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To what extent did being a nurse during WW1 represent a kind of emancipation for British women?

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To what extent did being a nurse during WW1 represent a kind of emancipation for British women?

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UFR D'ETUDES ANGLOPHONES

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PLC Anglais

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Introduction

"All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights", proclaims the first article of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Nowadays, gender equality is a well known concept everybody has certainly heard of: based on the foresaid Declaration, its ultimate goal is to provide equality in law and social situation for both sexes. Gender has always been a complex and delicate issue to deal with; nevertheless, it draws European people's attention on a permanent basis and arouses their interest. Equal treatment between men and women—although it still has to be improved—has strongly progressed in later years. This advance has only been achievable thanks to the long and harsh struggle women and their supporters have led through the centuries. Indeed, British women of the past did not experience easy living conditions. From the beginning of recorded history, there has never been a time in which men have considered women as their equals. Because of men's superior physical strength and obvious biological differences between the sexes, female have always been classified as a sub-class: their gender was a justification for their inferiority and men could use them to serve their needs. For centuries, the spouse only served the realm of reproduction and carried out her domestic duties, which consisted in children's education and housework. From birth, women were taught that their semi-slave status was natural: as they grew up, they were kept ignorant of everything outside their domestic sphere so as to prevent them from challenging the status quo. If they dared do so, they were severely punished by their husbands, who were allowed to use violence on women. Thus, patriarchy has ruled societies and civilizations for ages and still does so in some parts of the world. In late Victorian England, women decided to fight for their rights: weary of being men's inferiors, they wanted to prove their worth and craved independence. Turning their current status—they were considered the weaker sex—into a new identity became their everyday quest and that is why they ardently struggled to be bestowed with new rights. Several feminist organizations were formed, such as the famous NUWSS¹ and

¹ The National Union of Women's Suffrage Society, whose members were also known as the suffragists, was an organization of women's suffrage societies in the United Kingdom. and was created by Millicent Fawcett.

WSPU²—created in 1897 and 1903, respectively—and the suffrage campaign marked the beginning of one of the most important social revolutions in English history.

When the First World War broke out in 1914, Britain joined the conflict in the defense of Belgium and in reaction to Germany's violation of The Treaty of London³. As the whole country was mobilized to help the nation, British feminists put their campaigns on hold. Women entered the labour market in unprecedented numbers; while some of them spent hours working in factories, others preferred to enroll as nurses, following Florence Nightingale's⁴ footsteps. In the early 20th century, several associations were created, the most important and influential being the F.A.N.Y.s⁵ but also the V.A.D.s⁶, which constitute the focus of this dissertation. WW I nurses are truly inspirational heroes because they overcame insurmountable odds, endured gender-based prejudice, and helped a flood of wounded soldiers under enemy fire. Each of these courageous women was ultimately devoted to the true calling of nursing: saving human life. War and female mobilization were advantageous because they offered women a new way of planning their future as they craved equality with their male contemporaries. The young V.A.D.s were frequently exposed to the cruelties of war, such as zeppelins dropping bombs on the hospitals, dressing severe wounds, and standing alongside wounded soldiers as they died. Women swapped their dull domestic duties for the uniform and the field: they took up a fresh start in life and hoped that war could provide them with independence and new rights. To what extent did being a nurse in WW I represent a kind of emancipation for British women? Did they reach their

² The Women's Social and Political Union was the leading militant organization campaigning for women's suffrage in the United Kingdom. It was the first group whose members were known as "suffragettes" and the leaders were Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst.

³ The Treaty of London was established in 1839: it declared that Belgium's neutrality was to be respected by all nations.

⁴ She is perhaps the most famous nurse in British history . She is known for her efforts to reform the British military health system. She led The first instance of specialist civilian female nurses serving with the British Army during the Crimean War (October 1853 to February 1856).

⁵ Wikipedia: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First_Aid_Nursing_Yeomanry>, [Last date accessed: June, 12th, 2013]. The First Aid Nursing Yeomanry was a British independent all-female unit affiliated to the Territorial Army and formed in 1907.

⁶ Wikipedia: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Voluntary_Aid_Detachment>, [Last date accessed: June, 12th, 2013]. The Voluntary Aid Detachments, founded in 1909, was a voluntary organization providing field nursing services, mainly in hospitals, in the United Kingdom and various other countries.

goals and fulfill their ambitions? This is what we will try to define in this essay. This dissertation, based on Vera Brittain's autobiographical story told in *Testament Of Youth*, will deal with the beginning of the war: in the first part, we will take an interest in the girls' motivations and the way the recruitment of young nurses took place. We will then deal with the V.A.D recruits' new life: how they had to adapt to the rhythm of a challenging environment as they watched over injured soldiers and accompanied them through their ordeal, either in their mother country or abroad. Finally, the third and last part will address the issue of the young nurses' new identity: between femininity and militarism, how were they perceived by a society at war? Undoubtedly, men and women judged the V.A.D.s differently: the former welcomed them without much incident while the latter—the professional nurses—had serious disagreements and conflicts with the new recruits who joined nursing without the traditional training. This essay will try to explore the issue of gender and women's emancipation throughout the Great War, the first cataclysm of the 20th century, which brought radical changes to the lives of common citizens.

Part 1

Going to War

Going to War

A) Wartime propaganda: an appealing call to the pursuit of heroism

When Britain declared war on Germany on August 4th, 1914, everybody thought the conflict would be over by December at the latest. But the British quickly became disillusioned and realized that winning the war would not be that easy. As the battles went on, the British Government needed more and more help from the civilians. Men as well as women were encouraged to join the army and the work force thanks to propaganda posters produced by the Parliamentary Recruiting Committee. During wartime, propaganda enabled the government to get different kinds of messages across to the British public: it was useful for recruitment but also to promote patriotism, justify the war, raise money or resources, and promote accepted standards of behavior. Images representing brave soldiers fighting against cruel enemies or women encouraging their husbands to join the army and fight on the frontline began to be posted up and distributed in the streets. It worked well: while men went to war, women helped the country by taking their jobs and usual responsibilities. Since more and more men were engaged on the battlefield, more nurses were *de facto* needed; as the war progressed, the supply of nurses was too small to meet both military and domestic needs. Therefore, the government employed propaganda to both convey a message of hope to the British people and warn nurses about the urgent need to enroll if they wanted to save the lives of British soldiers. The common image of nurses during the First World War is that of a woman in the Red Cross uniform, braving danger, inwardly grieving but outwardly warm, serene and efficient; women were heavily influenced by this propaganda. The positive values hidden behind these type of posters as well as the chance of emancipation offered by the wartime situation made them willing to enroll. In the young girls' heads, propaganda pictures offered the opportunity of helping the country to win the war and gave them the possibility of being effective in a realm outside the domestic sphere. The modern young women of 1914 were easy targets for propaganda because of

their innocence and credulity: indeed, they did not know anything about military hospitals and their grim realities.⁷

B) The creation of the V.A.D.s

The original scheme for voluntary aid to the sick and wounded was a kind of practical measure to fill a gap in the Territorial Medical Service. "This auxiliary service was situated very firmly at home in case of invasion", as Sharon Ouditt wrote in *Fighting Forces, Writing Women*⁸. In the 1910's, women became eager to be recognized as responsible figures in the matter of national defense and wanted a kind of officialization of this service. Nevertheless, this was impossible because the organization did not depend on government funding and each detachment received voluntary contributions from private people, following the tradition of women's involvement in voluntary work in the early Victorian period.

