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As the editors note, “stories of women taking up arms and receiving national recognition” (1) is a global phenomenon, and this volume displays a welcome breadth in geographical coverage as well as historical span, looking at legendary women warriors and real-life fighters from classical Japan to the Vietnam War and modern China, from patriots on both sides of the colonizing conflicts in North America to fighting women in India, Zimbabwe, Greece, Mexico, Chile, Peru, and the Basque movement for independence. The essays undertake less a systematic exploration of feminist themes than a study of the narratives surrounding historical women who fought, spied, survived, or died for a nationalist cause, grouping them under the thematic umbras of process, violence, gender fluidity, and survivorship. Nonetheless certain intersections and similarities emerge, lending a comprehensive feel to the volume that galleries of remarkable women do not always achieve.

While the historical analysis is in most chapters thorough and illuminating, the greater focus is on the cultural work that stories about these women and warriors serve, with authors examining how narratives about their warriors of choice were constructed, circulated, translated, contested, and in some cases continue to be adapted for new audiences or new regimes. In many cases the legend takes on a power of its own, as Marcia Yonemoto observes of the sisters Miyagino and Shinobu of Sendai, Japan, who set out to revenge themselves on the samurai who cut down their father—a story where the historical veracity may be questioned but the imaginative power is unquestionable. Ruramisai Charumbira likewise traces how a lineage of women within the Mutapa Empire, the Nehanda who served as a medium for a powerful goddess, became distilled into the figure of Charwe, who defied the British colonizing influence and later was adapted as the “matron saint of the ruling party” (48) of Zimbabwe. How the Nehanda-Charwe narrative is later finessed proves a theme shared among all twelve essays. Sometimes the spin emerges from a contemporary moment, as Nerea Aresti argues that female leaders of Basque nationalism were interpreted according to the moral and religious ideology adopted by the movement, portrayed in virile terms without “compromising their femininity” (57). Likewise, Sakis Gekas notes, discussing female Greek warriors from the independence movement to the Greek civil
war, “representations of women warriors . . . has been contingent on the prevailing national ideology and the changing political milieu” (114).

Though the chapters are individual and distinct, the introduction by the editors outlines useful questions that this gallery of unique figures poses. For instance, in what circumstances are female warriors remembered and celebrated, and where have they disappeared from the record? In what ways are their transgressive actions accounted for, and what ideological weight do they carry? While the woman ready to fight for her home, family, country, or cause may surface from an array of national and historical contexts, her meaning is necessarily embedded in her culture, and her legacy varies according to interpretive lens. It is in accounting for these interpretive differences that the book best succeeds.

Women leading forces of resistance against colonial rule, we see, are often hypersexualized by the colonizer, as proven by the example of Rani Lakshmi Bai, the Queen of Jhansi who fought against the British in 1857. Harleen Singh notes that representations of the queen “essentially distill dominant narratives of femininity, sexuality, and sex to reorder structures disrupted by the female warrior” and bring the fighting woman to heel (23–24). Yet for Indian interpreters, Rani Lakshmi represents “a female heroism bound to the family and the nation, a valor that does not detract from masculinity” (32). Women rebelling against an eventually triumphant colonizer are often portrayed as transgressive or deviant, like Weetamoo, Sachem of the Pocasset, who led a coalition of Indigenous resistance in King Philip’s War in seventeenth-century North America. At the same time, as Gina M. Martino goes on to show, colonial women’s violence that supported “the goals of the larger community” were rarely considered transgressive (97) but rather fell under an umbrella of “republican motherhood” (98). For example, young Madeleine de Verchères, who alerted her colleagues to a foray led by the Haudenosaunee on her family’s farm in seventeenth-century French Canada, examined by Colin M. Coates, was given a statue in her honor and imagery that stresses her youthful innocence and valor.

How later interpretations of warrior women deal with the intersection of gender and violence is another pervasive point of connection. As Yonemoto observes, “At key historical junctures . . . official encouragement has transformed acts of rage and revenge by women into laudable and legitimate acts of female heroism, albeit in the service of a ‘higher’ calling defined by people other than women themselves” (87). Marilyn Booth traces the changing valence in portrayals of Joan of Arc in Arabic lists of worthy women where she is lauded for her
religious devotion and “civilizing” femininity (153). Gabriela Cano notes the differently gendered legacies left by Amelio Robles, whom some persisted in remembering as Amelia despite Robles’s preference, after the Mexican Revolution, to live and interact as a man, in contrast to women fighters who put aside their male attire and soldier’s weaponry once the battle was won. As Gabriel Cid notes in a discussion of female nationalists in twentieth-century Chile and Peru, “times of war bring with them greater fluidity in social conventions” (200), but the sacrifice lauded at the time can take on a different charge when peace returns and philosophical gymnastics are required to retrofit a robust female agency inside a gendered hierarchy that requires women to be submissive and domestic. Building “correct” memories of a conflict, as Louise Edwards notes, can mean silencing women who cross conventional norms, seen in how the reputations of Chinese communist spies Guan Lu and Jiang Zhuyun were carefully managed in the official record, which included scrubbing their sexual liaisons. Similarly, Karen Gottschang Turner notes how Vietnamese volunteers who helped defend the Ho Chi Minh Trail were afterward seen as polluting their femininity by their exposure to blood and death (245).

The brevity that makes the volume manageable comes sometimes at the expense of depth or clarity, but only in one or two essays does the analysis feel incomplete. One might wish for a more concerted effort on the part of the editors to trace certain useful intersections among the essays, for example the forced repatriation that is almost always a consequence of the woman warrior’s celebrity, a move necessary, as Coates observes, “to curb the potentially subversive elements of the story” (144) since “[a] woman warrior must, emphatically, remain a woman” (144). While the volume could do more to press on its points of connection, this is a useful and informative compendium that can support classroom study and please the general reader alike.

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