “Several application[s] have recently been received at this Headquarters from female Palestinians to enlist into the WAAF for

⁴⁰ HQRAFME to 207 Group (AIR 23/6059, TNA), February 13, 1942.

⁴¹ HQRAFME to 207 Group (AIR 23/6059, TNA), February 24, 1942.

⁴² 207 Group to HQRAFME (AIR 23/6059, TNA), February 29, 1942.

⁴³ Air Ministry to HQRAFME (AIR 23/6060, TNA), March 6, 1942.

⁴⁴ William Mann to Senior Personnel Staff Officer (AIR 23/6059, TNA), December 8, 1941.

service within the Middle East. [...] It is requested that this Headquarters be informed whether it is your policy to restrict WAAF enlistment to girls of British nationality resident in England or whether any possibility exists of a recruiting programme being instituted in the Middle East.”⁴⁵ Such a program had successfully begun for the Auxiliary Territorial Service.

However, the Palestinian women to whom Levant Headquarters referred were of European descent; the Colonial Office termed them “Czechoslovak-Jewish women” in a February 1943 letter to the War Office. Indeed, the Colonial Office persistently questioned the decided racial prejudice that continued to underpin official policy, suggesting the British military authorities were less concerned about “Britishness” than “whiteness.” Mentioning the recent initiation of local recruitment in the Middle East, the Colonial Office expressed their wish “that facilities at least equal to those which it is proposed to extend to aliens [Czechoslovak-Jewish women] should be made available to suitable British women from the Colonial Dependencies in the areas of the Middle East and East African Command.”⁴⁶ Similar queries, the letter noted, were being made of the Air Ministry and Admiralty regarding the WAAF and Women’s Royal Navy Service (WRNS). “It occurs to us,” the Colonial Office letter continued, “that the recruiting position of the ATS in this country may have become sufficiently stretched to make it desirable to consider the tapping of the reserves of woman-power in the Colonial Dependencies. [...] Whatever the policy followed, it is, of course, essential to preserve the principle of non-discrimination against persons of colour.” This final sentence was underlined by the War Office recipient.

⁴⁵ Air Headquarters Levant to HQRAFME (AIR 23/6060, TNA), December 31, 1942.

⁴⁶ Colonial Office to War Office (WO 32/10653, TNA), February 11, 1943.

Women's Auxiliary Corps India: Subverting Gendered and Colonial Power Structures

On April 9, 1942, the India Office in London received a telegram from the Indian Defence Department regarding the formation of a new women's organization: the Women's Auxiliary Corps (India).⁴⁷ Members, the telegram said, would "perform such duties as switchboard and wireless operators, telephone orderlies, clerks in offices or units, storewomen in ordnance offices, hospital dispensers, mess sergeants in reinforcement camps, and drivers of staff cars and ambulances etc. Any women," it was noted, "British subject or subject of Indian State above age of eighteen eligible for enrolment." The first part of this final sentence—"any women, British subject or subject of Indian State"—was underlined in pencil by the recipient. Clearly, the intent to recruit Indian women for service in the WAC(I) was noteworthy.

In fact, the Indian Defence Department's telegram sparked immediate anxiety in London; it was feared the WAC(I), by allowing both British and Indian women to enlist, might challenge the colonial status quo. The India Office promptly forwarded the telegram to the War Office, noting that it had "landed on us from the blue." "I assume," J. A. Simpson wrote to Lieutenant Colonel D. Macleod, "that the Corps will be open both to European and to Indian women. That being so," he continued, "it would surely be more in conformity with the general lay-out of the Army in India that the latter should be subject to the Indian Army Act; on the other hand if both Europeans and Indians are to be privates I know of no other formation in India where rank and file would serve side-by-side in the same unit subject to different Army Acts..."⁴⁸ "Formations" in India were typically hierarchical along racial lines. Not only did different army acts apply to "Europeans" (i.e. white Britishers) and Indians, but "Europeans" occupied positions of power while Indians were relegated to the "rank and file," as is implied here by Simpson. As such,

⁴⁷ Government of India Defence Department to India Office (WO 32/10664, TNA), April 9, 1942.

⁴⁸ Simpson to Macleod (WO 32/10664, TNA), April 13, 1942.

Simpson was concerned the WAC(I) might subvert this traditional colonial hierarchy by allowing European and Indian women to serve “side-by-side.” By contacting Macleod, Simpson was expecting (perhaps even hoping) the War Office to maintain the colonial status quo by either prohibiting both Indian and British women from serving as privates, or by allowing “rank and file” to serve under different Army Acts—despite the unprecedented nature of such an arrangement.

However, the War Office rapidly shifted focus from colonial power dynamics to gendered ones. Macleod noted “no legal objection” to applying different Army Acts to the British and Indian members of the WAC(I). However, he suggested, “the Women’s Auxiliary Corps (India) should be declared to be part of the Armed Forces of the Crown, as are members of the ATS, and not part of His Majesty’s Military Forces.”⁴⁹ Simpson’s concern about maintaining the colonial status quo was thus efficiently addressed and dismissed, but, by likening the WAC(I) to the ATS, Macleod explicitly introduced gender into the discussion. The nature of the distinction between the “Armed Forces of the Crown” and “His Majesty’s Military Forces” was lost on both Simpson and the Government of India, which, upon learning of the War Office’s “suggestion,” inquired as to the difference.⁵⁰ In replying, Macleod expressed his “hope [that] we shall be spared the labour which would be entailed in entering into a discussion on the history and constitution of the ‘military forces’. Perhaps,” he wrote, “it is enough to say that whether or not the ATS are covered by that term, their specific inclusion in the expression would be most inconvenient and embarrassing, since every time we want to make a joint order under Section 184A of the Army Act we should need to exclude them from the expression....”⁵¹ This is an undeniably ambiguous reply—the expression “beating around the bush” comes to mind—but the

⁴⁹ Macleod to Simpson (WO 32/10664, TNA), May 16, 1942.

⁵⁰ Simpson to Macleod (WO 32/10664, TNA), June 10, 1942.

⁵¹ Macleod to Simpson (WO 32/10664, TNA), June 15, 1942.

distinction seems to hinge on the sort of labor performed by the women's services as distinct from that of the (male) military. Perhaps while the Military Forces were understood to participate in active combat, the Armed Forces (including the ATS) were not? Or could the irrefutably gendered distinction simply be indicative of groundless squeamishness (note Macleod's use of "embarrassing") at conflating women's service with men's?



Figure 2. WAAF servicewomen in Bombay, India with Indian employees.
© Imperial War Museum. Source: www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205209698

In July, the Under Secretary to the Government of India forwarded to the India Office a draft of the Form of Commission for WAC(I) officers. The Commission was based on that of the ATS, to be "issued in the name of His Majesty the King Emperor, and...signed on His Majesty's behalf by the Governor General."⁵² The fact that WAC(I) officers received King's Commissions was a point of pride among servicewomen.⁵³ Indian women were among the recipients, with Mrs. Kalyani Sen and Mrs. Nirmala Prasher granted commissions as Second Subalterns in

⁵² Under Secretary (Government of India) to Secretary of the Military Department (India Office) (WO 32/10664, TNA), July 9, 1942.

⁵³ In her oral history, Coralie Taylor notes with pride that her WAC(I) commission was a King's Commission; recording of interview by Coralie May Taylor on her life, including her service in the WAC(I) (C63/38 & C63/39, British Library, henceforth BL), 1983.

1944.⁵⁴ Upon receiving their commissions, Sen and Prasher would have been read a message from the King, expressing his “Trust and Confidence in your Loyalty, Courage, and good Conduct”—loyalty, courage, and good conduct as, implicitly, colonial subjects. “[Y]ou are,” the Commission continued, “in such manner and on such occasions as may be prescribed by Us to exercise and well discipline in their Duties women serving under your orders, and such Officers and Men as may be placed under your orders from time to time....” The language of the Commission was approved by the War Office, with the comment that “officers and men” might be replaced with “officers and soldiers,” as was the case in ATS commissions.⁵⁵ Was this simple practicality, in that “soldiers” is a gender-neutral term? Or did this suggestion foreshadow forthcoming debates about whether WAC(I)s should have power of command over male troops?

Certainly, the exchange between Macleod and Simpson initiated a long-term dispute between London and the Government of India, whereby the former attempted to incorporate colonial and gendered power structures into the WAC(I) framework. In late 1943, the Government of India proposed a regulation that would allow WAC(I) officers to command male troops.⁵⁶ This was racialized by London, with the India Office cabling the War Department of the Government of India to ask whether Indian women officers in the WAC(I) would be able to give orders to white male soldiers.⁵⁷ The reply: “Indian officers of the WAC(I) will probably never be placed in command of British male officers and very seldom male other ranks. WAC(I) Indian Officers have been in command of British WAC(I) officers and auxiliaries and no trouble

⁵⁴ Extract from *The Gazette of India* included in the papers of Kathleen Morison (MSS EUR/D1175/8, BL), September 23, 1944.

⁵⁵ Macleod to India Office (WO 32/10664, TNA), October 26, 1942.

⁵⁶ Government of India to India Office (WO 32/10664, TNA), August 22, 1942. Yasmin Khan argues “the fact that the Government of India backed the plan is evidence both of the changing racial climate and also of the desperation of the state to keep the war effort on track at a time of skilled labour shortages.” See Yasmin Khan, *The Raj at War: A People’s History of India’s Second World War* (London: Vintage, 2016), 154.

⁵⁷ War Office to India Office (WO 32/10664, TNA), August 9, 1943.

in regard to power of command has been experienced.”⁵⁸ The Army Council met on March 31, 1944 to discuss the proposal. The War Office memorandum submitted for their consideration noted that powers of command could not be withheld from only Indian WAC(I)s without “emphasis[ing] the colour discrimination. The only practical way out of the difficulty,” it was continued,

would be to withhold powers of command over white troops from all women commissioned officers of the Women’s Auxiliary Corps (India), whether white or coloured. This would avoid colour discrimination inside the Women’s Auxiliary Corps (India), but it would presumably lessen the usefulness of the Corps and set up discrimination between the white women officers and women officers of the Women’s Forces raised in the U.K.⁵⁹

“[I]ncidentally,” it was added, “there is nothing to prevent the ATS locally recruiting women of colour abroad and extending to such women powers of command over British troops.” Regardless, on the basis of the “undue strain” such an arrangement would place on the discipline of white male troops, the Council “disapproved” the proposal, which “would have the effect of giving Indian women officers power of command over white troops.”⁶⁰

Initially, it was noted that the proposal was “difficult to withstand on purely logical grounds.” Indeed, the decision to withhold powers of command from the Women’s Auxiliary Corps (India) in relations with the Army was based on the (illogical) premise that, while permissible for Indian women to command white women and white women to command white men,⁶¹ it would be unwise to allow Indian women to command white men. Upending both gendered and colonial power structures simultaneously was clearly too much for London to handle. In fact, the following month, the Finance Member of the Army Council expressed his

⁵⁸ Government of India War Department to India Office (WO 32/10664, TNA), December 10, 1943.

⁵⁹ Memorandum on “Powers of Command of Officers of the Women’s Auxiliary Corps (India) in Relation to Military Personnel” for consideration by the Executive Committee of the Army Council (WO 32/10664, TNA), March 31, 1944.

⁶⁰ Extract from minutes of ECAC meeting on WAC(I) powers of command (WO 32/10664, TNA), March 31, 1944.

⁶¹ Newsreel footage never shows either of these scenarios, as will be considered in Chapter III.

belated dissent from the Council's decision. In response, the Secretary of State reaffirmed his support for the majority decision, noting that "Indian women still enjoyed only a comparatively low status as compared with men, and he felt certain that the British soldier in India would greatly resent being placed in a position where Indian women officers exercised powers of command over him."⁶² An Indian woman commanding a British man was too threatening a possibility to entertain, despite the clear practicality of such a decision. Thus, the Government of India's attempt to subvert colonial power structures in the name of military efficiency was foiled by persistent London prejudice.

However, within a few months, a new push-and-shove ensued between the Army Council and the Government of India when the latter challenged gendered power structures by "chang[ing] the present titles of rank in WAC(I) to ordinary Army ranks coupled with Mrs. or Miss. Example Captain (Miss) Smith."⁶³ The War Office responded by claiming that such a change would "give rise to similar representations in respect of the titles of rank of officers of the Auxiliary Territorial Service, a change which at this stage of the war would cause confusion."⁶⁴ In other words, on the basis of a slippery slope argument, the Army Council decided against supporting the proposal, and maintained their resistance after multiple entreaties from the Government of India protesting the confusion caused by different ranking systems. As the Director of the ATS noted upon being consulted, "their suggestion is a very good one as I know only too well the confusion which arises with our titles."⁶⁵ Regarding the Army Council's rejection of its proposal, the Government of India added that "use of ATS or WAC(I) titles has always caused confusion as many male officers either do not know them or else do not know

⁶² Extract from minutes of ECAC meeting (WO 32/10664, TNA), April 21, 1944.