The V.A.D. organization was properly formed in 1909⁹. The Voluntary Aid Detachment nurses and assistants were to provide nursing and medical assistance during a time of war. The young recruits received only basic medical training but could comfort badly injured soldiers and give them some basic treatments to ease their pain. Nonetheless, in the chaos at the beginning of war, the War Office refused help from the Red Cross; as a result, progress in the female work sphere was difficult and many women sought employment abroad, such as in France or Belgium, where they could gain a direct access to the front lines. Sir Frederick Treves¹⁰, who was responsible for the nurses of the British Red Cross Society, complained to Dame Katharine Furse¹¹,

⁷ See Appendix 1

⁸ Ouditt, Sharon. *Fighting Forces, Writing Women: Identity and Ideology in the First World War*. Routledge, 1993, 11.

⁹ QARANC: <<http://www.qaranc.co.uk/voluntary-aid-detachment.php>>, [Last date accessed: 12th, 2013].

¹⁰ Wikipedia: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sir_Frederick_Treves,_1st_Baronet>, [Last date accessed: June, 12th, 2013]. He was the Chairman of the Executive Committee from 1905 to 1912 of the British Red Cross.

¹¹ Katharine Furse was the founder of the V.A.D. force as well as the Chairman of this Joint Women's V.A.D Committee during WW I. She had studied anatomy, physiology as well as home nursing and was therefore in the best position to be at the head of the detachments. She is remembered for both her enthusiasm and her rigor, playing an important part in the war.

herself in charge of the V.A.D.s, that the detachments were deprived of a precious help. The girls had proved their competence on the British ground by healing and taking care of numerous Belgian refugees who had fled their country after the German invasion of 1914.

The year 1914 marked the beginning of British V.A.D.s' real actions: Katharine Furse left for Boulogne with fellow members and was called upon to help in improvised wards until the trained nurses' arrival. For the first time, they experienced the dismissive attitude that military men showed towards them and the contempt of professional nurses. However, this signified progress as Katharine Furse was recalled to London where she founded, in January 1915, the Central V.A.D. Head Quarters Office at Devonshire House¹². At that point, the War Office admitted that trained nurses were insufficient for the military hospitals and that V.A.D.s were needed to supply the professional nurses as probationary assistants. With the outbreak of the war, as many as 600 members per week were appointed to military hospitals at home and abroad; in her thesis¹³, Marie-Noele Bonnes Raud pointed out that in 1914, the British Red Cross Society counted up 1,582 female detachments, or 40,018 women in total. In Great Britain, the V.A.D. nurses constituted the more visible component of the nursing staff: they were 40,000 in number in 1914, rising to 66,000 in 1918.

C) Motivations and recruitment

The girls who wanted to submit their application for this profession were usually young aristocrats from eighteen years old to their early thirties. They also came from the wealthy bourgeoisie but occasionally some girls stemmed from a middle-class family. To serve abroad, girls had to be between 23 and 42 and the ones willing to help at home were between 21 and 48. When they were younger, they lied about their age just to enter the nursing sphere and face the living conditions of the changing English life, which was getting harsher because of the war. They were often attracted by the

¹² Ouditt, Sharon. *Fighting Forces, Writing Women: Identity and Ideology in the First World War*. Routledge, 1993, 13.

¹³ Bonnes Raud, Marie-Noele. *Les femmes au service de l'institution militaire en Grande-Bretagne pendant la Première Guerre mondiale*. Thèse 1992BOR30013. Bordeaux : 1992.

offer of a new authoritative identity—for the ones who would take up the administrative and commanding roles, at least. They wanted to be involved just like their male counterparts and exchange their idleness for a uniform, proving they could meet their needs by working. At the time, there was a striking shortage of doctors and nurses. However, even if women were crying out to begin their nursing training, every possible obstacle was put in their way and they were sent home, being told that the only thing required of them was to keep performing their domestic duties—taking care of the home and breeding future soldiers. Another reason to train to be a nurse could have been the wish to get closer to the world of war in order to understand it or take on responsibilities as soldiers did. Vera Brittain, for instance, gave up her studies in Oxford to work as a nurse in June 1915: she thought experience of the war would be more beneficial than learning Greek and Latin at the time. Furthermore, she would be in the heart of the war, helping soldiers and showing her usefulness by enduring as much as the man she loved: "he has to face far worse things than any sight or act I could come across; he can bear it—and so I can" she wrote in *Testament Of Youth*¹⁴. The girls became aware that in the trenches, men were suffering and surviving—more than living—in dreadful conditions. Vera Brittain wrote that it was "very hard to believe that not far away, men were being slain ruthlessly, and their poor disfigured bodies heaped together and crowded in ghastly indiscriminate and quickly provided common graves as though they were nameless vermin"¹⁵. Because she was born a female, she was not able to go to the front, but she wanted to do the next best thing—nursing. She strongly believed, as numerous other women did, that "the place of anyone who is young and strong and capable is where the work is needed to be done."¹⁶ Thus, the nurses-to-be, in the name of patriotism and solidarity, took on work that their servants normally carried out; these girls, who had never done any housework, did the whole of the house and kitchen work as well as they could during WW I. These volunteers represented the essence of the feminine commitment from the middle and upper social classes.

Katharine Furse wanted equal recognition for women's war work as well as an efficient, centralized method of recruitment and training. The campaign of recruitment was destined to upper and middle-class women, who were thought to better represent

¹⁴ Brittain, Vera. *Testament Of Youth*. Great Britain: William Collins Sons & Co. Ltd. Glasgow, 1979, 154.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 214.

England. On the one hand, the upbringing that characterized their class had provided them with a model of behavior and the reminder that obedience was a key value: thus, these women would not ask for their rights or complain but perform obediently. On the other hand, their simple ignorance should help them not to become romantically entangled with the men, which concerned the military establishment¹⁷. Eager to participate in this tragic event, the targeted young ladies offered their services in large numbers to the War Office in order to become members of the Voluntary Aid Detachments (V.A.D.). Military detachments had been created in order to defend English territory and the recruitment procedure was very detailed and highly selective. It was required from the V.A.D.s-to-be that they acquire some voluntary experience in a hospital before being employed. Moreover, the skills of first aid and home nursing were as well praised and valuable in contributing to the health and safety of the wounded. Women had to take the First Aid and Home Nursing examination¹⁸; those who passed the tests successfully and received Red Cross First Aid nursing as well as hygiene and sanitation certificates became full-fledged candidates for the Red Cross. Each girl had to send her Qualification Form—a document showing she had passed the examination previously mentioned—signed by her Commandant and counter-signed by the County Director, before her references could be taken up. The aforesaid references were to include a Matron's report on her hospital experience, a reference regarding the nationality of her parents, one testifying of her character and one from her school giving her qualifications; in addition, a medical certificate was also required. The candidate was then interviewed by a Matron. During WW1, it was Miss Becher¹⁹ who worked for the War Office and was in charge of the girls' recruitment as well as the administration and allocation to the nursing services. She conducted an interview with each girl and submitted her reports and her decision to the military-medical authority. On the recruitment contract, it was always specified whether the nurse was a member of the mobile branch—which meant that she was assigned in a foreign country—or if she remained in her own country. The "paper to VAD members", an official letter that Katharine Furse wrote and sent to the new recruits, contained these words:

¹⁷ The military establishment feared sexually transmitted diseases that the Contagious Diseases Act brought to public in the 19th century. Working women were represented as lustful and degraded.

