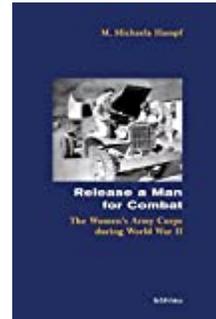




M. Michaela Hampf. *Release a Man for Combat: The Women's Army Corps during World War II.* Köln: Böhlau Verlag Köln, 2010. IX, 379 S. ISBN 978-3-412-20660-4.



Reviewed by Steve Estes

Published on H-Soz-u-Kult (April, 2011)

M. Hampf: Release a Man for Combat

Michaela Hampf's *Release a Man for Combat: The Women's Army Corps during World War II* is not just one book, but actually three. First, it is a comprehensive institutional history of the Women's Army Corps and its predecessor, the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps, from 1942-1948. Second, it is an examination of the training and wartime experiences of the nearly 150,000 women who served with the U.S. Armed Forces in the Second World War. Third, it is a post-structural analysis of the relationship between gender, sexuality, and military service in the construction of the woman/soldier in the United States. Given all of that, you may be expecting a multi-volume work, but Hampf gets the job done in only 299 pages of text. Through it all, she argues that creation of the WAC constructed the woman/soldier as a new American identity. Though this identity remains contested in the military and civilian society, Hampf believes that the rise of the woman/soldier in the WAC altered conceptions of gender identity in America.

Aside from the range of topics, the major strength of this book is its awe-inspiring level of primary and secondary research. Hampf has read seemingly all of the

earlier works on gender and sexuality in World War II. She builds upon the work of notable American scholars, in particular Alan Berube and Leisa Meyer, as well as German historians like Karen Hagemann, Norbert Finzsch, and others. Judith Butler and Michel Foucault inform this book theoretically. As good as Hampf is on secondary sources, she is even better with primary sources. I know of no other work on this topic that includes the quantity or quality of primary sources that this one does. She cites congressional debates, formal memoranda, personal letters, news articles, songs, photographs, cartoons, military investigations, and much more. As an oral historian, I might have liked to see more interviews with women who served with the WACs, but Hampf does include a few of these as well.

Because Hampf covers three topics, the organization of the book is thematic and not chronological. The institutional history comes first, so readers learn that the U.S. government created the Women's Auxiliary Army Corps (WAAC) in 1942, before bringing women into the regular army with the creation of the Women's Army Corps (WAC) the next year. The social history of wom-

enâs experiences in the WAC discusses the intersection of race and military service as well as the many roles that women performed in the war (for example clerks, laboratory technicians, radio operators, cryptographers, photographers, and nurses). Aside from one experimental unit where women served in coastal gun batteries, U.S. military policy formally excluded women from combat roles. It still does.

Hampfâs analysis of the discourse around womenâs service is perhaps the most significant contribution of the book. WAC recruitment campaigns, including the failed âRelease a Man for Combatâ slogan, had to appeal to womenâs self-interest and willingness to sacrifice for the war effort without challenging traditional connections between women and the home or men and the battlefield. âA girlâs experience in the Wacs serves to accentuate her desire for home â| and children,â one pamphlet claimed. âWhen you put on a uniform, you donât change your nature.â (p. 99) But as Hampf argues in an excellent chapter on WAC uniforms, this is exactly what happened. âDonning the uniform often proved to be a liberating experience for many women,â she writes. âHence we can also observe the formation of new identities, as women as social actors assumed and embodied newly available subject positions of the female soldier.â (p. 176) Hampfâs analysis of identity is most successful in her discussion of sexuality in the WAC. âThe epitome of gender and sexual deviance was the lesbian woman/soldier, who by donning the uniform even attempted to appropriate the role of protector.â (p. 289) Hampf shows that women suspected of loving other women (particularly middle-class

women) did serve, but WAC leaders depicted the ideal women/soldiers as respectable, heterosexual, and chaste.

In an era of total war, Hampf argues, the necessary inclusion of women into the military destabilized traditional gender and military identities in the United States. Though there is perhaps not enough discussion of World War IIâs effect on civilian gender identities in this book, a history of the WAC is still an excellent case study to test the hypothesis about changing gender roles. The âthree dimensional imageâ of power in the organization based on âinstitutional, discursive, and subject perspectivesâ also seems a good strategy (p. 282). But this organizational strength is also a weakness of the book in two ways. First, without a chronological structure, it is harder for Hampf to show when the women auxiliary identity is transformed into the women/soldier, except perhaps for when the WAAC becomes the WAC. Because Hampfâs chapters all straddle this chronological divide, however, readers may get the impression that this transition was primarily bureaucratic and not significant and symbolic. Second, without a central story or well-defined characters, the book lacks narrative drive to sustain casual reader interest. Here are women/soldiers who seem to be more constructions than human beings and a conflict that feels like a war of words not actions. These are primarily stylistic critiques, however, and perhaps unfair ones given Hampfâs aim at a scholarly audience. A substantive review of this book must judge it a triumph of scholarly research and analysis. It is a study that will lead the field for years to come.

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Citation: Steve Estes. Review of Hampf, M. Michaela, *Release a Man for Combat: The Women's Army Corps during World War II*. H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews. April, 2011.

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