⁶³ Government of India War Department to India Office (WO 32/10664, TNA), April 21, 1944.

⁶⁴ War Office to India Office (WO 32/10664, TNA), September 30, 1944.

⁶⁵ ATS Director to War Office regarding telegram from Government of India War Department (WO 32/10664, TNA), August 31, 1944.

relative seniority to army ranks. WAC(I) forms an integral part of IA [the Indian Army] and should have the privilege of using army ranks.”⁶⁶ If a key reason for reconciling ranks between the services would be to clarify “relative seniority” between servicemen and servicewomen, it would seem the Government of India was still seeking WAC(I) power of command over military personnel. In addition, the Government of India appeared to consider this a matter of valuing women’s labor, noting their “integral” role in the Indian Army. However, due to War Office resistance, members of the WAC(I), like members of the Auxiliary Territorial Service, continued to be given different titles from male soldiers of equivalent rank, which caused confusion but maintained a gendered power structure. In the case of the WAC(I), “personnel will rank as juniors of their equivalent rank when serving with military personnel”; that is, between a man and a woman of equivalent rank, the former was established as superior.⁶⁷

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have considered how the colonial and military patriarchy coopted both the labor and bodies of British servicewomen to enact imperial power in the Middle East and India. In both contexts, with the incorporation of first British and then non-white colonial women into the imperial military sphere, we see the gendered and racial boundaries of imperial belonging being challenged, defended, and gradually expanded. Indeed, as Ashley Jackson has noted, by “bringing shared experiences to people across the world by virtue of the bonds of Empire, the war was one of the most significant globalizing experiences of the twentieth century.”⁶⁸ The women’s services in the Middle East and India certainly represented a simultaneous diffusion of British women into the Empire and the inclusion—albeit gradual,

⁶⁶ Government of India War Department to India Office (WO 32/10664, TNA), December 1, 1944.

⁶⁷ “Regulations for the Women’s Auxiliary Corps (India), 1944,” (Delhi: Defence Dept, 1944), (IOR/L/MIL/17/5/708, BL).

⁶⁸ Jackson, *The British Empire and the Second World War*, ix.

contested, and tenuous inclusion—of local women into the imperial fold. As such, the overseas women’s services allowed for encounters between cultural “others,” specifically between women of the metropole and the colonies. In order to shed further light on these dynamics of imperial encounter, we will turn in the next chapter to a social history of the wartime imperial periphery.

CHAPTER II: EXPERIENCE

Power and Identity (Re)creation in the Imperial Periphery

In late 1943, Women's Auxiliary Air Force officials embarked on a recruiting circuit of the Middle East. With them were a dozen portraits of Palestinian servicewomen, all drawn by British WAAF Dorothy Colles.¹ Colles had been posted to Egypt in February 1942. She was thrilled by the opportunity, repeatedly referring to her "adventure" in letters home.² "This opportunity to travel in war at the Government's expense is really unusual for women & I think I would have been all kinds of a fool to have missed it," she wrote from tropical waters, en route to Cairo.³ Over the course of two-and-a-half years in the Middle East, Colles would visit kibbutzim and lunch with Bedouins. By August 1944, she considered herself an amateur Orientalist.⁴ A trained artist, one of Colles' principle pleasures was drawing "exotic" landscapes;⁵ she spent her leaves painting and intended to publish a book of watercolors on "Oriental leave" upon returning to England.⁶

Colles was recruited to draw portraits of multinational members of the Middle Eastern WAAF in July 1943. "These 12 sketches are a fascinating cross section of the diversity of Palestinian women wearing the grey-blue uniform of the WAAF," notes a review of the exhibit that Colles sent to her parents. "Though they are not representative of 'the' Palestinian WAAF, they are characteristic of the Palestinian women who responded to the call of the RAF." One

¹ Private Papers of Miss D. M. T. Colles (Documents.8516, Imperial War Museum, hereafter IWM). Colles first mentions her work as a portraitist in a letter to her mother dated July 29, 1943. On August 22, she wrote to her mother that the "The Palestinian Waafs are for propaganda. I was half an official artist." On October 31, she wrote her father that "The pictures are [a] travelling exhibition with recruiting officers."

² See especially February 1942 letter to "Granny," written "On Board a Troopship Somewhere in the Atlantic Ocean."

³ Colles to "Family," March 1942, written "In Tropical Waters."

⁴ On August 15, 1944 Colles wrote her mother: "I am becoming one of those odd folk with an Arab fixation! Why does an interest in Arabs make people queer? It seems to. [...] I long to draw Bedouin so am going back Inshallah to do that very thing, before I come home."

⁵ Colles to "Mummy and Daddy," undated letter (No. 3).

⁶ See February 24, 1944 letter to her mother about the idea for a book of sketches "with emphasis on the idea of Oriental leave."

such Palestinian servicewoman—though not one sketched by Colles—was a young Arab who, on the first of September 1943, was discharged from the Auxiliary Territorial Service. We do not know her name, but because she was discharged under Paragraph 11, Appendix VI of ATS Regulations, we do know she was pregnant.⁷ It is also possible that she had run away from home in order to join the ATS.⁸ She was likely unmarried, and ATS authorities deemed her unable to be “taken back into [her] own home.”⁹ Because she was Christian, the Government Welfare Officer arranged for a convent to take in the pregnant servicewoman. Senior Commander Fletcher was relieved by the religion of her charge, for “the question of Moslem discharges is extremely difficult,”¹⁰ as the “Arabs have no Welfare Organization to deal with them.”¹¹

This chapter turns to on-the-ground experiences in the women’s services in the Middle East and India.¹² The two biographies briefly sketched above—that of Colles and the anonymous Arab woman—are indicative of the fact that no one experience can be generalized. To say lived realities in the overseas ATS and WAAF varied along national lines, with British servicewomen having one set of experiences and local servicewomen another, would itself be an egregiously reductive claim; as the newspaper clipping Colles sent home states, there was no such thing as “the” Palestinian WAAF. That being said, the experience in the Middle Eastern and Indian women’s services related in this chapter is refracted through a British lens, given the nature of

⁷ See 1943 ATS Training Depot War Diary (WO 169/13845, The National Archives, hereafter TNA), September 1: “OC Depot went to JERUSALEM to visit the Government Welfare Officer, to make arrangement for an Arab discharge under Para. 11, Appendix VI, ATS Regulations.” Appendix VI is “Table of Discharge,” Para. 11 “For family reasons”: “Applies to auxiliaries who are discharged for pregnancy or recent confinement” (p.156). See War Office, *Regulations for the Auxiliary Territorial Service, 1941* (London : H.M.S.O., 1941), trove.nla.gov.au/version/20066133.

⁸ See 1943 ATS Training Depot War Diary (WO 169/13845, TNA), January 21: “[T]o District Commissioner JAFFA re assistance for discharged Arab girls. Since most of them joined without their parents’ consent the family will not have them back.”

⁹ 1943 ATS Training Depot War Diary (WO 169/13845, TNA), September 1.

¹⁰ 1943 ATS Training Depot War Diary (WO 169/13845, TNA), September 1.

¹¹ 1943 ATS Training Depot War Diary (WO 169/13845, TNA), January 21.

¹² The vast majority of the sources I draw on in this section are about the women’s services in Egypt and Palestine. I extrapolate to India when possible, but given the nature of the evidence, my argument cannot help but be rooted in the Middle East.

the sources (as will be further explored in Chapter Four). We might even consider Colles' portraits a metaphorical manifestation of this chapter's attempt to paint a more comprehensive picture of the wartime imperial periphery—one that includes non-British characters but is inescapably British in perspective.

Despite the sources' limitations, however, we can become attuned to some of the complexities of Middle Eastern and Indian women's experiences in the services by considering power. Experience is inflected by power, and we can gain insight into the nature of power—its exertion, experience, and resistance—in the overseas women's services by looking at British sources. The overseas women's services would seem to be a space where traditional power dynamics were challenged. On the one hand, the services represented the subversion of gendered hierarchies that had traditionally characterized the socio-political spheres of security and defense. On the other hand, by allowing Anglo and local women to serve side-by-side, the services symbolized a unique degree of imperial inclusivity. The women's services thus ostensibly resisted power along two vectors: the gendered and the colonial. But to what extent was this seeming resistance—manifested as inclusiveness—experienced by servicewomen on the ground? How did individual women participate in resisting and/or enforcing gendered and colonial power dynamics? How did Anglo and local women experience power differently? This chapter draws on the personal accounts of British servicewomen (chiefly letters, diaries, and oral histories)¹³ to examine lived realities of gendered and colonial power structures in the British military services in the Middle East and India. Taking as a given that servicewomen both actively exerted and resisted such power dynamics, and were also the objects of their exertion and resistance by other

¹³ One set of sources on which I rely heavily are official war diaries. These were kept by ATS Commanding Officers in the Middle East between 1942 and 1945, and record the daily occurrences in their respective companies on an annual basis. Written in an official but private capacity, the war diaries are not as personal as individual servicewomen's journals and letters home, but much less manicured than official propaganda since they were classified.

actors, I consider the extent to which the services recreated women—both British and local—as imperial subjects. Ultimately, I argue that there were four spheres in which power was contested, thus shaping servicewomen’s experiences in the Middle East and India as well as their imperial subjectivity writ large: gender, class, language, and the mind.

Gender: Resisting Socio-Political Liminality

Servicewomen’s accounts of life in the Middle East and India reveal that the male military establishment consistently failed to take the women’s services seriously. “This is the sort of thing which has made our job so difficult out here,” Commander Pine noted in March 1942, “the Englishmen have appeared to consider the women as quite apart from ordinary Army rules and regulations. They cannot understand that the rules which apply to them apply also to ATS.”¹⁴ The incident that occasioned such a response was relatively trivial. ATS Private Fleischman had been found with a male Sergeant Major at the Blue Boar, a bar reserved for those ranked Sergeant and above. When Fleischman was ordered to leave, Pine was not bothered by the stringent enforcement of military hierarchy; rather, she was annoyed the Sergeant Major had deigned to take Fleischman to the Blue Boar in the first place, when “he knows the rules as well as anybody else.” This odd incident is indicative of more weighty ways in which the women’s services were “othered” in gendered terms by the male military establishment. For example, in December 1942, Dorothy Colles wrote to her father from Egypt, reporting that a letter had been distributed to the WAAF “defining our precise legal position in this country. Do you know,” she exclaimed, “after over two years service I am now officially a ‘Camp Follower’ having no authority whatever over any officer or airman. [...] If it wasn’t so funny it would be infuriating...”¹⁵ The classification “camp follower” left no doubt as to where servicewomen fell

¹⁴ 1942 ATS Training Depot War Diary (WO 169/6827, TNA), March 23.

¹⁵ Colles to her father (Documents.8516, IWM), December 15, 1942.

in the military hierarchy. Indeed, the front was a highly gendered environment where women's labor—on a militarized as well as volunteer basis—was consistently downplayed, trivialized, and dismissed.

Women's traditional exclusion from the spheres of security and defense led many to doubt their trustworthiness and reliability. Indeed, it was deemed "bad policy" by military authorities to publicize women's knowledge of high security intelligence. Sidney Ralli, a volunteer "cipherette" in India, penned a humorous poem memorializing her signing of the Official Secrets Act in April 1942. When she submitted the poem for publication, the manuscript was returned to her by Lionel Wilson, "King of the Cypherettes." "I enclose your very amusing poem," Wilson wrote, "but the powers that be say 'No' to publication: the main reason is, I think, that it's bad policy to stress the fact that Cipherettes know so much..."¹⁶ There are small X's penciled in the margins beside stanzas three, six, and seven, no doubt left by "the powers that be":

(3) I know what General Lissimo [sic]
 Wired from Manchukwo [sic],
 And which of the lads are overseas.
Wouldn't you like to know! [...]
 (6) I could say who is short of what,
 Who's telegraphed, and why,
 Which general is on the mat,
 And how he made reply.
 (7) I know which troops did brilliant things,
 And who they fought as well
But I've signed the Official Secrets Act,
So I REALLY mustn't tell!

¹⁶ Sidney Ralli's diary (MSS EUR F309/3, British Library, hereafter BL), April 15, 1942.