¹⁸ M.N, Bonnes Raud, *op.cit.*
To become qualified, the girls were required to pass examinations on home nursing, first aid and hygiene.

¹⁹ Dame Ethel Hope Becher was the Matron in Chief of the Queen Alexandra's Imperial Military Nursing Service (QAIMNS) between 1910 and 1919.

"You are being sent to work for the Red Cross. You have to perform a task which will need your courage, your energy, your patience, your humility your determination to overcome all difficulties"²⁰.

After having been registered, young women were sent to different places and hospitals to learn the job under the supervision of the women who already were in the profession. Generally, the first hospitals they were sent to were small ones run by the Red Cross and the Saint John Ambulance Brigade. The girls had to do one month's probation; if considered suitable, they signed a contract for a further six months. After this stage, they often wanted to carry on their training in a bigger hospital. Thus, they could ask for an appointment directly with the Matron of an Army Hospital and be interviewed: hereunto, Vera Brittain wrote "I stood all through the interview and know now just how a servant feels when she is being engaged."²¹. Indeed, just like servants of the time, the V.A.D.'s were essentially women used and exploited by the military institution on a temporary basis. According to the male leadership—that is to say the Government and the military leaders—the women were deemed incapable of carrying out certain tasks but the emergency of war made them change their minds. These women, who were glad to participate in the war effort, quickly forgot the humiliation they had been subjected to and hoped their efficiency and bravery would be recognized at last.

²⁰ See appendix 2

²¹ V. Brittain, *op. cit.*, p. 179.

Part 2

Being a nurse in a wartime society

Being a nurse in a wartime society

A) Leaving the family nest

At the beginning of the 20th century, a girl in her twenties was familiar to tennis or garden parties, with weddings and dances seeming to be logical stages in a young lady's life. Before the war, the occupations, interests, emotions, and schedule of a young woman were supervised by the family circle from beginning to end. Their private life was nonexistent: their letters were often opened, every move was carefully observed, and parents, faithful to the universal norm of the time, asked a torrent of questions each time their daughter met a young man and chaperoned them during their outings or hired a reliable resident of the neighborhood to do so. The "relationships leading from acquaintance to engagement were to be conducted in public or not at all"²², wrote Vera Brittain in her book.

As they left their houses they had lived in since they were children, they also withdrew from the constraining Victorian principles and set off on a new kind of adventure. Their enrolment enabled them to free themselves from the passive and chaperoned Edwardian existence which characterized the lives of women. Not only did they escape the parental home but they also broke away from their country when they served abroad. France was often the place where they wanted to practice, as it was "the heart of the fiercest living where nothing was permanent"²³, in Vera Brittain's words. Indeed, the more dangerous it was, the more free and helpful the women felt. At the time, there was a certain glory about standing alongside death. War and its aftermath actually improved the lives of some women: they developed a greater sense of responsibility and took pride in their work, something they had never experienced before. Far from home, girls could enjoy a feeling of liberty because they were not spied on all day long: they could come and go as they wished. Vera Brittain testified about that point in a letter she wrote to her lover in 1915: "it is quite thrilling to be an

²² *Ibid.*, p. 120.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 372

unprotected female and feel that no one in your immediate surroundings is particularly concerned with what happens to you so long as you don't give them any bother."²⁴.

This feeling of liberty and the new living style of the enrolled girls was not always understood by the older generation, with parents often not sharing their daughters' convictions: they thought their daughters were seeing too much of life and that their place was not in stressful military hospitals. When Vera Brittain received a letter containing such disapproval and misunderstanding from her father, she firmly responded that nothing would induce her to stop doing what she was doing and that she would never respect herself again if she allowed a few slight physical hardships to make her give up what was the finest work any girl could do at that time. Actually, it is more likely that parents simply did not want their daughters mixing with lower-class Tommies²⁵.

B) Training period and nursing apprenticeship

WW1 was the first conflict in which nurses had a professional training: the nation had realized the crucial need to prepare them to meet the medical needs of war. Nurses were rapidly sent to military hospitals to address the shortage of personnel. V.A.D. organization followed the military hierarchy and each a detachment was composed of twenty four women: "led by a Commandant and Lady Superintendent (a trained nurse), the detachment comprised four sections, each with a Section Leader and four women, or two sections, each with one Section Leader and nine women. Within its ranks, each female detachment had to include four proficient cooks."²⁶ From their arrival, the young recruits were immediately under the commandment of the professional Sister-in-Charge, Matron and Principal Matron.

Committed women had some first aid lessons where they learnt how to dispense nursing care as well as hygiene and sometimes cooking lessons. Due to their education and their privileged social background, they had always relied upon a large

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.213

²⁵ By the beginning of war in 1914, 'Tommy' was the name commonly assigned to the British private soldier.

²⁶ Storey, Neil.& Molly Housego. *Women in the First World War*. Shire, 2010, 16.

amount of servants and, as a consequence, were hardly confident and ill at ease with the everyday feminine activities they were asked to carry out. Vera Brittain wrote:

What did profoundly trouble and humiliate me was my colossal ignorance of the simplest domestic operations. [...] it led me to make shamefaced inquiries of my superiors, from whom I learnt how numerous and devastating were the errors that it was possible to commit in carrying out the most ordinary functions of everyday life.²⁷

However, they performed their tasks without breathing a word for their biggest fear was to be judged unfit for the job and sent back home before the end of their contract.

After a few weeks of training in the small hospital of their country-town, the nurses-to-be could be attached to a bigger hospital and begin working under professional nurses. In their new environment, they became truly aware that their comfortable life was far behind them and that a new life as well as new habits were beginning. Girls would often feel a bit lost and disconcerted on their arrival, with the first days spent far from their family being both thrilling and morally harrowing. Indeed, "every girl in the great military hospitals or elsewhere was living under strange, and at first, bewildering conditions. She was up against new problems and experiencing new sensations; she was confronted with new barriers and restrictions", relates Kathleen Marion Barrow in a personal account which was published in *Reminiscent Sketches 1914 to 1919*²⁸. The new recruits' emotions were confused and they had to exert constant effort to endure and accept their new way of living. "I feel a mixture of strangeness and independence and depression and apprehension and a few other things to-night."²⁹, wrote Vera Brittain in a letter she addressed to her lover.

Many times, their living place was not ready when they arrived and, in those days, "there was no Institute of Industrial Psychology to suggest ideal standards to professional organizations"³⁰, underlined Vera Brittain. This undermined the health of nurses and could sometimes cost a life. The room in which they slept was generally located in a hostel or a boarding school requisitioned for the duration of the war. It was

²⁷ V.Brittain, *op. cit.*, p. 165

²⁸ Scarletfinders.co.uk: <<http://www.scarletfinders.co.uk/184.html>>, [Last date accessed: June, 12th, 2013].

²⁹ V.Brittain, *op. cit.*, p. 205

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 207

often a bare-boarded room that they had to share with companions: that is the reason why it was divided into several cubicles, each of these separated by curtains or screens. Each nurse only had a bed, a wash-stand and a chest of drawers, with the building often being uncomfortably cold. Nobody seemed to really care about the new recruits' comfort and well being: the venue was not really maintained. The rooms were often badly equipped and the sanitary aspect of the place they lived in was apparently not a priority for the authorities: indeed, the girls were not allowed a daily bath even though they were continually in contact with septic wounds, sputum cups, or bed-pans and had to walk with wet feet. The hours were strict and the poor accommodations allowed no more than two persons per evening to occupy the bathroom. Furthermore, Vera Brittain's story reveals that the water was barely lukewarm because no order to install an updated water heater had been given. These hard and desperate conditions affected the girls' health and many fell ill repeatedly. The V.A.D.s had even less chance of getting a bath if Sisters slept in the same building because hierarchy enabled them to pass first; that is why V.A.D.s often resorted to removing the odors and residue of the day with a small washcloth and water in the sink.

Nurses' nights were usually short with the girls unable to sleep much despite being due at the hospital early in the morning. The hospital was seldom close to their quarters and they had to take public transport, but this was often overcrowded and unavailable for use. No matter the weather or their fatigue, they were obliged to walk to the ward on empty stomachs, generally lugging a heavy suitcase containing medical equipment and clean aprons. Military punctuality was enforced, with nurses being expected to arrive at work on time, appearing clean, tidy and cheerful. These exhausted girls, unaccustomed to a life of hardship, often fell ill and even developed pneumonia undertaking these grueling early morning walks. Once at the hospital, they finally ate a modest breakfast and began working. Their hours generally included several hours off and a weekly half-day if no delivery of severely wounded soldiers arrived at the hospital. After a long and hard day of work, the difficult journey they did in the morning had to be repeated at day's end, with the totally exhausted nurses never coming back to their rooms before eight in the evening. The demanding rhythm of their new lives and the strictly enforced rules were certainly far from the idealized life the girls had imagined before enrolling; however, as long as their country required their sacrifice, they willingly shouldered the burden.

V.A.D.s were also put on night duty over a period of two months. Nurses had to work long hours without time off and received only a small sum in return. They usually worked in huts and had to look after dozens of soldiers. They changed linens, sterilized equipment, and served meals, but many were also exposed to the rawer side of war, with V.A.D.s being expected to perform the duties of professional nurses when the influx of casualties overwhelmed the staff. Their fatigue grew and most nurses eventually developed chapped faces and swollen hands or ankles. Even if they fell ill, they managed to remain on duty with colds, neuralgia, septic fingers, and sometimes influenza. They certainly would have been happier, healthier and more competent if work hours had been shorter, the living conditions more comfortable and off-duty time known in advance. Nevertheless, they showed great courage and motivation in their work as Vera Brittain highlights in *Testament Of Youth*: "far from criticizing our Olympian superiors, we tackled our daily duties with a devotional enthusiasm"³¹. The daily work was often complicated and increased as the war worsened: to meet the emergency, new V.A.D.s were rushed to the hospitals. These new arrivals, accustomed to the previous weeks of ordinary routine, often could not endure the stress and many fell ill. The ones who remained healthy faced huge difficulties in accomplishing the demanding work required in the wards and, as a consequence, the more experienced V.A.D.s and professional nurses had to look after them constantly. Vera Brittain confessed that she learnt for the first time how "one could be tired to the limits of human endurance "³² and get through more work than she had ever thought possible.

For the first time, nurses were exposed to the dreadful realities of the war: illnesses, mutilations, amputations, and other horrors. They never got used to the ghastly look of open wounds, which varied from soldier to soldier. Excessive work required under great urgency and hospitals being remarkably noisy places prevented the nurses from resting more than a couple of minutes. A convoy's arrival is a prime example of these challenging conditions: indeed, the crowding of the surgical wards with severely wounded men burdened the nurses greatly and confronted the V.A.D.s with the harsh realities of the profession. In her diary, Vera Brittain wrote: "I had no time to wonder whether I was doing things right or not, they simply had to be done

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 210

³² *Ibid.*, p. 280

right."³³. Nurses had to act professionally and rapidly even if the obscene horrors awaiting them during each emergency made them want to escape their hellish situation. For the first time in their lives, these women witnessed true death and misery, feeling both shocked and overwhelmed by pity but powerless to save the most gravely wounded. "Nothing could have looked more dreadful than he did this morning, [...] it seems sad that he should die like this in the midst of strangers, with Sister beside him of all people, and no one really to care very much..."³⁴ confessed Vera Brittain in her diary, after having seen her first dead soldier in the hospital.

Let's not forget that being in contact with ill and badly injured soldiers brought a great deal of health problems for the nurses: they could catch the diseases of the injured men, such as the measles. Epidemics were frequent during WW I and nurses were not sheltered from them, often being sent to other hospitals to recover. These adverse experiences led to the disillusionment of the young girls, who began to see the baffling contrast between the ideal of service and its harsh reality. They realized that the motivations which had triggered the desire to join were no longer true and strong, their outlook changing as they evolved in their training. Increasingly, the disagreeable tasks and the monotony of the grueling work they had once found so inspiring weighed heavily upon them.

C) Leaving the British soil: a new perspective of life

In 1916, during the rush of work that happened after the Somme³⁵, every London hospital needed its full quota of nurses and the number of British V.A.D.s working across the English Channel diminished. As soon as the situation slackened, nurses were increasingly required abroad. The war became more intense and activity increased on various fronts; once again, volunteers were required for foreign service. A lot of V.A.D. recruits desired to serve abroad, as it was a logical continuation of their

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 212

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 176

³⁵ The Battle of the Somme took place in France between July 1 and November 18, 1916.

service in England: they felt ready to confront danger, suffer as much as the male members of their families, and devote their time entirely to nursing. However, some of them were hesitant to enroll because they thought their parents would dislike it, judged themselves too inexperienced or had already caught pneumonia when they were children, disqualifying them from consideration. Those who left for foreign countries were chiefly sent to France but could also be sent to Malta, which are the two destinations we will focus on here.

Nurses dedicated their lives to the job, especially when they embarked and left for foreign destinations. The perils of the sea, such as being torpedoed by German U-boats, left almost no chance of survival for passengers. All they could do was pray and cross their fingers not to be targeted. The sea crossing lasted many long days, during which nurses had to be on good behavior and submit themselves to a strict *quasi* military discipline. Once they were on the boat, the V.A.D. passengers were divided into several sections ruled by a section-leader and had to attend functions with the members of their group. Aboard, the living conditions were a real ordeal for the young recruits, though the nurses' quarters sometimes happened to be luxurious cabins. However, this was quite rare and they generally had to occupy places which were ill-suited to a submarine-infested sea. Furthermore, the air was fetid, the heat was unbearable and the girls had to sleep in filthy blankets and mattresses. The intimacy was nonexistent, as there was only one washhouse for each ward: young ladies, accustomed to the well-equipped homes in which they had been brought up, experienced life as lived in the British slums for the first time. Finally, they also had to eat low-quality food and, as a consequence, some of them began to suffer from headaches and diarrhea, which often could turn into more serious diseases.

Once in the foreign country, nurses were driven to the hospitals and posted in different wards. In Malta, for instance, they worked in several "blocks" containing from ten to twenty beds. There, V.A.D. staff members were left on duty alone for the first time since they had enrolled; it was a great responsibility that the London hospitals would never have permitted. Each V.A.D. was in charge of over one hundred patients. Both the new working conditions of the foreign mission as well as the place where they were practicing enabled the nurses to be motivated and energetic. The training in Malta allowed the V.A.D.s to receive more formal instruction: this was totally unthinkable in England, where it was said that the nurses were there to be useful and not to be taught

things. By attending these readings, the girls had access to knowledge and education, which was a small step towards feminine emancipation.