The authorities were no doubt concerned the public would be perturbed by a woman's intimate acquaintance with top secret intelligence. Instead of challenging such gendered distrust, the male military establishment chose (in this case, at least) to perpetuate an illusion of their liminality.¹⁷

Servicewomen's labor was not abstractly devalued in policy and publicity alone. Men as well as women maintained derisive attitudes toward the women's services that members of the ATS and WAAF contended with on a regular basis. WAAF June Knowles remembers that "some of the older RAF officers didn't really like having us around."¹⁸ Such disregard transcended the military sphere; Ralli, a member of the non-military Women's Voluntary Service in India as well as a "cipherette," considered her uniformed peers disorganized and frivolous. After a dinner party, she recorded in her diary that a friend, Philip Mason, "was at his best, & very amusing about the women who leapt into uniform to drive army cars & lorries. When he was originally approached about it, he assented because he thought it would be better for many women to have something to do instead of cocktail parties. But it was on the strict understanding that it was to cost nothing."¹⁹ Ralli proceeded to recount the increasing demands made by the women's services and their nonexistent work ethic. Clearly, because she found his commentary "very amusing," Ralli was inclined to agree with Mason. Indeed, over the course of her diary, it becomes clear that Ralli considered servicewomen's motivations for "joining up" far from

¹⁷ Despite the authorities' downplaying of women's high stakes involvement in war work, both servicewomen and volunteer "cipherettes" were perceived as soft targets for intelligence gathering. As Veronica Downing remembers, "The officers were inclined to see if I would give away secrets and chaff me at parties"; Veronica Cara Downing papers (MSS EUR/C394, BL), p.271. June Knowles recalls attending a party in Egypt, where she was led onto a balcony by "a delightful young man" who offered her a drink. The drink, Knowles realized, was heavily laced with alcohol. She inconspicuously emptied it into a plant, along with the many subsequent drinks the man ordered when he saw her glass was empty. When he began to ask her about her work, she said "'Oh I'm a typist, I do an awful lot of dull messages in the typing pool'—what we'd been told to say more or less." Knowles later noticed a bug planted in the lamp rigged above the balcony. The anonymous man's intentions are hard to discern. He was likely an inquisitive British soldier who took his curiosity about the war further than most. See June Knowles' oral history (22599, IWM), Reel 4.

¹⁸ Knowles oral history (22599, IWM), Reel 4.

¹⁹ Ralli diary (MSS EUR F309/3, BL), May 15, 1942.

honorable; as far as she was concerned, the uniform was a manifestation of arrogant self-absorption.

Servicewomen, on the other hand, considered their uniforms a crucial symbol of their officialdom, most necessary in an environment where their authority and labor were consistently called into question. When Veronica Cara Downing, a volunteer “cipherette” in India, requested to wear a uniform on the base, her male superiors “said the airmen liked to see me in pretty dresses.”²⁰ By depriving her of a uniform, the military authorities kept Downing in a visible position of institutional liminality. The significance of this act is revealed in a comment made by Sybella Stiles, a British member of the Motor Transport Corps (MTC) who would eventually join the ATS in the Middle East as an ambulance driver. Upon donning her uniform, Stiles noted that “I always swore I wouldn’t [wear khaki] and now I realize what a passport it is [if] I put up with it.”²¹ Because khaki was indeed a “passport”—a symbol of inclusion in the masculine sphere of security and defense—one of Wing Officer Hayes’ priorities upon visiting the Middle East in 1940 was to find a wholesaler who could take responsibility for attiring the service. She noted that the Clothing and Equipment Company of Egypt, Ltd. was “quoting very reasonable prices for women’s khaki drill uniforms and shirts. Samples and prices have been brought back to the UK for examination by the Director, WAAF.”²² Preoccupation with dress would continue throughout the war, with notices regularly circulated through the ATS reminding servicewomen to observe standards of attire.

Although we might assume that servicewomen were actively invested in subverting gendered hierarchies, not all were “feminists” by contemporary standards. Stiles, for example,

²⁰ Downing papers (MSS EUR/C394, BL), p.271.

²¹ Sybella Stiles to Capt. Dennis O’Callaghan (Documents.401: Private Papers of Miss S Stiles, IWM), November 17, 1940.

²² “The Diary of Wing Officer Hayes’ Official Visit to Middle East” (Documents.7260, IWM), p.6.

“had a heated argument at lunch with one of our own fitters as to whether men & women doing the same job should earn the same.”²³ The male fitter thought they should; Stiles, however, did not, arguing that “men should have more responsibilities” and that “if women are accustomed to earn a lot they are less ready to settle down....” This would suggest that women had diverse motives for joining the services; their primary goal was not necessarily to improve women’s socio-political position by participating in the war effort. For some, it was a way to see the world; for others, no doubt, it was little more than reliable employment.

Regardless, servicewomen waged an ongoing battle to maintain their prestige on the front. Servicewomen responded with frustration to consistent trivialization of the women’s services, as is suggested by a poem of Pamela Mitchell’s, written while she was stationed in Egypt:

We girls in khaki have roughed in. / And we know that men do the same. / But, honestly chaps is it cricket / To give the ATS a bad name. / We know that the clothes we are wearing / Ain’t like those of a swell curvy dame / But after all boys, there’s a war on / And things can’t be quite the same. / We gave up our homes & our good jobs / And even some gave up the dole. / But it doesn’t give heart to a woman / To be termed as a soldier’s moll, / So next time you hear whispering stories / That ATS girls ain’t quite it / There is just one thing to remember / At least they are doing their bit. / And think before you condemn them / That all girls are not quite the same / They’re somebody’s sweethearts & sisters / So DON’T give the ATS a bad name.²⁴

Here, we see Mitchell resisting a symptom of institutionalized sexism, whereby servicemen could mock their female counterparts with immunity. Why not, given that their superiors consistently devalued servicewomen’s labor in policy and practice? Mitchell’s resistance was private—written in the back pages of her diary—but no less revealing as to the nature of gendered power dynamics as they played out in the women’s services.

²³ Stiles to O’Callaghan (Documents.401, IWM), February 25, 1943.

²⁴ Private Papers of Miss P. M. Mitchell (Documents.15332, IWM).

Mitchell's poem (titled "To Whom It May Concern") conveys frustration with rumors and gossip circulated about the ATS, largely sexual in nature. Indeed, sexual politics on the front were fraught, with members of the ATS and WAAF experiencing harassment ranging from crude innuendos to assault. Most accounts of rape or attempted rape are attributed to local men. Knowles, for example, recalls being attacked by an Arab fisherman who was towing her boat,²⁵ while Winifred Davison recounts a story of local men surrounding her carriage: "I asked the driver for his whip, and I stood...whipping these men off."²⁶ One must allow for the possibility that racism is inflecting the reporting of these occurrences. They certainly may have happened, but no doubt similar incidents in which British men were implicated failed to make their way into the official record, or were instead blamed on the woman.²⁷ Veronica Downing, for example, remembers that when she began working in ciphers on an Indian base, "there were many crude remarks that I must give satisfaction, all in fun,"²⁸ while June Knowles recounts in her oral history a picnic with her Commanding Officer at which he asked Knowles to remove her clothes.²⁹

It was in the sexual realm that gender power dynamics mapped onto imperial ones, principally through the policing of "mixed marriages." It was "again repeated" in June 1943 ATS Orders released by Commander Pine that "no mixed marriages will be approve [sic] by this HQ on principle."³⁰ The next month, Private Kopstein (presumably Palestinian) was not given permission to marry a British soldier, since "mixed marriages are being discouraged at all

²⁵ Knowles oral history (22599, IWM), Reel 5.

²⁶ Winifred "Vicki" Davison oral history (19651, IWM), Reel 2.

²⁷ Downing, for example, notes in her memoir that "various girls complained they were raped; the prosecuting officer often asked me what I knew.... [I]t was usually the girl's fault"; see Downing papers (MSS EUR/C394, BL), p.285.

²⁸ Downing papers, p.269.

²⁹ Knowles oral history, Reel 4.

³⁰ 1943 ATS HQ Palestine/Syria Group (WO 169/13839, TNA), Appendix III: HQ Palestine & Syria Group ATS Part I Orders (June 29, 1943).

costs.”³¹ In October, Private Srager (an Austrian Jew) was prepared to marry a Corporal Brown, to which “there was no actual objection other than it was a ‘mixed’ marriage.”³² By mid-November, however, policy had changed. Perhaps the conservative ban on multinational marriages met with resistance, because Pine released new ATS Orders noting that applications for mixed marriages would now be considered—though not until six months after they were filed, and only “at the further request of the applicant that he still wishes the marriage to be approved.”³³ By December third, Privates Harmelin and Batscha were both allowed to marry British soldiers.³⁴ General Headquarters ruled that “once these [mixed] marriages have taken place wives are entitled to all privileges of an Army wife,” meaning that they were permitted to “return” to the UK with their husbands under the Python repatriation scheme.³⁵ By this means, some number of non-British women from the imperial periphery—whose “otherness” the military authorities had tried so hard to maintain—made their way to the imperial center. In fact, Commander Courtney cynically speculated that Python was increasing the number of mixed marriages among Palestinian ATS.³⁶

Class: Transcending Hierarchy in the Imperial Periphery

Although many servicewomen’s recollections of the ATS and WAAF are characterized by comradery,³⁷ the military was as inescapably hierarchical an institution for women as it always had been for men. Not only were servicewomen differentiated by rank; class hierarchies

³¹ 1943 ATS HQ Palestine/Syria Group (WO 169/13839, TNA), July 4.

³² 1943 ATS HQ Palestine/Syria Group (WO 169/13839, TNA), October 2.

³³ 1943 ATS HQ Palestine/Syria Group (WO 169/13839, TNA), Appendix G2: HQ Palestine & Syria Group, ATS Part I Orders (November 14, 1943).

³⁴ 1943 ATS HQ Palestine/Syria Group (WO 169/13839, TNA), December 3.

³⁵ 1945 ATS HQ Palestine War Diary (WO 169/21567, TNA), February 16.

³⁶ 1945 ATS HQ Palestine War Diary (WO 169/21567, TNA), February 6.

³⁷ For example, former WAAF June Knowles recalls that “These teams of women became a watch—ten, twelve women—and we all became absolutely blended as a team. It was wonderful, we worked well together. And I don’t remember a single disagreeable incident with other members, on our watch or any other watch”; see Knowles oral history (22599, IWM), Reel 4.

from civilian life were also mapped onto the services, leading to tensions between women of diverse socio-economic backgrounds. However, in the imperial periphery, British women had a certain prestige regardless of their class status at home. Particularly in Egypt and India, British recruits belonged to a unique upper-class due to their nationality, which allowed them to transcend domestic class hierarchies. Instead, socio-political colonial hierarchies caused tensions between British and colonial recruits.

Because the women's services comprised women of diverse backgrounds, class tensions often rose to the surface. Upon arriving in South Africa as a member of the Motor Transportation Corps (MTC), Sybella Stiles wrote home that the British recruits shared a mess with the local girls, "who are very nice but fairly mixed like the ATS in England."³⁸ Stiles—Oxford educated and from a wealthy family—presumably means "mixed" in class terms, since she proceeded to note that one white South African servicewoman said she was "surprised as most of us come from London there are no cokneys [sic]." WAAF June Knowles had a fraught relationship with her Australian superior officer; in her oral history, Knowles attributes their antagonism to class difference, namely "jealousy" on the part of the Australian, given that she was called "the housemaid" by the depot doctor while Knowles came from an upper-class British family in East Africa.³⁹ Sidney Ralli, a volunteer "cipherette" in India, bemoaned manifestations of elitism in the ATS, noting that "one of the Vice-Regal daughters joined the A.T.S. but stopped when she discovered that her duties included one night on duty per week. Nobody else is allowed to resign—except 'Mint Sauce' who was 35 minutes late on duty & when told about it went off and hasn't been seen there since. She, incidentally, had her uniform made at enormous expense by

³⁸ Stiles to O'Callaghan (Documents.401, IWM), November 17, 1940.

³⁹ Knowles oral history (22599, IWM), Reel 5.

Phelps, while the others made do with a serge at (literally) roughly one-sixth of the cost.⁴⁰

Winifred Davison also observed upper class recruits' fraught adaptation to service life in the Middle East, especially among white East African women who "lived out there in the colonial life, used to having servants for everything, and they didn't like having to work."⁴¹

British servicewomen were exposed to this "colonial life" upon arriving in the Middle East. Some found it distasteful, such as Davison, who recalled visiting British elites in Egypt. "The tables were laden with the most gorgeous foods I've ever seen. [...] Lots of servants. You didn't have to pick up a handkerchief, as it were.... It was very interesting to see them, but I wouldn't have liked their life, so artificial."⁴² Colles, however, enjoyed the opportunities her British nationality afforded in the colonial periphery. In a letter to her mother, written a few months after arriving in Cairo, Colles noted that "it makes me laugh to think I should ever dream of being so conventionally minded to mind who anyone was, but it cuts so much ice here and I can see why now, I am becoming socially as opposed to socialistically minded...."⁴³ That is, while Colles had been "socialistically" inclined at home, she was beginning to see the value of having elite friends like Anne Dorrien-Smith, who hailed from an aristocratic British family. Colles, Dorrien-Smith, and their friends consistently entertained in their flat, with Colles noting that "the opportunity is so good one cannot miss it. We'll never be in such a position again with a house, a garden & servants."⁴⁴ She was acutely aware of the disparity between the colonial lifestyle and that of her fellow Brits on the home front, remarking to her father that "One of our unit just returned [from England] said the thing he noticed most was lack of servants & everyone

⁴⁰ Ralli diary (MSS EUR F309/3, BL), February 6, 1942.

⁴¹ Davison oral history (19651, IWM), Reel 3.

⁴² Davison oral history (19651, IWM), Reel 1.

⁴³ Colles to her mother (Documents.8516, IWM), June 24, 1942.