Far away from home, the girls working in the area of Malta had many difficulties to communicate with their families and were isolated from their English relatives. From 1916 to 1917, the island was the very center of submarine warfare and the nurses' daily life was dominated by submarine disasters and the dangers of the sea threatened their letters, their parcels and their supplies of tinned and dried food; indeed, they were dependent upon these deliveries because water was undrinkable until it was purified and fresh fish was nearly unobtainable in the poisoned sea. The isolation from family and friends who had remained in England led many girls to become intimate with their patients while on duty; romantic affairs were often reported in the autobiographical stories that nurses and officers wrote after the war. Nevertheless, the discipline which was imposed on the girls was rigorous and the Matrons made it a point of honor for it to be respected and kept a close watch on the girls. If any incident happened, a series of interviews would follow and every V.A.D. would be privately questioned by the Matron.

For a month after their arrival on the island, each V.A.D. had to work in the Sisters' quarters. They became a combination of assistant housekeepers and head-parlourmaids; it was a real feminine function that young ladies were supposed to perform easily. This job had nothing to do with nursing; yet, they also applied their natural gender skills to the task. Once the domestic occupations were achieved, girls returned to the nursing sphere; some were sent to the surgical block, where many soldiers had only superficial and slight wounds which refused to heal due to the humid climate. Nursing conditions in Malta were radically different from England and suffered from a lack of means: water was cold and unsterilized while the sink was used for everything from cooking to cleaning. Others had greater responsibilities and handled patients with serious infectious diseases; in this case, they had to report the news to the Night Superintendent. Months went by and nurses became more accustomed to the horrors of the Great War, learning to remain calm when they saw the mutilations of the soldiers, including those with mutilated faces, missing limbs, those who had been disemboweled, and those with hideous truncated stumps for bodies.

France was one of the most active countries during the Great War and the battles on the French soil were more and more violent. V.A.D.s often worked in medical huts located on huge field hospitals. The working and living conditions in the medical camp were very rudimentary, especially during the heavy winters: the marquees were usually wet and cold because of the incessant rain. The girls were overwhelmed with work; when there was understaffing, they sometimes had to be Sister, V.A.D. and orderly³⁶ all in one. They nursed, stoked the stoves, kept the kettles going, prepared food and carried out other numerous domestic chores. Though there were some occasional jealousies and competition amongst the V.A.D.s, "a strong esprit de corps, and a strong sense of discipline prevailed", related Kathleen Marion Barrow³⁷. Everyone was ready to undertake tasks both great and small. Girls were generally ready and eager to do right to help their nation. Vera Brittain wrote that she was "kept on the go the whole time and in the end, there seems nothing definite to show for it—except that one or two people are still alive who might otherwise have been dead."³⁸ They had no time to rest and the nights were usually short: each morning, they did the "T.P.R.s"³⁹, the washings, and gave medicine to the wounded. Trained nurses and V.A.D.s had a huge amount of work and could not allow themselves a spare moment as the convoys of wounded were more and more frequent; as Kathleen Marion Barrow pointed out in her account, "the extent of a V.A.D.'s work was bound to be decided far more by the measure of her capacity than by the rule of seniority."⁴⁰ This job gave the young ladies an opportunity to show their worth as members of the British nursing staff but also to learn about their limits, their capacities and themselves too.

During the Great War, military hospitals were often cosmopolitan because of the global character of the war. In Etaples, the injured were bedridden in large marquees and one of them was used for the captive and badly wounded Germans only. In most

³⁶ Ehow: <http://www.ehow.com/about_6585309_hospital-orderly-job-description.html>, [Last date accessed: June, 12th, 2013]. Orderlies still exist today, working directly with hospital patients. They perform non-medical duties and work under a nurse or other medical staff.

³⁷ Scarletfinders.co.uk: < <http://www.scarletfinders.co.uk/184.html>>, [Last date accessed: June, 12th, 2013].

³⁸ V. Brittain, *op. cit.*

³⁹ Temperatures, Pulses, Respirations.

⁴⁰ Scarletfinders.co.uk: < <http://www.scarletfinders.co.uk/184.html>>, [Last date accessed: June, 12th, 2013].

cases, V.A.D.s had never encountered German soldiers before and this particular ward appeared frightening and alarming to them; nevertheless, they had to nurse and heal the soldiers no matter their origins, their professional code requiring complete impartiality while nursing and not judging the wounded men. They devoted themselves to their work and took it for granted that it was they who must be overworked rather than the prisoners neglected. Dedicating one's time to strangers was something that middle and upper class young ladies hardly ever did before their enrolment. Besides, it was common for provincial V.A.D.s to have been raised with a certain distaste for foreigners and this job constituted a real challenge to their prejudice. For them, it was always disconcerting to nurse German soldiers because they repeatedly had been told that these men "had crucified Canadians, cut off the hands of babies and subjected pure and stainless females to unmentionable atrocities"⁴¹, confessed Vera Brittain. By working in the German ward and doing their best to fix the human damage the battles were causing, the girls could fight the war in their own way. They stopped hemorrhages, stuffed intestines back into abdomens, bandaged spurred heels, fed the emaciated, and drained as well as re-inserted thousands of rubber tubes. As the number of wounded men rose, the convoys arrived with greater frequency and the German ward was filled with so many badly injured soldiers that it could be described as a baptism of blood and pus for the medical staff. The girls had to dress the worst wounds they had ever seen or imagined and they did their best to cure awful diseases, such as gas-gangrene, while watching the patients suffer delirium. Most V.A.D.s who had not yet been to France were unprepared for a true emergency. It goes without saying that war was devastating to the militaries on both sides of the conflict, with many soldiers dying whose wounds were too severe. Nurses were overwhelmed by death wherever they turned, with many being griefstricken when injured soldiers—to whom they had become attached—passed away. However, the V.A.D.s had no time for regrets, as they had to carry on with their job.

V.A.D.s mainly preferred to work abroad because they felt more helpful to the soldiers and their patriotism could be noticed through their willpower and the risks they took on the front area. Furthermore, the supervision of the girls was totally different from England and much more appreciated. As Vera Brittain wrote in *Testament Of Youth*:

⁴¹ V. Brittain, *op. cit.*, p. 374

At Etaples, the supervision in 'quarters' was slight and infrequent ; the privacy of the V.A.D.s was respected and they were credited with responsible behaviour off duty as well as on - a policy which made for good discipline, though in English hospitals no one appeared to understand this elementary fact of psychology.⁴²

Young V.A.D.s could enjoy a certain freedom of movement, which enabled them to be emancipated from the strict British system: being considered as more than a pawn on the chessboard of war, the girls felt recognized for their humanity as well as their work; this made them more likely to obey orders and work harder because the atmosphere was better.

For the V.A.D.s working cross-Channel, being employed for the first time was a weighty step that offered them an appealing perspective on life. They were welcomed without much resistance in their new work and did not pose a threat to male employment once WW I ended. However, the relationship with their female peers and superiors was more stormy. To what extent did female workers manage to be integrated into the early 20th century wartime society?

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 385

Part 3

Making an impression

Making an impression

A) A new identity for the V.A.D.s: between femininity and militarism

Since time immemorial, women had been living under men's yoke and had had no choice but to follow the rules of the patriarchal society they were born in. They were not supposed to join the army and were rarely invited to help on the field: for reasons of tradition, security and discipline, men were rather reluctant to admit women onto their territory. Wealthy women, if they were born into a distinguished family, could establish their own semi-military organizations and support their country's war effort at their own expense. When WW I broke out, they began to work and moved away from tradition: this release from social as well as economic constraints was both a liberating move and a cataclysm, with some portraying women's entry into war work "as joyfully liberating, happy and purposeful"⁴³, as Sharon Ouditt wrote in *Fighting Forces, Writing Women*. Men feared that WW I would trigger a female conquest of the stronger sex and were also worried about the fact that this female involvement to support the war would totally ruin the established order and diminish their power and privilege.

By participating in the war effort, military nurses had a particular identity. For the nurses, the sign of the Red Cross symbolized the badge of their sacrifice, equal to that of the male. Before their enrolment, they tended to idealize the aims and the functions of a V.A.D. and found out that the tasks they carried out in the field were not as glamorous as portrayed in wartime propaganda: thus, the gendered idealism they showed at first was eroded by the practical experience of the war zone. Their shift in identity was made possible by militarism but limited by femininity and social class. Because they were registered with the War Office as part of a plan for the national defense, the V.A.D.s had a military identity: women had to pay attention to the etiquette of military procedure if they wanted to be taken seriously and gain acceptance. If this constituted a liberating appeal, it was limited by the V.A.D. authorities' invocation of certain aspects of female social organization, which were femininity and class: the principles of obedience and honor were integrated into the V.A.D concept, with the girls

⁴³ S. Ouditt, *op. cit.*, p. 7

swearing an oath to their King while simultaneously being told that their parent organization was feminine. Even if working was new and emancipating, nurses had to fulfill their duty and adopted the role of the Mother in obedience to the Father, the symbol of the patriarchal nation state. As Sharon Ouditt noted in her book, the young recruits had to "negotiate between the power granted to them by their class and patriotic endeavour and the subordination that was product of their gender and voluntary status"⁴⁴.

When discussing female war workers, one cannot ignore the uniforms they wore, which are charged with symbolism and meaning. Was the uniform a symbol of emancipation or did the V.A.D.s leave their civilian prison for another type of bondage? The uniform is always found in military organizations, constituting a link between the individual and the institution he or she represents. The V.A.D.'s uniform lessened their individuality and femininity due to the strictness of regulations (see Appendix 3). By accepting to wear the uniform and transforming themselves into little parcels of patriotism, the V.A.D.s were required to completely conform their appearance and behavior to the demands of the institution under which they served. They lost their civilian freedom, their personal identity being absorbed by a uniform representing nothing more than the garments of a new kind of slavery to a standardized feminine identity. On another hand, the uniform could be interpreted as a means of gaining access to new freedoms; indeed, to be a nurse was widely recognized as a fitting and honorable occupation for a woman during WW I.

B) A male perception: why did they accept nurses in their sphere?

Nurses were well accepted by English society and far less criticized by men. Their position, reflecting both militaristic discipline and civilian femininity, was seen by many as the woman's nearest equivalent to the fighting man. Male individuals welcomed the nurses far better than female workers on the home front because nursing was not considered as a male occupation; it was essentially a feminine pursuit. As they carried the burden of the angelic image of English womanhood, V.A.D.s had to be maternal, give comfort and look after the sick and wounded just like guardian angels.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 10

Nurses were often appreciated by the recovering soldiers: Vera Brittain, in *Testament Of Youth*, said that "the men appeared to like me and no doubt my youth, my naïve eagerness and the clean freshness of my new uniform meant more to them than any amount of common sense of efficiency."⁴⁵ The injured men had been fighting on the front for many long months and the presence of the nurses, bandaging their wounds and calming their pains, enabled them to rest and, in the best cases, to survive and find back little confidence about their future. Members of the V.A.D., under the professional nurses' supervision, played the role of the Holy Mother and stayed by the bedside of the soldiers during their recovery. The 'devotional glamour' they showed did not go unnoticed and they were rewarded by the men, who willingly admitted their dependency on the nurses' generous and omniscient care. The men could confide their fears and apprehensions to the V.A.D.s, who accompanied them until they could return to the front or, for the less lucky, until they passed away. They owed their lives to these dainty young life-saving fingers and recognized the importance of the medical staff. Furthermore, they were aware that the nurses, by practicing a woman's job, would not be potential rivals for employment after the war, assuming the soldiers survived frontline combat.

One should note that during WW I, nurses were paid and housed by the military authorities. This could appear as special treatment but was actually not that preferential; indeed, the War Office accepted V.A.D.s into the war zone only because their work was voluntary and did not create additional expense to the Government. The girls were essentially paid "chicken feed": a small allowance was given for food, quarters, washing and travelling. The pay for the first seven months was at a rate of £20 *per annum* with an additional £2.10 for every subsequent six months agreed to. Even if it was small, this salary gave the V.A.D.s a feeling of emancipation and helped their contribution to the military enterprise be recognized by the state. Nevertheless, they were paid dramatically less than women munitions workers and sometimes less than some servants: at the time, a cook earned about £30 and a parlourmaid £25.

⁴⁵ V.Brittain, *op.cit.*, p. 165

C) Female peers: a different angle, a world apart

The new V.A.D. recruits had to find their place in the new institution they had joined. They were trapped between the rites and traditions of the nursing profession and the new discipline that militarism imposed on them. In England, the V.A.D.s were welcomed tepidly; as Vera Brittain confessed in her writings, they were nicknamed "the women without any qualification" and professional nurses thought that the VADs were not useful in military hospitals. In her book *A V.A.D. in France*, Olive Dent⁴⁶ shares her memories with her readers and relates the reaction of a trained sister when she did her first night duty in France: "The sister lucidly and emphatically explained to us that she had no idea what 'people were thinking about' to send out such girls as we, girls who had not come from any 'training school', girls who had 'not had any hospital training', what use could we possibly be?"⁴⁷. The military and civilian professional nurses who had joined the Queen Alexandra's Imperial Military Nursing Service or the Territorial Force Reserve were often hostile to the young semi-trained amateurs upon whom they would be obliged to depend for the duration of the Great War; indeed, they had the feeling that the 'untrained' women threatened their authority and diminished their expertise thanks to numerous certificates and a few months' experience only. The Matrons and other promoters of state registration visualized a post-war professional chaos in which hundreds of experienced V.A.D.s would supplant the fully qualified and accomplished nurses: that was a reason why the presence of Red Cross nurses drove some of them into a state of jealousy and suspicion which only grew in intensity as the V.A.D.s increased their nursing experience.

The complexity of power relations and the clashes of ideals caused many frictions and disagreement between the Matrons and the V.A.D.s. On the one hand, the Matrons complained about a lack of discipline and reluctance to accept criticism: as Sharon Ouditt emphasizes in her book, "they wanted to do their job unhindered by well-meaning 'ladies' who had no long-term commitment to the standards and principles of

⁴⁶ Scarletfinders.co.uk: <<http://www.scarletfinders.co.uk/184.html>>, [Last date accessed: June, 12th, 2013]. She was an educated, middle-class young woman who served as a V.A.D in France, during the year 1916.