⁴⁴ Colles to her family (Documents.8516, IWM), August 19, 1942.

doing all their own housework.”⁴⁵ In Egypt, on the other hand, Colles was afforded the opportunity to transcend her domestic class status and enjoy the privileges of house, garden, and servants.

The socio-political colonial hierarchies that supplanted domestic ones had the effect of rousing tensions between British and local recruits. “Slight disturbance in officers mess in evening due to bad manners on part of junior officers. It was the British Officers who were to blame, and I cannot understand their ignorance or lack of common courtesy,” Commander Pine noted in October 1942.⁴⁶ The Commanding Officers of the ATS in Egypt and Palestine considered the “advisability or otherwise of mixing” Palestinian and British personnel.⁴⁷ They later found, “on investigation, [that] there were no complaints from British NCOs and personnel about living with Palestinians, and considered it a great pity if any destruction and separation were made.”⁴⁸ The Indian Draft, on the other hand, was to be “dealt with separately”; no doubt British women from India were accustomed to the “white prestige” of the Raj. Nonetheless, ATS officials tried their best to subvert colonial hierarchies in the services by minimizing British privilege. In June 1943, the Commanding Officer of ATS Palestine-Syria noted that “New British Clerks posted to HQ Pal[estine] seemed to think that they had not been given important enough jobs. It was pointed out that it was up to them to shew [sic] themselves worthy of doing an important job.”⁴⁹ The next month, it was decided that British corporals “should be taught as much as possible of the conditions in the Middle East before being posted to Companys [sic]”⁵⁰

⁴⁵ Colles to her father (Documents.8516, IWM), January 6, 1944.

⁴⁶ 1942 ATS Training Depot War Diary (WO 169/6827, TNA), October 12.

⁴⁷ 1942 ATS Egypt War Diary (WO 169/6828, TNA), June 20.

⁴⁸ 1942 ATS HQ Palestine War Diary (WO 169/6829, TNA), September 10.

⁴⁹ 1943 ATS HQ Palestine/Syria Group (WO 169/13839, TNA), June 26.

⁵⁰ 1943 ATS Training Depot War Diary (WO 169/13845, TNA), July 7.

and within a couple weeks an “educational tour” had been “arranged for new British Draft to visit settlements, girls training colleges and mother-craft institutes in and around Tel-Aviv.”⁵¹

Colles’ evolution from being “socialistically” to “socially” minded relied on her movement from metropole to periphery. That is, her “re-creation” as an imperial subject—one who was defined not by her domestic class status but by colonial privilege in Britain’s imperial outposts—hinged on her transplantation from the UK to Egypt, from an environment characterized by class hierarchies to one based on white, British prestige. Locally recruited servicewomen did not experience the same re-creation along class lines as did British women serving abroad. For some, such as the Vice-Regal daughter mentioned by Ralli, the privileged East African women recalled by Davison, or the “Indian Draft” that resented being housed with Palestinians, the services had the opposite effect, challenging their self-understood prestige. Indeed, officials tried to even out colonial hierarchies within the services despite the intensely stratified socio-political environment in which they were rooted. Some non-British local recruits were afforded the opportunity for transient upward mobility by joining the services, for the women’s services incorporated them into a public sphere that had traditionally been off limits. This upward mobility, however, was defined less by class and more by socio-political status, as will be further considered further below.

Language: Socio-Linguistic Assimilation in “Babel Tower”⁵²

In a September 1942 broadcast for the BBC, British Controller of the Auxiliary Territorial Service Audrey Chitty described the Middle Eastern ATS as characterized by congeniality and multinational harmony. This idealistic representation of the service hinged on linguistic inclusivity. “Training is done in English and Hebrew, and all orders, notices, etc. are in

⁵¹ 1943 ATS Training Depot War Diary (WO 169/13845, TNA), July 18.

⁵² 1943 ATS HQ Palestine/Syria Group (WO 169/13839, TNA), Appendix: Minutes of ATS Unit Education Officers’ Conference (June 15, 1943), p.3.

these two languages,” Chitty brightly noted. “We have also trained in Polish, and soon will do so in Greek. [...] But not knowing English does not seem to matter much. I have seen women whose knowledge of our language is limited to ‘yes’ and ‘no’ working well and happily in stores.”⁵³ Indeed, “English, French, Arabic, Greek and Hebrew speaking auxiliaries could all be found in one [ATS] Company,” the minutes of an ATS Education Officers’ Conference noted.⁵⁴ Individual women’s accounts, however, would suggest that the linguistic situation in the Middle Eastern services was a fraught arena of cross-cultural interaction, where linguistic differences were primarily divisive. This led to a process of attempted assimilation by the British authorities that was met with resistance by local recruits.



Figure 3. Local WAAF recruits at a training camp in Egypt.

© Imperial War Museum. Source: www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205209076

⁵³ “Work of ATS in Middle East” (1232, IWM), September 28, 1942.

⁵⁴ 1943 ATS HQ Palestine/Syria Group (WO 169/13839, TNA), Appendix: Minutes of ATS Unit Education Officers’ Conference (June 15, 1943), p.2.



Figure 4. Local WAAF recruits during a kit inspection at a training camp in Egypt.
 © Imperial War Museum. Source: www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205212245

Commander Pine of the ATS Training Depot in the Middle East repeatedly bemoaned auxiliaries' use of the Hebrew language. At a January 1942 event for new Palestinian recruits in Tel Aviv, British ATS officials "sat for two hours on a platform and did not hear one word which we could understand. All speeches made in Hebrew. Everybody presented with a bible in Hebrew."⁵⁵ A couple days later, a representative of the Jewish Agency, Mrs. Samuel, visited the Training Depot, where her "conversation with recruits [was] carried out entirely in Hebrew."⁵⁶ What did Samuel and the Palestinian recruits discuss, and what had been said in the speeches in Tel Aviv? Pine had no idea. Indeed, her entries in the Depot's official diary not only betray resentment that she was unable to understand local recruits, but also suggest that her incomprehension was an implicit threat to British authority. "There have of course been difficulties over staff, in the past," Pine noted in October 1942, "largely due to language difficulties, and the fact that the locally enlisted personnel will never do as they are told and

⁵⁵ 1942 ATS Training Depot War Diary (WO 169/6827, TNA), January 26.

⁵⁶ 1942 ATS Training Depot War Diary (WO 169/6827, TNA), January 28.

require constant and strict supervision.”⁵⁷ Perhaps the local recruits’ disobedience could be traced to such “language difficulties”; after all, it is challenging to do “as one is told” if the order is given in an incomprehensible tongue. Regardless, linguistic difference is here closely linked to perceived resistance, with foreign language and stubbornness both coding the locally enlisted personnel “other.”

Ironically, in April 1942 Commander Chitty—who in September would so brightly extol the linguistic diversity of the ATS—condemned an ATS concert conducted in Hebrew as undermining the British identity of the service. Pine, despite her reservations about multilingualism noted above, did not agree. “As 90% at least of the depot is Jewish,” she pointed out in the Depot’s official diary, “it naturally follows that the Hebrew element will be uppermost....” Chitty, Pine added, “also objected to the Jewish flag being shown alongside the Union Jack and the International being played, but as they always play and sing the British National Anthem first, and as we always fly the British Flag, I do not think we can do any harm.”⁵⁸ Here we see two opposing visions of the ATS: one that prioritizes the linguistic and cultural Britishness of the service, the other recognizing its inherent diversity. Pine was not alone in promoting the latter view. At an ATS depot in Egypt, Palestinian recruits had been fined for failing to understand and therefore execute their Standing Orders; recognizing the injustice of the situation, the Commanding Officer required that the Orders “be read out in Hebrew as well as English, and pointed out that they [officers] had no right to fine anybody.”⁵⁹ There were also various Jewish events held for both Palestinian and British servicewomen, where linguistic and cultural intermixing was evident. For example, ATS Headquarters in Palestine held a “Friday

⁵⁷ 1942 ATS Training Depot War Diary (WO 169/6827, TNA), October 2.

⁵⁸ 1942 ATS Training Depot War Diary (WO 169/6827, TNA), April 10.

⁵⁹ 1942 ATS Egypt War Diary (WO 169/6828, TNA), August 13.

night party” in November 1942, at which “Sub. Maclev [lit] the Sabbath candles. Chapter of the Bible read in Hebrew & English. Funny story read in both languages. Games and dancing.”⁶⁰

But neither was Chitty alone in believing that English should be the *lingua franca* of the ATS. In an attempt to curb communication breakdowns, a program of linguistic—and therefore cultural—assimilation was instituted at the Training Depot. “Recruits being given English lessons etc.” Pine noted in January.⁶¹ But linguistic assimilation was increasingly met with resistance from Palestinian recruits. It “would appear that some of the Palestinian NCOs have been rudely failing to translate in front of British personnel,” Boyle noted in January 1943, and she “suggest[ed] tact all round.”⁶² Two years later, the Commander at ATS Headquarters in Palestine recorded that “a few auxiliaries, who have failed the English Test, are refusing to learn English compulsorily during working hours. [...] Some discussion also with OC 507 Coy. ATS re. speaking of Hebrew on the military line. This is not allowed....”⁶³ Here, we see Hebrew being used to resist the exertion of British authority by means of English education and cultural assimilation. Hebrew, in other words, was employed by local recruits to maintain a discrete identity within the British women’s services.

Mind: Creating and Coding “Belonging”

Education—linguistic and otherwise—was a key pillar of life in the Middle Eastern ATS. “The aim of Army education in the ATS is the production of a responsible citizen of the world, and a fully developed human being,” Colonel Anderson, Education Officer-in-Chief of the Middle Eastern Forces said at an ATS Unit Education Officers’ Conference on June 15, 1943. “ABCA [Army Bureau of Current Affairs programs] should be concerned with the morale of the

⁶⁰ 1942 ATS HQ Palestine War Diary (WO 169/6829, TNA), November 6.

⁶¹ 1942 ATS Training Depot War Diary (WO 169/6827, TNA), January 19.

⁶² 1943 ATS Training Depot War Diary (WO 169/13845, TNA), January 2.

⁶³ 1945 ATS HQ Palestine War Diary (WO 169/21567, TNA), March 21.

forces in the field. The world morale really means ‘morals,’ and depends on four moral virtues—courage, loyalty, endurance, discipline. ABCA produces a better understanding of our position in the world, of why we are at war, and what precautions to take to prevent another war.”⁶⁴ Some educational programs tended towards indoctrination and cultural assimilation, as might be suggested by the inclusion of “loyalty” in the catalog of “morals” articulated above (ABCA publications included the “British Way and Purpose” series). Other approaches were more inclusive, geared towards cross-cultural understanding. These were ultimately appropriated by local recruits in the interest of their own personal and socio-political post-war goals—namely, to participate in state-building on equal terms with men, and more generally, to create a society defined by gender equality.⁶⁵

Cultural assimilation was attempted via educational schemes including lectures and screenings. In April 1943, Commander Boyle of the ATS Training Depot met with Education Officer Captain Henderson to “talk over the possibility of further lectures with regard to ‘British Policy.’”⁶⁶ A couple months before, ATS 510 Company had attended a screening of the propaganda film “Next of Kin.” This film, released in 1942, concerns a British espionage mission to destroy a German submarine in Northern France. The mission nearly fails due to Brits’ “careless talk” which alerts Germans to the coming attack. “There were several sequences showing the ATS in England,” 510 Company’s Commanding Officer noted, “which was of particular interest to Palestinian auxiliaries.”⁶⁷ Such lectures and films would certainly suggest that the ATS authorities were attempting to incorporate locally recruited auxiliaries into a British

⁶⁴ 1943 ATS HQ Palestine/Syria Group (WO 169/13839, TNA), Appendix: Minutes of ATS Unit Education Officers’ Conference (June 15, 1943), p.4.

⁶⁵ See Anat Granit-Hacohen, *Hebrew Women Join the Forces: Jewish Women from Palestine in the British Forces during the Second World War* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2017).

⁶⁶ 1943 ATS Training Depot War Diary (WO 169/13845, TNA), April 12.

⁶⁷ 1943 ATS 510 Company War Diary (WO 169/13857, TNA), January 6.

cultural space. However, there was no lack of ambiguity in the attempted assimilation. “Next of Kin,” for example, is considered unique by historians in that it is one of the only World War II films to depict the British forces coming anywhere close to defeat.⁶⁸ Despite its patriotic tenor, local auxiliaries watching the film would have seen an England more fallible than monolithic, thus undermining the center of the imperial imaginary.

The education scheme was not placidly accepted by auxiliaries. In March 1943, the Education Officer gave a “lecture on Arabs” that caused an uproar in the ATS Training Depot.⁶⁹ The nature of his offensive comments is unclear; it is possible that the tenor of his lecture was more favorable towards Palestine’s Arab population than anything else, and therefore considered problematic by Jewish auxiliaries with Zionist tendencies. Certainly, it was not an Arab auxiliary, but a Sub. Carson who was summoned by Command Boyle to explain what attendees had taken issue with. Another talk a few months later on “Post War Women” was deemed “very bad” by Commander Boyle, who also noted that servicewomen were becoming “very discontented with the Education Scheme.”⁷⁰

Aware that education was a delicate matter in a sphere inflected by the socio-political power dynamics of imperialism, General Headquarters required that ABCA be “conducted as a discussion and not as a lecture” because the latter “would lay itself open to the accusation of propaganda.”⁷¹ The “divergent background[s]” of auxiliaries in the Middle East were noted, and discussion pronounced “an excellent thing, since it produces understanding. Badly led discussion,” on the other hand, “that is when the officer is not impartial...can do infinite harm.”

⁶⁸ British Film Institute, “Next of King, The (1942),” BFI Screenonline, screenonline.org.uk/film/id/524117/index.html.

⁶⁹ 1943 ATS Training Depot War Diary (WO 169/13845, TNA), March 6.

⁷⁰ 1943 ATS 510 Company War Diary (WO 169/13857, TNA), July 27.

⁷¹ 1945 ATS HQ Palestine War Diary (WO 169/21567, TNA), Appendix: Group Order Serial No.20 (January 2, 1945), Appendix A: GHQ Letter 75901/13/AG12 (December 23, 1944).

Impartially led discussion certainly moderated any impression of attempted indoctrination, and the requirement that interpreters be provided to companies of “mixed nationality” instead conveyed an impression of British investment in cross-cultural understanding. Of course, the language barrier persisted, and Captain Hopkinson suggested that discussion instead be held in English only, and that “the ideas would percolate through the Companies from those who attended.”⁷²

Despite language difficulties, inclusive programming was increasingly instituted. In September 1943, the ATS Training Depot offered lectures on Jewish and Arab welfare.⁷³ Domestic Science courses were begun in 1945; at a meeting of the Unit Education Officers’ Conference in June, Junior Commander Carson (the same Carson, perhaps, who was summoned to explain why the “lecture on Arabs” gave offence?) noted that “there would be courses for Palestinian auxiliaries in their own type of cooking.”⁷⁴ Such developments allowed local recruits to work towards their own personal and socio-political post-war goals, including the feminist Zionist aims Anat Granit-Hacohen points to as being Yishuv women’s primary motives for joining the services.⁷⁵ Indeed, one ATS official noted that “Palestinians are more interested in the Educational Scheme than the British personnel.”⁷⁶ This would suggest that Jewish Palestinian servicewomen utilized the educational opportunities provided by the ATS in the interest of their own personal development—in the interest, that is, of becoming full-fledged members of the Yishuv political community—as distinct from the nominal British vision of “a responsible citizen of the world.”

⁷² 1943 ATS HQ Palestine/Syria Group (WO 169/13839, TNA), Appendix: Minutes of ATS Unit Education Officers’ Conference (June 15, 1943), p.3.

⁷³ 1943 ATS Training Depot War Diary (WO 169/13845, TNA), September 8.

⁷⁴ 1945 ATS HQ Palestine War Diary (WO 169/21567), Appendix A: Minutes of ATS Unit Education Officers’ Conference (June 20, 1945), p.2.

⁷⁵ Granit-Hacohen, *Hebrew Women Join the Forces*.

⁷⁶ 1943 ATS HQ Palestine/Syria Group (WO 169/13839, TNA), Appendix: Minutes of ATS Unit Education Officers’ Conference (June 15, 1943), p.3.

The mind became a contested space in which power was exerted and resisted in ways besides education. Imperial power was discursively performed in pronouncements of “unfit” Jewish and Arab recruits. The first Palestinian recruit to the ATS, Private Schleimer, was deemed “a definite nuisance” and “too temperamental for army life” within a week of the establishment of the ATS Training Depot in January 1942.⁷⁷ The next month, two Palestinian recruits, Privates Picker and Cohen, were sent to a specialist who pronounced them “unfit for military service.”⁷⁸ Jewish Palestinians were consistently constructed as temperamental and lazy, with Commander Pine claiming that the “average Palestinian has little idea of domesticity, or running homes or kitchens,”⁷⁹ and the Commanding Officer of ATS Palestine-Syria bemoaning the fact that “locally enlisted personnel seem to expect everything done for them.”⁸⁰

Arab Palestinians were subjected to even more virulent criticism. Commander Pine devoted numerous entries in her official war diary to a Private Shammias, who she pronounced “rather difficult,” “selfish,” and “absolutely unsuited, temperamentally,” to army life.⁸¹ Denouncements of Arab recruits became increasingly hostile, beginning to conform to traditional colonial depictions of the colonial “native.” “Some of the recruits,” Pine noted, “appear primitive, to put it mildly, and have no sense of decency or personal hygiene. One has to teach them, rather as one would savages. [...] One particular girl has had to have her head deloused twenty times in 28 days.”⁸² Later, the Egyptian Platoon was pronounced “lazy and dirty, and thoroughly undisciplined.”⁸³ This discourse of unsuitability evolved into the all-purpose label

⁷⁷ 1942 ATS Training Depot War Diary (WO 169/6827, TNA), January 12 & 19.

⁷⁸ 1942 ATS Training Depot War Diary (WO 169/6827, TNA), February 18.

⁷⁹ 1942 ATS Training Depot War Diary (WO 169/6827, TNA), February 10.

⁸⁰ 1943 ATS HQ Palestine/Syria Group (WO 169/13839, TNA), May 30.

⁸¹ 1942 ATS Training Depot War Diary (WO 169/6827, TNA), January 18 & 19, February 18.

⁸² 1942 ATS Training Depot War Diary (WO 169/6827, TNA), September 26.

⁸³ 1942 ATS Training Depot War Diary (WO 169/6827, TNA), November 5.

“misfit.” In September 1943, Commander Fletcher began to reorganize the Training Depot to “cater for bad characters, bad workers and general ‘mis-fits’” from other companies.⁸⁴

Many women were deemed “misfits” on the basis of mental health. Winifred Davison remembers that “the depression was terrible” among both British and local WAAFs.⁸⁵ As a health officer, Davison was responsible for speaking to servicewomen hospitalized for depression. “I wasn’t trained for this, but you went out and did your best,” she says in her oral history. The services were hardly prepared to treat mental illness successfully, and there were multiple attempted suicides. Private Jarabi, a Bedouin Arab, attempted to strangle herself with her tie in June 1942.⁸⁶ Private Schaffer threatened suicide upon being discharged from the ATS in March 1943.⁸⁷ Palestinian Private Frankel drove a Company car off a cliff in May 1945 but survived.⁸⁸ One must ask to what extent such “madness” was a reaction to the strict and unfamiliar setting of the British military services. As British ATS recruit T. Taylor writes in her memoirs, “A motley collection had enlisted, speaking a babel of languages. And what a tremendous change had hit them, different food, language, work and customs and through it all the typically English attitude that expected them to adapt themselves to it, which they did, remarkably quickly.”⁸⁹ But perhaps some didn’t “adapt” quite so easily. Perhaps their difference was coded “madness.” For example, in June 1942, Commander Pine noted she had been informed by the probation officer that the Training Depot had taken in “several highly undesirable people” as recruits, “but that if we managed to keep them and turn them into something worthwhile, we should be doing a very good service.”⁹⁰ What happened to those who

⁸⁴ 1942 ATS Training Depot War Diary (WO 169/6827, TNA), September 28.

⁸⁵ Davison oral history (19651, IWM), Reel 2.

⁸⁶ 1942 ATS Training Depot War Diary (WO 169/6827, TNA), June 10.

⁸⁷ 1943 ATS 510 Company War Diary (WO 169/13857, TNA), March 15.

⁸⁸ 1945 ATS HQ Palestine War Diary (WO 169/21567, TNA), May 30.

⁸⁹ T. Taylor, “Desert Convoy” (1998-02-141: Wartime memoirs of T. Taylor, National Army Museum).

⁹⁰ 1942 ATS Training Depot War Diary (WO 169/6827, TNA), June 5.

were not successfully made “worthwhile,” such as Jarabi, an “undesirable” with a “very bad history and police court record of attempted suicide etc. [as well as] history of VD and living in a brothel in Jaffa”⁹¹

Conclusion

This chapter has considered the exertion and resistance of power along the vectors of gender, class, language, and the mind in order to surmise the extent to which the women’s services recreated women—both British and local—as imperial subjects. Some British women were “recreated” as such by transcending their domestic class status to instead be defined by colonial privilege, thus perpetuating imperial power dynamics within the overseas women’s services. Although British officials attempted to curb colonial hierarchies in the services by minimizing British privilege, they maintained programs of socio-linguistic assimilation. These met with resistance by local recruits, either explicitly through the continued use of their own language (Hebrew, in the case of Jewish Palestinians) or implicitly by appropriating educational opportunities in the interest of their own personal and socio-political post-war goals. Overt deviations from the normative imperial subject that the services attempted to create were coded “misfits,” indicative of their failed “re-creation” and “unbelonging” in the imperial community.

Because my argument has relied exclusively on British sources, the social portrait of the wartime imperial periphery painted here is irrefutably fragmented. Nonetheless, by considering the power dynamics manifested in the women’s services, it is possible to shed light on some of the complexities of Middle Eastern and Indian women’s experiences in the services. For example, it is clear that we cannot reduce power dynamics to simple faceoffs between men and women, Brits and colonized populations. As we have seen, there were servicewomen who—discursively, at least—perpetuated gendered power dynamics, such as ATS Sybella Stiles when

⁹¹ 1942 ATS Training Depot War Diary (WO 169/6827, TNA), June 5.

she advocated that women should be payed less than men employed in the same work. Tensions also did not manifest simply between British and locally recruited servicewomen. In 1942, censored correspondence at the ATS Training Depot “reveal[ed] a bad feeling between the Jews and Arabs which is increasing in intensity. The Arabs being so much in the minority get a very bad time, and we are powerless to stop it.”⁹² It would also appear that, against this complex backdrop of power vectors, there was consistent congenial, even harmonious, interaction between British servicewomen and locals. For example, after participating in Soldiers’ Day Parade in May 1943, “All ATS were entertained to lunch by the Jewish Welfare Committee and then attended a concert and a Service in the Synagogue.”⁹³ The following month, “British and Arab personnel were entertained by Sheihk Hussein Ragib Khawaja at Dehireh.”⁹⁴ However, in reaction to rising anti-colonial tensions in India and with the Jewish community in Palestine, the complexities of gendered and colonial power dynamics were flattened in an attempt to maintain British authority and political stability throughout the empire. The next chapter will turn to depictions of the women’s services, examining how Anglo women were symbolically coopted in the name of enacting imperial power and local women in the name of imagining an inclusive imperial community.

⁹² 1942 ATS Training Depot War Diary (WO 169/6827, TNA), October 14. On December 3, Commander Pine noted that “2/Sub. Sarour, the Arab Recruiting Officer, came to ask whether there was any possibility of notices in Arabic being put up in the Depot, and whether she dare promise potential recruits that they will serve in separate Platoons from the Jews.”

⁹³ 1943 ATS Training Depot War Diary (WO 169/13845, TNA), April 22.

⁹⁴ 1943 ATS Training Depot War Diary (WO 169/13845, TNA), May 29.

CHAPTER III: REPRESENTATION

From Performing Empire to Constructing an Inclusive Imperial Space

The 1945 newsreel “WAC(I)s Celebrate Third Birthday” features footage of Indian and Anglo members of the Women’s Auxiliary Corps (India) standing to attention side-by-side.¹ “Under the shadow of Lucknow’s majestic buildings,” the narrator intones, “WAC(I) contingents are inspected by the commissioner and area commander.” Indeed, Sir Henry Knight, Acting Governor of Madras, solemnly shakes the hand of an Indian WAC(I) wearing a sari. Scenes in Bombay, Karachi, Madras, and Lucknow follow, conveying an impression of the Corps’ trans-Indian presence. As the narrator notes, “these women, drawn from every part of India, answered the call of duty when their country needed them most.” The WAC(I)s are constructed here as loyal subjects of the Raj. Indeed, when the war ends, the narrator concludes, “they will take back with them qualities of independence and responsibility. [...] Back in civilian life, they may well become a powerful factor in shaping India’s destiny.”

In this chapter, I investigate how depictions of the Middle Eastern and Indian women’s services participated in Britain’s imperial project and interacted with increasing anti-colonial sentiment. Drawing on newsreel footage and print journalism, I argue that depictions of the women’s services constructed two opposing visions of empire. While recruitment of British women relied on Orientalist representations of British privilege abroad, local recruitment efforts portrayed non-British women incorporated into imperial spaces. Indeed, by examining depictions of the overseas women’s services, we find that while local recruitment was initiated to resolve labor shortages, it had, by the end of the war, evolved into a propagandistic reaction to rising anti-colonial tensions in India and with the Jewish community in Palestine.

¹ Indian News Parade No. 111 (INR 111, Imperial War Museum, henceforth IWM).