⁴⁷ Archive.org: <<http://archive.org/stream/vadinfrance00dentrich#page/28/mode/2up>>, [Last date accessed: June, 12th, 2013].

the profession."⁴⁸. On the other hand, the girls were shocked to find themselves treated as servants by those who had the same goals and were helping to fight the same cause; they felt aggrieved at being caught in such an authoritarian structure, often ordered around by women who were their social inferiors. In the V.A.D. organization, two hierarchical systems collided one another: class and rank. The ideal that a common purpose could ignore these systems and unify everyone under a common goal was unattainable. Social was mixed with professional jealousy and neither side could accept the attitude of the other: the Matrons could hardly bear the subtle snobbery from lower ranks and the V.A.D.s, being part of a higher social class, resented their professionally subordinate position. This organization left the V.A.D.s at the Matrons' mercy: they could be asked to perform any task, however demeaning, from sweeping the floors to assisting an amputation operation. The lack of internal structure left them very vulnerable and they ran the risk of being refused another position if their superiors, upon whom their career depended, judged their work unsatisfactory. A system of promotion—consisting of red stripes worn on the uniform—was offered, guaranteeing them senior and responsible work once they had served long enough.

The discontinuity between the propaganda and individual experience is clear: none of the girls could have expected such appalling working conditions when they answered their country's call in good faith. Nursing was the one and only area of female contribution that involved being at the front and experiencing the calamity of war. Whilst most of the volunteers did a marvelous job, many young women were psychologically unable to adapt to the hardships, exhaustion and horrors of military hospitals. The tense atmosphere and the power struggles did not help them hold on and this is why, as the glamour of the job diminished, many women abandoned their mission. For those who remained, the rivalry between the professional nurses and the V.A.D.s, as well as their inability to band together, did not serve their interests; both groups lost out to the prevailing patriarchy and gained their tickets to their point of departure—that is to say home—after the war. It can be argued that the V.A.D. organization, being a women's voluntary institution which lacked unity, was unable to challenge or transform directly the power system. While the nurses were fairly well accepted as female workers, munitionettes were not, as they had taken on a traditionally male occupation. In the name of patriotism, the V.A.D s aided war efforts of Great

⁴⁸ S.Ouditt, *op. cit.*, p. 27

Britain with little fanfare or appreciation, while men's roles on the battlefield were glorified.

Conclusion

By joining the nursing sphere and working for the V.A.D.s, young ladies were offered a kind of equality with men. Yet this role was deeply sororal and tinged with femininity. As Sharon Ouditt wrote in *Fighting Forces, Writing Women*, the nurses-to-be "found themselves, then, at an ideological junction between a traditional, idealised value system and a radical new order of experience"⁴⁹.

By swapping their ball gowns for uniforms, the V.A.D.s entered the public sphere and truly experienced the life of working women. For young ladies of the provincial upper middle classes, an early marriage and motherhood were both expected developments but the war and their work changed them in character and in habits: they came back morally stronger as well as more confident, with parents often taking a gratifying pleasure in their daughters' new wisdom—if not in their choice to enroll. The girls were almost strangers to them after spending so much time apart on their adventures. Moreover, many young ladies started to smoke during their war service, especially when they were abroad: the cigarette became symbol of emancipation and equality with men in this period.

Nevertheless, emancipation from home was not total: the family remained concerned about their girls, who could be called home at any time: "because we were women, we feared perpetually that, just as our work was reaching its climax, our families would need our youth and vitality for their own support"⁵⁰, wrote Vera Brittain, who was victim of that situation in the spring of 1918. V.A.D.s knew too well the clashes between family and profession, between their duty and their ambitions; the endless conflict between personal and national claims exhausted them. Furthermore, for young women of the time, working was insufficient to ensure a real emancipation: while enjoying the new liberties of employment, they still were wrestling with the fact that they were secondary and temporary workers. If their experience and service in the nursing sphere were a great step towards the improvement of their situation, they contradicted gendered stereotypes: the V.A.D.'s organization made a strategic use of conservative definitions of femininity—which were deeply anchored in the mind of early 20th century people - and was also confined into a cultural system that showed

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 7

⁵⁰ V.Brittain, *op. cit.*, p. 401

few signs of revolution concerning its patriarchal principles. Women had indeed broken away with the constraining traditions by leaving their 'cocoon of isolation', but their sex was still considered as the weaker one and females still suffered from the gender discrimination. An official *Report by the Joint War Committee of the British Red Cross Society and Order of St. John* reported the following: "The V.A.D. members were not...trained nurses; nor were they entrusted with trained nurses' work except on occasions when the emergency was so great that no other course was open". This quotation illustrates perfectly the illusory character of the emancipation that the V.A.D. organization offered: young ladies were needed because of the emergency and responded heartily to the war call but would be dismissed and sent back to their previous life as soon as they were no longer useful. Amongst the nurses, some had fulfilled their dreams of heroism and their ambitions by rising in rank and increasing power, while others were rewarded monetarily. However, the majority had only performed a voluntary duty for their country before taking their upper class woman's role back on.

Finally, the right to vote is an important factor when talking about women's emancipation. Since the 1870's, feminist associations had been created and numerous campaigns—more or less successful—had been held but the break out of the war led to a pause of the campaigning. Women and their supporters hoped that the aftermath of the war would bring some substantial improvement but the result was quite disappointing. Indeed, the Representation of the People Act, passed in 1918, enfranchised women over the age of thirty who met minimum property qualifications: they had to be either a member or married to a member of the Local Government Register. V.A.D.s were usually young ladies in their twenties and could not access this privilege; they had to wait another ten years before the Representation of the People Act 1928 was passed, granting the right to vote to women over twenty one.

Despite the appealing promises made by the Government, the young girls who enrolled in the V.A.D. organization hardly achieved the emancipation they craved; indeed, they worked far from home, served abroad voluntarily, experienced the harsh life of the wartime nurse, and performed their military duty faithfully. Still, they left the rules of their class for the rules of a military organization and their female essence never disappeared; gender is something one cannot fight or deny. Humility and unselfishness, which were required from the V.A.D.s on the "paper to V.A.D. members", are both feminine values that appeal to patriotism and obedience to the patriarchal society; thus,

V.A.D.s, even if they were about to work, could hardly escape their gender and the subservience it implied. WW I nurses, in their own way, were sacrificed heroines: these women did not receive their rights as a gift but had to lead a permanent struggle for years after the cataclysm of the Great War.