Thus, it is not coincidental that Indian and Anglo women are shown side-by-side in “WAC(I)s Celebrate Third Birthday,” nor that Knight shakes the hand of a sari-clad Indian servicewoman. Such depictions were geared towards not only winning the war, but also investing in British authority and political stability throughout the empire. After all, as Ashley Jackson points out, the Second World War was in large part fought by Britain to preserve the empire.² The final lines of commentary in the newsreel can thus be interpreted as implicit propaganda against the Indian independence movement. These women serving the British Empire, the narrator suggests, personify India’s future. They will enjoy their newfound “independence and responsibility”—courtesy of the Raj—within the existing imperial framework, as loyal British subjects. Of course, this was not to be.

“She Serves Abroad”: Performing Empire in the Orient

A dozen Anglo women in uniform hop off a plane, all smiles. They pose with a RAF man, then drive away across the barren airfield in a jeep. They are WAAFs, and they have just arrived in Ceylon.³ Arrival abroad is a trope in newsreel footage featuring British servicewomen overseas. Given that this footage was intended for recruiting purposes, the choice makes sense; depictions of arrival—whether by plane, train, or ship—invite the audience to not only share in the servicewomen’s anticipation of foreign adventure, but to witness the enactment of imperial connectivity. Witnessing (and vicariously participating in) imperial connectivity would have been relevant to all British viewers, whether potential recruits or not. For example, let us consider another newsreel, in which the first contingent of the Women’s Auxiliary Air Force in India—all Anglo women in uniform—arrives at port, smiling and waving from the deck of their

² Ashley Jackson, *The British Empire and the Second World War* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2006).

³ “WAAF Personnel Arrive by Air in Ceylon” (ABY 58, IWM).

troop carrier.⁴ Having made it to Delhi, two of the WAAFs eat oranges and are served tea by a Sikh man. They ride camels; they watch a snake charmer; one woman tries on an embroidered coat outside a shop while the owner looks on. Here, we see the WAAFs' immersion in a deeply romanticized—and Orientalized—imperial space. As British women abroad, they are performing empire. Indeed, when they are led on a tour by a uniformed Indian woman (perhaps a WAC(I)), India Gate is among the sites they visit; a monumental stone arch, the gate is dedicated to the Indian soldiers who were killed during the First World War. The juxtaposition is no less striking for being none-too-subtle: British women are now serving the Empire just as Indian men did a quarter of a century prior, thus further strengthening the ties that bind India to Britain, Britain to India.

Servicewomen's lives abroad were deeply romanticized in publicity materials targeted toward British audiences. In a 1942 BBC broadcast, Audrey Chitty, Controller of the ATS, described the service's training depot in Palestine.⁵ Here, she said, recruits "work in the most delightful surroundings, for the depot is situated with wide views across orange groves to the hills beyond. Another lot of auxiliaries," she continued, "are living in tents in the desert. Some of them made their camps most attractive, with gardens in front of their briquettes. This sounds quite mad, I know, gardens in the desert. But a bit of mud and a lot of water, and almost anything will grow. [...] [O]ne of the most delightful billets I have seen is a monastery, with a cloistered courtyard with palm trees in the middle, and a view from the windows across incredibly blue seas and mountains, a most peaceful spot to return to at the end of a day's work." Orange groves, desert, palm trees, blue seas and mountains—who wouldn't want to spend the war immersed in such a landscape? Footage of WAAFs in India portrays a strikingly similar ambiance of peace

⁴ "The First Contingent of the Women's Auxiliary Air Force Arrives in India" (ABY 53, IWM).

⁵ "Work of ATS in Middle East" (1232, IWM), September 28, 1942.

and leisure in an exotic setting: women go swimming, style each other's hair, and, reading in the sun, are brought tea by an Indian servant.⁶



Figure 5. Newly arrived ATS servicewomen climb the in October 1942.
© Imperial War Museum. Source: www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205203997

In order to perform imperial unity and represent overseas service as akin to a peacetime holiday, depictions of British women's service abroad employed Orientalizing imagery and discourse. We see this in the scenes of camel rides and snake charmers. It is also apparent in Chitty's description of the ATS "gardens in the desert," which participates in a centuries-old colonial discourse whereby European settlers "improved" or "cultivated" the indigenous landscape.⁷ Locals themselves are not absent from the newsreel footage I have described thus far; when WAAFs are driven down a country road in a jeep, they are watched by men in turbans

⁶ "WAAF's at Work and Play in India" (ABY 117, IWM), Reel 1.

⁷ For a discussion of the "colonial environmental declensionist narrative," see Diana Davis, *Resurrecting the Granary of Rome: Environmental History and French Colonial Expansion in North Africa* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2007).

and an Indian woman and child. Shots of plantation workers at work in the fields follow.⁸ However, in the story of “service abroad,” locals are depicted either as menials or subsumed by the landscape such that they are no more than features of the exotic scenery. This imagery serves as the visual equivalent of what Said pinpoints in the writings of British Orientalists such as T. E. Lawrence and Gertrude Bell: “We note immediately that ‘the Arab’ or ‘Arabs’ have an aura of apartness, definiteness, and collective self-consistency such as to wipe out any traces of individual Arabs with narratable life histories.”⁹ In newsreel footage of British servicewomen in India and the Middle East, locals are similarly cast as Orientalized “others.”

An uncompleted film on the ATS in the Middle East weaves together these threads of romanticized service in the Orientalized abroad such that we clearly see the imperial space being imagined.¹⁰ We follow our protagonist, an attractive young British woman, from one privileged setting in Cairo to another—settings that could all too easily be mistaken for the Raj. The servicewomen inhabit a cloistered world comprised exclusively of Anglo soldiers and civilians who interact with the scenery but not with its inhabitants. Arguably more significant than the trappings of privilege, however, is the simple fact of British interaction with the imperial landscape. For example, our protagonist and a friend arrive at the Information Bureau, where a poster advertises “Tours Available”: Jerusalem (1, 2, or 3 days); Nazareth (1 day); Horse riding; Syria and Lebanon (3 days); Haifa and Acre (1 day).¹¹ Having decided on a tour, the servicewomen drive through a barren desert landscape and, passing through a village, are watched by a shepherd and locals. At one point, a young Arab boy pops into the frame, grinning at the camera. Having arrived in Jerusalem, a group of ten uniformed men and women tour the

⁸ “WAAF’s at Work and Play in India” (ABY 117, IWM), Reel 1.

⁹ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 229.

¹⁰ Army Film Unit, ATS Footage (MGH 226, IWM). This is the assembly cut of a film that was never completed. Although scripted and staged, it would have been considered documentary footage since it features real people.

¹¹ Army Film Unit, ATS Footage (MGH 226, IWM), Reel 2

city, including a covered market, a narrow street bordered by ancient stone walls, and the Dome of the Rock and Western Wall.¹² Although they look like bad tourists, rushing from place to place, they are in fact performing “friendly occupation” of the wartime imperial periphery.¹³ The tour is for the benefit of the viewer as much as the servicewomen; to witness this tour of Jerusalem, like the arrival of WAAFs in India, is to witness the enactment of imperial connectivity.

In each of these media depictions we see the women’s services in India and the Middle East constructed as an imperial project; as such, the British woman is characterized as an imperial actor, a role traditionally reserved for young, virile men.¹⁴ “Today, behind the desert battlefields bordering the Mediterranean, women of the services, for the first time in their history, are marching behind the men in the Middle Eastern army,” intones the narrator of a newsreel produced by the Army Film Unit and released by the Ministry of Information.¹⁵ “Behind the dusts of battle, these girls, all of them volunteers, are playing a vital part.¹⁶ [...] Not only from the British Isles, but from all over the Empire, there are girls serving with the Royal Air Force in the Middle East command.” He notes the “thousands” of Palestinian and South African recruits, remarking that the latter—all white women—“have travelled across an entire continent to do tough jobs and rough jobs in the women’s auxiliary army service. Once again,” he boldly observes, “history repeats itself. Their forefathers were amongst the dauntless foretrekkers and early British settlers who crossed Jangoland desert and mountains to build new

¹² Army Film Unit, ATS Footage (MGH 226, IWM), Reel 1

¹³ Ashley Jackson has argued that “the use of colonies as bases for Allied military operations was a form of transformational ‘friendly’ occupation in itself, affecting people’s lives on many levels”; see *The British Empire and the Second World War*, 7.

¹⁴ Imperial discourse whereby the colonized population was feminized in comparison to the masculine colonizer; for example, see Mrinalini Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity: The ‘Manly Englishman’ and the ‘Effeminate Bengali’ in the Late Nineteenth Century*, Studies in Imperialism (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995)..

¹⁵ “She Serves Abroad” (CBE 208, IWM).

¹⁶ It is worth noting that the script highlights the servicewomen are “behind the dusts of battle” and volunteers; keeping women from active war zones and sending only volunteers overseas were hot topics back in London.

homes.” Here, an explicit parallel is drawn between colonial expansion and the women’s services, which have initiated their own territorial expansion, having “firmly established themselves in an area stretching from the desert across the Nile Delta up to the Caucasus.” “Women of the British Commonwealth,” the narrator concludes, “are proud to share the life of the men in the Middle Eastern army.”

Imperial Inclusion: Local Recruitment and Pro-British Propaganda

Two servicewomen stationed in India go sightseeing together; one is an Indian WAC(I), the other an Australian WAAF. They admire an Indian garden vista, cross a pond on stepping stones (the WAC(I) in the lead), pose with a Hindu statue, and admire a stone lion and elephant.¹⁷ Here, we have the personification of imperial solidarity—women of colony and dominion united in friendship and service to their Empire. Media increasingly foregrounded non-British recruits as this newsreel footage does, so as to represent the women’s services as an inclusive imperial project. This image of empire—strikingly different from the exclusive and Orientalized one considered in the previous section—was constructed in reaction to rising anti-British sentiment in the imperial periphery.

Given her depot’s position at the frontline of the Middle Eastern recruitment program, Senior Commander Helen Pine of the ATS Training Depot in Palestine was acutely aware of public opinion. In the Depot’s 1942 War Diary, Pine repeatedly notes perceptions of the ATS, and suggests how these might be influenced (positively or negatively) by recruitment policy. “Information received that next intake of 500 [ATS] to go to Egypt,” Pine noted on February 16, “From recruiting point of view this is a bad move. They should be seen and work in Palestine.”¹⁸ Two months later, the second British draft arrived, causing “great dismay on the part of the

¹⁷ China India Burma: RAF Operations in South East Asia (ABY 159, IWM).

¹⁸ 1942 ATS Training Depot War Diary (WO 169/6827, The National Archives, henceforth TNA), February 26.

Palestinians generally. Bad effect on public opinion,” Pine concluded.¹⁹ Both entries suggest that Pine recognized the propaganda value of not only recruiting local women, but also making their participation in the ATS as visible as possible; by doing so, the British authorities might diminish any impression of “friendly occupation” by imperial forces. Nonetheless, another two months later, on June 22, Pine bemoaned that the “CRO [is] letting all & sundry in, because of what he calls ‘public opinion.’”²⁰ Clearly, so far as Pine was concerned, recruitment policy was becoming too inclusive, with image erroneously eclipsing efficacy as the priority.

Despite Pine’s reservations, the recruitment campaign in Palestine was conducted with considerable attention to attracting local recruits, principally from the Jewish population. In December 1942, a call for “auxiliaries suitable for a Recruiting Circus in Palestine” was circulated by Morrison-Bell. “They...must be of smart appearance, with good Hebrew, and able to speak in public.”²¹ Later, it was added that personnel for recruiting duties should have: “(i) Very good character and smart appearance. (ii) Knowledge of English and Hebrew—preferably fluent in the latter. (iii) Not less than 9 months service. (iv) Of some standing and local influence in Palestine.”²² Recruiting marches and speeches in Petach Tiqvah, Ramat Gan and Tel-Aviv followed in February 1943,²³ and 100 ATS (one British and two Palestinian platoons) were sent to the United Nations Day Parade in Jerusalem in June, where a “very good impression [was] given” by auxiliaries.²⁴ Following this flurry of recruiting activity, Morrison-Bell issued a thank you message to the Palestinian auxiliaries who participated in the campaign, congratulating them on their “excellent work” and noting that “already we are reaping the benefits of their efforts

¹⁹ 1942 ATS Training Depot War Diary (WO 169/6827, TNA), April 4.

²⁰ 1942 ATS Training Depot War Diary (WO 169/6827, TNA), June 22.

²¹ 1942 ATS HQ Palestine War Diary (WO 169/6829, TNA), Appendix III: ATS Part 1 Orders by Morrison-Bell (December 13, 1942).

²² 1943 ATS HQ Palestine/Syria Group (WO 169/13839, TNA), Appendix V: ATS Part I Orders by Pine (July 30, 1943), p.2.

²³ 1943 ATS Training Depot War Diary (WO 169/13845, TNA), February 10.

²⁴ 1943 ATS HQ Palestine/Syria Group (WO 169/13839, TNA), June 8 & 14.

which have proved highly successful and invaluable to recruiting. This form of propaganda is undoubtedly the most satisfactory for recruiting,” she concluded.²⁵

Certainly this “propaganda,” to use Morrison-Bell’s word, was due at least in part to a persistent need for “womanpower”; on June 28, 1943, Senior Commander Boyle (Pine’s replacement at the ATS Training Depot), noted that “lack of recruits still causes great concern and the demand for ATS workers is still very high.”²⁶ However, press coverage and films would suggest that the purposes of publicity transcended mere recruitment. A press presence was noted at the ATS Training Depot throughout the first week of April 1942. The Army Film Unit was in regular contact, including on April 7 and November 2, when they “photographed [the] Company on Parade, etc.”²⁷ They required footage of both British and Palestinian ATS.²⁸ The ATS courted not only British publicity; on May 5, 1943, Boyle noted the “arrange[ment] for visit of Hebrew, Arab and British Press representatives to ATS Training Depot.”²⁹ And in April 1945, the Commander of ATS Headquarters Palestine noted that the ATS publicity officer for Public Relations, Junior Commander Brown, would be “stay[ing] with ATS units in Palestine in order to obtain stories for the local and UK newspapers.”³⁰ Palestinian journalists and film producers were also in touch with ATS units across the region. A “Palestine Post” reporter named Kloetzal was “very anxious to sponsor ATS Recruiting in Palestine,”³¹ and a few months later “Mr. Lazar Dunner [of Jerusalem] ... arrived and chose auxiliaries and scenes etc. for proposed ATS

²⁵ 1943 ATS HQ Palestine/Syria Group (WO 169/13839, TNA), Appendix IV: ATS HQ Palestine Group Part X Orders by Morrison-Bell (February 24, 1943).

²⁶ 1943 ATS Training Depot War Diary (WO 169/13845, TNA), June 28.

²⁷ 1942 ATS 504 Company War Diary (WO 169/6834, TNA), November 2.

²⁸ 1942 ATS Egypt War Diary (WO 169/6828, TNA), September 7.

²⁹ 1943 ATS Training Depot War Diary (WO 169/13845, TNA), May 5. Perhaps the publicity was effective, for three weeks later, “4 Palestinian and 3 Arab recruits were enrolled and commenced training” (May 24, 1943).

³⁰ 1945 ATS HQ Palestine War Diary (WO 169/21567, TNA), April 4.

³¹ 1942 ATS Egypt War Diary (WO 169/6828, TNA), December 19.

film”—production began on June 7, 1943.³² When the Commanding Officer of ATS Palestine-Syria saw a ATS “propaganda film” a couple months later that could well have been Mr. Dunner’s, she noted that it was a “very good film indeed, although no captions or commentary yet produced.”³³

We might get a sense of the inclusive imperial space officials in the Middle East were attempting to construct with local help by considering footage of Indian women in uniform. One newsreel featured Naval WAC(I)s, who, the narrator declares, “keep secrets. That’s supposedly one thing women can’t do, but the Naval WAC(I)s do it very well.”³⁴ Some women wear saris, others western-style uniforms—but “whatever the uniform,” the narrator assures the audience, “these girls are doing very up-to-date jobs.” Proceeding from this assumption of non-Western “backwardness,” the narrator proceeds to explain that the WAC(I)s work in cyphers, where decoding is like doing “a crossword puzzle in Greek” and “everything is so hush-hush they won’t even tell you the time.” Some, he notes, come from “fighting families”; one woman has a brother in the RAF, another in the Merchant Navy, and two in the army. The tone is light, humorous, occasionally bordering on mocking (cyphers, the narrator remarks, “might be news of D-Day or a request for sardines”). And yet, these Indian WAC(I)s are unabashedly depicted as trusted (employed in high-security jobs), intelligent (solving crossword puzzles in Greek), and loyal (members of fighting families). Such depictions and the imperial subjects made visible in them had the effect of putting a new face on empire, suggesting a dawning recognition on the part of British authorities: expanding the gendered and racial parameters of “Britishness” was a necessary investment in imperial survival.

³² 1943 ATS Training Depot War Diary (WO 169/13845, TNA), June 1.

³³ 1943 ATS HQ Palestine/Syria Group (WO 169/13839, TNA), August 17.

³⁴ Indian News Parade No. 81 (INR 81, IWM).

Reframing Empire: Local Depictions of the Women's Services

A fourth anniversary celebration was held for the Women's Auxiliary Air Force on June 28, 1943 at the YMCA Sports Ground in Jerusalem. Those invited included the British High Commissioner, the Jewish Agency, and—because the Public Information office had been instructed to take “urgent action” and “dispose of [invitation] cards” to them—ten Arab women.³⁵ The celebration was, authorities concluded, a success. “Reports from Police and other sources indicate that spectators turned out in considerably greater numbers than was the case on the United Nations Day Parade,” reported Officers Reece and Jollye to the Command Public Relations Officer two days later.³⁶ One hundred and sixty airwomen were on parade—including local recruits who had spent no more than four weeks in uniform³⁷—led by the Palestine Recruits Training Depot Band, which played “God Save the King” twice before the “imposing YMCA building.” Blenheim planes flew overhead at “psychological moment[s]” and a multi-tiered cake from Groppi's in Cairo was “exclaimed on” by the guests.³⁸ Clearly, this event was meant to impress, from the presence of the High Commissioner (this was “the first Women's Service event at which His Excellency has lent his support in this way”) to the cake, which was topped by small airwoman doll.

Indeed, this event was primarily a public relations move geared toward renewed cooperation with local Jewish authorities. “If this [celebration] succeeds in improving the WAAF recruiting situation,” the RAF Command Public Relations Officer in the Middle East remarked in

³⁵ “Arrangements made, and to be made, for WAAF 4th Anniversary Celebration in Jerusalem, 28th June 1943” (AIR 23/1011, TNA).

³⁶ Flying Officer Reece & Flight Officer Jollye to Command Public Relations Officer, “Report on WAAF 4th Anniversary Celebrations Jerusalem” (AIR 23/1011, TNA), June 30, 1943, p.3.

³⁷ “Notes Given to H.E. the High Commissioner on Women's Auxiliary Air Force” (AIR 23/1011, TNA).

³⁸ Reece & Jollye, “Report on WAAF 4th Anniversary Celebrations Jerusalem,” p.4.

a memo to Air Headquarters Levant, “it will have attained one of its main objects.”³⁹ Not only did the RAF budget £1.10 for advertising in *The Palestine Post*, but “press support was generous” at the event itself, which “was covered by two newsreel cameramen from Public Information and a freelance for the Jewish Agency. Release...will take place throughout Palestine next week,” Officers Reece and Jollye noted.⁴⁰ *The Palestine Post* devoted an impressive 74 column inches to coverage of the parade and the “Palestine Broadcasting Society gave three five-minute spots during the day to WAAF broadcasts, in English, Arabic and Hebrew, all by WAAF personnel.” In this way, the WAAF fourth anniversary celebration exemplifies the increasingly dual purpose underpinning representations of the women’s services in the Middle East and India: recruitment and political stability through the construction of an inclusive imperial space. However, British authorities did not have a monopoly on depictions of the services; the discourse of imperial inclusion they had begun increasingly showed signs of escaping their control.

Jewish-Arab tensions that would characterize post-war Palestine and take on an increasingly anti-British valence clearly underpin local depictions of the WAAF anniversary celebration. The British authorities’ preoccupation with depictions of the Middle Eastern WAAF is indicated by the fact that an entire Air Ministry folder was devoted to the parade, the majority of which is comprised of clippings from local Hebrew and Arabic language newspapers—clippings that present conflicting information depending on their language, and therefore their audience. For example, a Hebrew article in *Hatzofeh* was translated: “At the head of the columns, consisting of about 200 airwomen, marched the band of the Jewish Forces. Most of the airwomen, with the exception of the officers, are Jewesses from Palestine.”⁴¹ This was echoed by

³⁹ RAF Command Public Relations Officer in the Middle East to Air Headquarters Levant (AIR 23/1011, TNA), July 2, 1943.

⁴⁰ Reece & Jollye, “Report on WAAF 4th Anniversary Celebrations Jerusalem,” p.2.

⁴¹ “Parade of the Women who Serve the Air Force,” *Hatzofeh* (AIR 23/1011, TNA), June 29, 1943.

an article in another Hebrew periodical, *Hamashkif*: “Many of the volunteers are Jewesses from Palestine.”⁴² One more article, this one from *Haboker*, provided additional detail about the Jewish recruits to the WAAF: “Among the Palestinian airwomen were many who had left their studies or their jobs to join, and also a number of mothers whose children had come to see the march past.”⁴³ An Arabic newspaper, however, made no mention of local recruitment, and noted that the WAAF parade was “led by English airwomen who have been in WAAF since its formation.”⁴⁴ It would seem that the Arab press did not want to highlight the inclusion of Jewish women in the British public sphere.⁴⁵

Then again, Jewish Palestinians’ reasons for emphasizing local women’s participation in the WAAF was certainly not inspired by imperial loyalty, as is indicated by the ways in which official British discourse was modified in the Jewish press. An anonymous account of the parade, seemingly written for a Jewish audience, highlights members of the Jewish Agency who were present and notes, “The airwomen—Palestinians in their majority—have only had a short period of training and their officer had much praise for them.”⁴⁶ The journalist proceeds to quote at length the speech delivered by the High Commissioner of Palestine and Transjordan, Sir Harold MacMichael, at the event. However, the wording is modified.⁴⁷ Three key differences emerge upon comparing side-by-side the transcript of MacMichael’s speech and the Palestinian journalist’s quotation of it: First, Palestinian WAAFs would “follow them [British WAAFs] in

⁴² “Yesterday’s Parade of W.A.A.F. in Jerusalem,” *Hamashkif* (AIR 23/1011, TNA), June 29, 1943.

⁴³ “W.A.A.F. on Review in Jerusalem,” *Haboker* (AIR 23/1011, TNA), June 29, 1943.

⁴⁴ “4th Anniversary of Formation of WAAF. H.E. the High Commissioner Reviews WAAF,” *Falastine* (AIR 23/1011, TNA), June 29, 1943.

⁴⁵ As Michael J. Cohen argues, “both communities [Arab and Jewish] reserved their first loyalty for their own people, and only second to the British”; see *Britain’s Moment in Palestine: Retrospect and Perspectives, 1917-48*, *Israeli History, Politics and Society* 55 (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2014), 101.

⁴⁶ The pinholes at the top of the page indicate this might be a translation of a Hebrew newspaper article, the original having been removed from the folder.

⁴⁷ It is impossible to know whether the differences were in MacMichael’s delivery or in the journalists’ quotation. That is, does the transcript or the article accurately capture what he said? I proceed from the premise that MacMichael delivered the speech as it was written in the transcript, and that the journalist was the one to modify the wording.

their own way” instead of “emulate[ing] their example” (MacMichael). Second, the journalist notes the Palestinian servicewomen’s “zeal” as opposed to the “keenness of their work” (MacMichael). And third, “we need you to help the Royal Air Force” rather than “we need your help as auxiliaries of the Royal Air Force” (MacMichael). Each variation modifies the power dynamic conveyed by MacMichael, whereby Middle Eastern women follow passively and “keenly” in the footsteps of British WAAFs.

A further way in which official British discourse was modified in the Jewish press is revealed by a *Palestine Post* article titled “WAAF Celebrates Fourth Birthday” and written by C.Z. Kloetzel (the same journalist who contacted the ATS in Egypt).⁴⁸ While Kloetzel alluded to the Middle Eastern WAAF’s “British mother organization” and claimed that “to make the acquaintance of these WAAF officers and NCOs from England is to be reassured that they will be to our women and girls in their care much more than just expert drill-masters and military instructors,” elsewhere in the article he implicitly challenged the official British discourse that MacMichael’s speech participated in. “When peace comes to this distracted world,” MacMichael had proclaimed, “the discipline and sense of responsibility which have been learned, the skill acquired, and the pride of achievement, will be an unforgettable heritage for yourself, for your children, and for the service to which you belong.” In this way, he echoed the newsreel about the WAC(I)s that asserted they would, after the war, “become a powerful factor in shaping India’s destiny.” Kloetzel made a similar statement in his article: “[T]he creation of a new and very fine type of woman who will play as important a part in the shaping of things after the war as she is doing now in the war effort.” Similar, yes, but different in a key way; Kloetzel’s mention of a “new woman” and vague allusion to “things after the war” tapped into a nationalist (specifically Zionist) discourse. Such depictions signal that the British authorities did not have a monopoly on

⁴⁸ C.Z. Kloetzel, “WAAF Celebrates Fourth Birthday,” *The Palestine Post* (AIR 23/1011, TNA), June 28, 1943.

representations of the women's services. And yet, they continued to act under the pretense of discursive control, with RAF Command Public Relations sending a thank you note to the editor of *The Palestine Post* thanking him for "the generous space which you have given in your paper to this event... and in particular the striking article by Mr. C.Z. Kloetzel."⁴⁹

Conclusion

"Due to the delicate political situation that existed between the Government and the Jewish Agency, which has resulted in the almost complete closing down of all recruiting in Palestine," noted Officers Reece and Jollye in their report on the WAAF anniversary celebration in Jerusalem, "this event had an importance considerably greater than appears on the surface. [...] The importance of this was realised and Political Officers of the Jewish Agency, influential members of Jewish and Arab women's organisations, together with representatives of the English, Arab and Jewish press, were invited to the event. [...] Opportunity was taken here too, to kill dangerous rumour that has wide circulation and says that chances of promotion will not be afforded to girls locally enlisted in the WAAF. It is yet too early to estimate what concrete value will result in terms of recruiting, but it seems safe to assume that extensive and valuable co-operation will accrue...."⁵⁰

This section has argued that by the end of the war, local recruitment for the British women's services had evolved into a propagandistic reaction to rising anti-colonial tensions in India and with the Jewish community in Palestine. Indeed, the WAAF anniversary celebration in Jerusalem, in which locally recruited Palestinian women played a visible and highly publicized part, was the culmination of efforts to portray the British women's services in the Middle East as an inclusive imperial space. Similar efforts were made in India. In each region, the inclusive

⁴⁹ To the Editor of the *Palestine Post* editor from RAF Command Public Relations Officer (AIR 23/1011, TNA), June 30, 1943.