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<<http://www.tlema.com/Michaelsen.asp>>

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■ **British Red Cross official website:**

<<http://www.redcross.org.uk/About-us/Who-we-are/Museum-and-archives/Resources-for-researchers/Volunteers-and-personnel-records>>

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■ **Wartime Memories, a website collecting memories of the Great War and Second World War:**

<<http://www.wartimememories.co.uk/greatwar/women/vad.html>>

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■ **British Daily Mail official website:**

<<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2279716/Battered-suitcase-unlocks-story-World-War-One-nurse-cared-German-soldiers-brother-lay-dying-battlefield.html>>

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[Last date accessed: June, 12th, 2013]

⁵¹ Queen Alexandra 's Royal Army Nursing Corps

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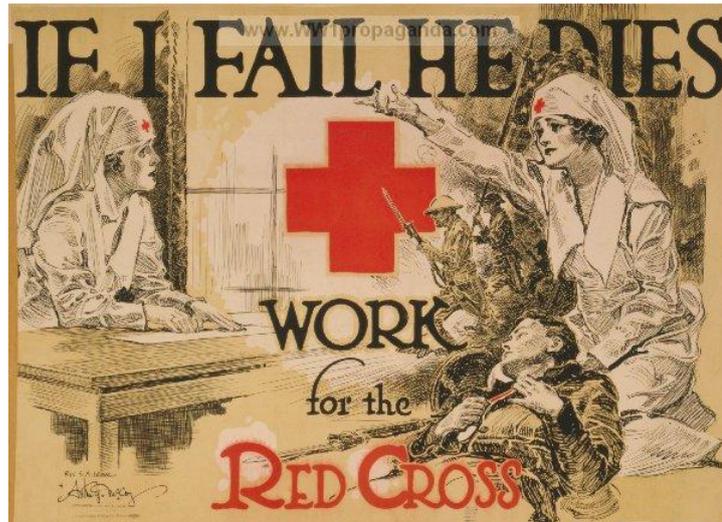
Appendix 1 Propaganda posters

Three propaganda posters used by the Red Cross to supply new recruits. During World War I, the impact of the poster as a means of communication was greater than at any other time during history. Pictures had the ability to inspire, inform, and persuade people who often supported the ideas that such posters wanted to convey.

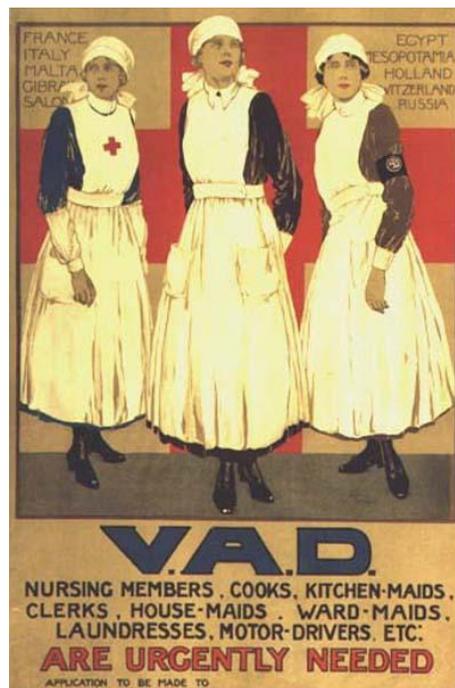


This poster, by Alonzo Earl Foringer, depicts a seated female, robed and veiled with the Red Cross sign, gazing at Heaven while she cradles a tiny wounded soldier. This image is often compared to Michelangelo's Pietà or Da Vinci's Madonna and child: it encouraged women to adopt a caring mother role and conveyed a message of mercy and tenderness. This was the most famous Red Cross poster during the war, and perhaps the most effective because the image of the Holy Mother was a powerful recruiting icon, at that time.⁵²

⁵²Wellcomecollection.org:<<http://www.wellcomecollection.org/explore/sickness--health/topics/military-medicine/images.aspx?view=the-greatest-mother>>, [Last date accessed: June, 12th, 2013].



Created by Arthur G. McCoy in 1918, this Red Cross recruitment poster shows a nurse on a battlefield with a wounded soldier, appealing to a nurse seated at a desk; in the background, soldiers are charging into battle.⁵³



This is a poster dedicated to the British recruitment of V.A.D.s. It was designed by Joyce Dennys at the beginning of WW1 and was titled *V.A.D are urgently needed*.⁵⁴

⁵³ ww1propaganda.com: <<http://www.ww1propaganda.com/ww1-poster/if-i-fail-he-dies-work-red-cross>>, [Last date accessed: June, 12th, 2013].

⁵⁴ Redcross.org.uk: <<http://www.redcross.org.uk/About-us/Who-we-are/Museum-and-archives/Resources-for-researchers/Volunteers-and-personnel-records>>, [Last date accessed: June, 12th, 2013].

Appendix 2

Paper to the V.A.D.s

Letter from Katharine Furse, B.R.C.S., Commandant-in-Chief of Women's Voluntary Aid Detachment which was addressed to the serving nurses (1914)⁵⁵:

This paper is to be considered by each V.A.D. member as confidential and to be kept in her Pocket Book.

You are being sent to work for the Red Cross. You have to perform a task which will need your courage, your energy, your patience, your humility, your determination to overcome all difficulties.

Remember that the honour of the V.A.D. organization depends on your individual conduct. It will be your duty not only to set an example of discipline and perfect steadiness of character, but also to maintain the most courteous relations with those whom you are helping in this great struggle.

Be invariably courteous, unselfish and kind. Remember that whatever duty you undertake, you must carry it out faithfully, loyally, and to the best of your ability.

Rules and regulations are necessary in whatever formation you join. Comply with them without grumble or criticism and try to believe that there is reason at the back of them, though at the time you may not understand the necessity.

Sacrifices may be asked of you. Give generously and wholeheartedly, grudging nothing, but remembering that you are giving because your Country needs your help. If you see others in better circumstances than yourself, be patient and think of the men who are fighting amid discomfort and who are often in great pain.

Those of you who are paid can give to the Red Cross Society which is your Mother and which needs more and more money to carry on its great work. their Mother Society and thus to the Sick and Wounded.

Let our mottos be 'Willing to do anything' and 'The People give gladly'. If we live up to these, the V.A.D. members will come out of this world war triumphant.

⁵⁵ Spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk: <<http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/FWWnurses.htm>>, [Last date accessed: June, 12th, 2013].

Appendix 3 V.A.D.s' uniform



The V.A.D. uniform was strictly controlled by the Joint War Committee of the British Red Cross Society and the Order of St. John. It was expected to signify discipline, restraint and subjugation. There were some official changes in uniform during the war and women wanted to keep a hint of their individuality; some of them therefore tried to introduce subtle changes in what they wore, though these were usually firmly rejected by their superiors. The picture shows the reproduction of a uniform dating from the middle years of the Great War.⁵⁶

One should note that role and rank were defined by the color of the indoor uniforms. "Commandants wore a bright scarlet dress, quartermasters grey, cook pale brown and the nurses, the iconic pale blue dress."⁵⁷

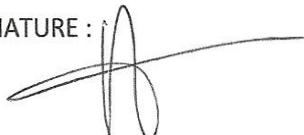
⁵⁶ Maggiemayfashions.com: <<http://maggiemayfashions.com/sewingblog/wwi-vad-uniform/>>, [Last date accessed: June, 12th, 2013].

⁵⁷ N, Storey, *op.cit.* , p. 22-23

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1. Ce travail est le fruit d'un travail personnel et constitue un document original.
2. Je sais que prétendre être l'auteur d'un travail écrit par une autre personne est une pratique sévèrement sanctionnée par la loi.
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Key Words

First World War

Nurses

V.A.D.s

Women's emancipation

Sum up

This dissertation is focused on WW1 nurses and especially V.A.D.s. It deals with the beginning of the war, taking an interest in the girls' motivations and the way the recruitment of young nurses took place. It approaches V.A.D recruits' new life: how they had to adapt to the rhythm of a challenging environment as they watched over injured soldiers and accompanied them through their ordeal, either in their mother country or abroad. Finally, it addresses the issue of new identity: between femininity and militarism, how were these women perceived by a society at war? In the end, this whole essay tries to explore the issue of gender and women's emancipation throughout the Great War, the first cataclysm of the 20th century.