⁵⁰ Reece & Jollye, "Report on WAAF 4th Anniversary Celebrations Jerusalem," p.1.

image was at odds with Orientalizing depictions of empire constructed for British audiences, wherein Anglo women performed imperial power by interacting with the romanticized scenery but not with its inhabitants. Despite their obvious differences, both images—the inclusive and Orientalist—appeal to imperial unity: the diffusion of British women into the periphery, and the inclusion of colonial women into an imperial space. Such depictions were geared towards not only winning the war, but also investing in British authority and political stability throughout the empire. Indeed, the recrafting of the imperial image was indicative of rising tensions with the local populations and the recognition that expanding the gendered and racial parameters of “Britishness” was necessary for imperial survival.

Local depictions of the women’s services, however, suggest that British constructions of empire could be reframed. In fact, the imperial space could even be coopted in the service of nationalist (and therefore anti-British) aims. The day before the WAAF anniversary celebration, *The Palestine Post* published a statement issued by the Jewish Agency and Vaad Leumi (Jewish National Council): “We are again appealing to the sons and daughters of the Yishuv to join the Army. [...] Up till now nearly 23,000 members of the Yishuv, men and women, have joined H.M. Forces in the present war. They volunteered for military service as Jews. Their enlistment has led to the creation of Palestinian-Jewish units in the British Army. [...] Let new recruits come forward for the glory of Israel’s name in the present war! Let everyone do his duty!”⁵¹ This statement is rife with nationalist discourse: “volunteered...as Jews,” Palestinian-Jewish units, “the glory of Israel’s name.” Although there is no evidence of anti-British stirrings in the WAC(I), the Rani of Jhansi Regiment (RJR) might be considered an anti-colonial foil to the Corps. Founded by Indian nationalist leader Subhas Chandra Bose in 1943 as the women’s

⁵¹ “Jewish Agency Recruiting Appeal: Offices Re-Opened with Call to Arms,” *The Palestine Post* (AIR 23/1011, TNA), June 27, 1943. See Anat Granit-Hacohen, *Hebrew Women Join the Forces: Jewish Women from Palestine in the British Forces during the Second World War* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2017).

branch of the Indian National Army, the RJR comprised young Indian women living in Southeast Asia who joined the regiment to fight for the liberation of the “Motherland” from the British.⁵² Indeed, due to the rise of anti-colonialism following the war, memories of Middle Eastern and Indian women’s service in the British army quickly became dissonant in their own countries. Moreover, as women of color, their stories were fated to fall victim to racial and gendered power structures in the metropolis. The Conclusion will consider the memory of the overseas women’s services: How and why has the history of Indian and Middle Eastern women’s participation in the British war effort been silenced?

⁵² See Vera Hildebrand, *Women at War: Subhas Chandra Bose and the Rani of Jhansi Regiment* (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2018).

CONCLUSION: MEMORY

The Archive and the Tenacity of Imperial Power

Vicky Davison's memories of her time in the Middle Eastern WAAF are dark—much darker than those of other British servicewomen. She highlights medical neglect, depression, violence, and tensions with locals throughout her 1999 oral history. Perhaps this can be attributed to the fact that Davison was stationed in Palestine through 1946, as hostilities rose with the Jewish population. However, Davison's memories may also be colored by the fact that, upon being interviewed by the Imperial War Museum, she deeply resented the lack of recognition she and her fellow servicewomen had received following the war. "It's been kept under cover," she says, "They don't like to talk about women in war service. They say it belittles the men. If the women were on the front, it couldn't have been that bad."¹ After the war, Davison claims, servicewomen "wouldn't dare say you'd been in the services," for both veterans and civilians often assumed servicewomen's primary role overseas had been of a sexual nature.² Decades of silence ensued. Davison received three medals, but "apart from that there was nothing, [we were] just forgotten. [...] There was a lot of suffering, physically and mentally, during that period. And it's not been recognized."³

Women's participation in the war effort—whether in the armed services or as members of the civilian labor force—was quickly forgotten following British victory in 1945. Artifacts of popular culture are a useful barometer of collective memory,⁴ and Penny Summerfield has argued that "the rapidity with which women's wartime roles were expunged from public memory is indicated by the consensus among 1950s reviewers that there was no place for women in war

¹ Winifred "Vicki" Davison oral history (19651, Imperial War Museum), Reel 3.

² Ibid., Reel 4.

³ Ibid.

⁴ See Takashi Fujitani et al., *Perilous Memories: The Asia-Pacific War(s)*, (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2001), 16. "Collective memory" is defined as "knowledge of the past [that] emerges in communicative practice and interaction."

films.”⁵ Colonial servicemen had a similar fate, for it was preferable “to represent the Second World War as one that Britain fought alone.”⁶ Indeed, Martin Francis has claimed that the erasure of non-white airmen from collective memory of the wartime RAF is indicative of the wider “limitations of how the history of cultural memory has been conceptualized and written.”⁷ Why such limitations? Perhaps because acknowledging the service of both women and colonial men during the Second World War complicates the narrative of white British male as sole victor—a narrative that has been paramount to British self-understanding since the end of the war and near simultaneous collapse of the empire.

After decades of silence, British women’s service during the war has gradually been restored to collective memory. So too has the service of colonial men.⁸ However, memories of colonial women’s participation in the war effort remain limited, suggesting their potential to disrupt dominant narratives of the Second World War along simultaneously gendered and racial lines. As such, the act of opposing the erasure of colonial women’s service from collective memory engenders “critical remembering” as defined by Takashi Fujitani, Geoffrey White, and Lisa Yoneyama: a process that “recuperates ... memories that have been distorted, disavowed, or effaced by the effects of power.”⁹ In the case of colonial women’s wartime service, the source of such “effacing” power can easily be traced to postcolonial nationalism, deeply racialized in the UK and almost always gendered male. As Yasmin Khan has noted, “Many societies have used

⁵ Penny Summerfield, “Film and the Popular Memory of the Second World War in Britain 1950-1959,” in *Gender, Labour, War and Empire: Essays on Modern Britain*, ed. Philippa Levine and Susan R. Grayzel (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 163.

⁶ Summerfield, 167.

⁷ Martin Francis, “Men of the Royal Air Force, the Cultural Memory of the Second World War and the Twilight of the British Empire,” in *Gender, Labour, War and Empire: Essays on Modern Britain*, ed. Philippa Levine and Susan R. Grayzel (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 188.

⁸ Yasmin Khan has noted that “museum exhibitions, oral history projects and television documentaries have continually probed and elucidated the role of imperial and Commonwealth servicemen and their lesser-known participation in the war.... It is no longer true to suggest that this is an entirely forgotten story.” See Yasmin Khan, *The Raj at War: A People’s History of India’s Second World War* (London: Vintage, 2016), xii-xiii.

⁹ Fujitani et al., 2.

histories of war ... to bolster their own cohesion and sense of national belonging. The 1940s have often been remembered in ways that have served national stories and myths” in both Britain and postcolonial states.¹⁰ The Indian and Middle Eastern women who served in the ATS, WAAF, and WAC(I) have traditionally had no place in Britain’s national myth, for they show that the war was not white, male, and limited to the nation, but instead multicultural, multigendered, and imperial in scope.

In the first section of this conclusion, I consider how Indian and Middle Eastern women’s service during the war has been variously remembered and forgotten by analyzing a Ministry of Defense photographic exhibition that toured the UK between 2000 and 2005, a multimedia resource pack designed by the Imperial War Museum in 1995 for primary school history teachers, and the colonial archive itself as an institutional source. Ultimately, I argue that the erasure of colonial women’s wartime service from collective memory has recently been countered—though not altogether productively—in order to foster a multicultural British identity for the 21st century. Meanwhile, as a state institution deeply rooted in the colonial era, the archive perpetuates the liminality of colonial women through persistent erasure, thus maintaining gaps in both collective memory and scholarly discourse that can only be challenged by reading against the grain. Finally, in the Coda, I assess how we might also read *along* the archival grain¹¹ to shed light on the overseas women’s services as an (ongoing) imperial project.

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¹⁰ Khan, *The Raj at War*, xv.

¹¹ As called for by Ann Laura Stoler in *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

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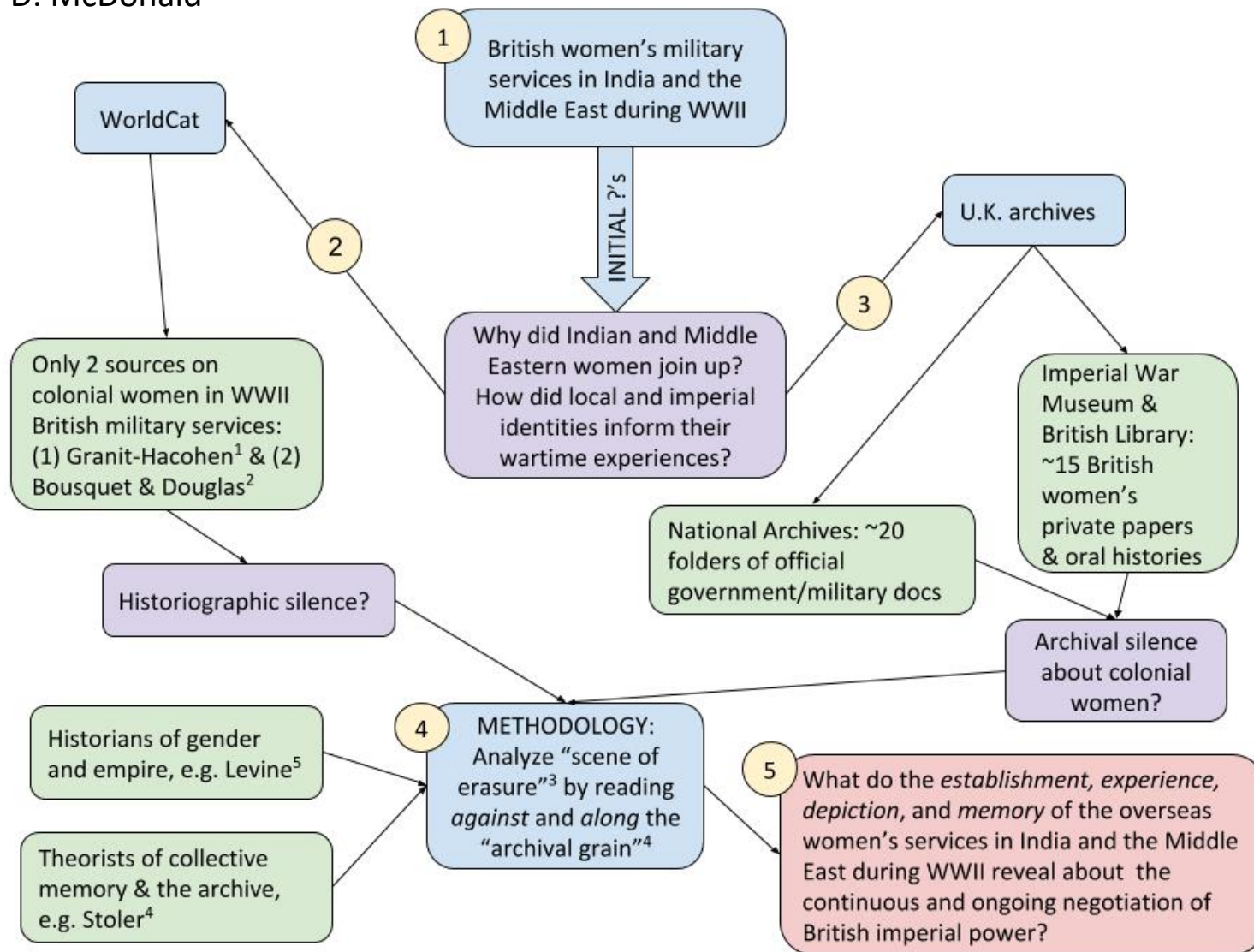
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