

White Masculinity and National Identity in the Sexual Behavior of American Soldiers in Western Europe During World War II

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This article discusses war and sexual assault.

World War II is commonly framed as a global conflict between countries, but the involved nations disputed their ideologies and identities on an individual level that played out in the actions and on the bodies of people in the engaged areas. This paper examines how white masculinity was a core facet of the national identity of the United States in this period, exemplified by the regulation of American soldiers' sexual activity with women in France, Great Britain, and Northern Ireland. White masculinity can be defined as a belief in white supremacy and male authority that confers white men in these countries unearned advantage at the expense of women and people of color. I first discuss historical events that made white male dominance especially vulnerable leading up to the breakout of World War II, such as the aftermath of World War I and the Great Depression. Using pamphlets and films distributed by the US military as evidence, I then argue that the US safeguarded American white masculinity by excusing white soldiers of any sexual misconduct, letting blame fall on supposedly promiscuous Western European women or black American soldiers. In comparison, France, Great Britain, and Northern Ireland directly attempted to control the sexuality of their country's women to protect their own claims to white masculine dominance. These attempts at control took place on the bodies of men and women through the management of STI transmission, prostitution, rape, and interracial sexual contact, but reflected national crises of patriarchal and white identity.

In many ways, the United States entered World War II representing itself for the first time as a definitive world superpower. Declaring war in 1941, the US joined a conflict in which its allies had been battered by fighting for the past two years and during which the Axis powers experienced the majority of their victories. In Western Europe, France had suffered defeat to German occupation, and the UK had sustained heavy losses and demoralizing attacks under the Blitz. The US therefore swept into World War II as a powerhouse of military strength, imagining itself as rescuing the other Allied countries. The US's self-conceptualization as rescuer and liberator was essential to its growth as a world power as well as to sustaining wartime morale. Also integral to this American belief in its own dominance was maintaining American white masculinity, which can be understood as the belief in white supremacy and masculine dominance as core to American patriotism. However, the Western European countries in which American troops were stationed also had a stake in protecting their own claims to white masculinity as key to their own national identities. During World War II, both the US and these countries negotiated white masculinity and national identity through the attempted regulation of sexual contact between American GIs and Western

European women. France, Britain, and Northern Ireland aimed to safeguard white masculinity as national identity through direct control of female sexuality, while the United States military protected American white masculinity through management of venereal disease and rape in these countries.

White Masculinity as Central to National Identity

Although World War II intensified many anxieties about white masculinity in the United States, the United Kingdom, and France, many factors leading up to the war had already undermined feelings of national masculinity and virility. In each of these countries, the Great Depression had paralyzed economies and caused staggering unemployment, leaving many men feeling stripped of their ability to provide for their families.¹ A decade before the worldwide economic depression, losses from World War I lingered in national memory. The emergence of post-traumatic stress disorder, then known as shell shock, caused many veterans of the war to feel isolated and vulnerable,² as did the many physical handicaps sustained from battle, further challenging their claims to masculine virility and strength. For

1. Mary Louise Roberts, *What Soldiers Do: Sex and the American GI in World War II France* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), 164.

2. *Ibid.*

France in particular, the fact that the country was the site of much of the bloodiest fighting on the Western Front meant it sustained significant damage to the landscape and a high death rate, exacerbating both the physical and psychological effects of war for French soldiers. Each of these countries also experienced emasculation after World War I simply because of the loss of so many young men, especially in Europe where this generation came to be known as the “lost generation.” Additionally, in the interwar period, movements for women’s suffrage as well as the role of flappers in the Jazz Age emphasized a newfound female independence, threatening male control.³

When World War II began, many features of being at war heightened this threat to both national identity and white masculinity in Western Europe. While away at war, soldiers had less control over women back at home, who then took on more independence in managing the home and family by themselves, as well as took on traditionally masculine jobs in war industries. For the United Kingdom and France during World War II, the dynamic of liberator and liberated lay at the crux of white masculine insecurity. When the United States invaded France starting in 1944, France’s national morale had already taken a significant blow after falling to German occupation so early in the war. Mary Louise Roberts, a historian at the University of Wisconsin, writes that after US invasion, “the presence of American soldiers on French soil meant liberation, yes, but also evidence of international decline.”⁴ If Germany was conceptualized as a masculine dominator, France would thereby be defined as the feminine victim. This attitude can be explicitly traced in American wartime propaganda: “A Pocket Guide to France,” a booklet widely distributed to GIs in the US Army and Navy, uses “he” pronouns for Germany and “she” for France.⁵ This relationship is crucial to understanding threatened white masculine identity not only in France, but in the United States as well. As liberator, “the acts of rescue, protection, and sexual dominance all restored a GI’s sense of manliness.”⁶ After summarizing German occupation, the narrator of “A Pocket Guide to France” condescendingly

explains to the soldier reading that the French “look up to the United States as the friend of the oppressed and the liberator of the enslaved.”⁷ This depiction of masculine America-as-heroic-liberator to feminine France slates France as a damsel in distress, in need of a manly American rescuer.

Although the United States was not a liberator to Britain and Northern Ireland the way it was to France, the significant American presence in these areas also contributed to anxieties about national identity and white masculinity. The United Kingdom was weakened and thereby emasculated by the additional time at war, although to a lesser degree than occupied France. Northern Ireland, as an official part of the UK but sharing an island with the neutral Republic of Ireland, had additional struggles with unity of national identity in the war cause. Northern Irish opinion has always been deeply divided about whether it should be part of the UK or the Republic of Ireland, and this conflict also divided national opinion about participation in the war, because Ireland remained a neutral party, but England was a central Allied player. Because religious affiliation as Catholic or Protestant has been closely tied to loyalty to Ireland or the UK, religion deeply divided Northern Irish society in almost all contexts, but both Catholics and Protestants shared conservative values about female sexuality.⁸ For this reason, “the importance of female moral standards and sexual behavior transcended other divides and, indeed, were perhaps magnified because of the absence of other common markers of Northern Irish identity.”⁹ Emphasis on religion in Northern Ireland therefore reinforced the country’s stake in restricting female sexuality, even though it was less directly involved in the war than the UK.

For the mainland of the UK, moral panic about female sexuality also heightened wartime anxiety about emasculation. Insecurity about British women favoring American troops, and particularly the stationing of black GIs in the UK (and in France as well), caused “race and national difference [to exacerbate] public concern about the romantic and pleasure-seeking activities of women and girls.”¹⁰ Despite this public anxiety, there was also pressure

3. Sonya O. Rose, “Sex, Citizenship, and the Nation in World War II Britain,” *The American Historical Review* 103, no. 4 (1998): 1166.

4. Roberts, *What Soldiers Do*, 4.

5. United States War and Navy Departments, “A Pocket Guide to France,” (Washington, D.C.: War and Navy Departments, 1944), 1.

6. Roberts, *What Soldiers Do*, 5.

7. US War and Navy Departments, “A Pocket Guide to France,” 7.

8. Leanne McCormick, “‘One Yank and They’re Off’: Interaction between U.S. Troops and Northern Irish Women, 1942-1945,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 15, no. 2 (2006): 229.

9. McCormick, “‘One Yank and They’re Off,’” 232.

10. Rose, “Sex, Citizenship, and the Nation,” 1149.

to mitigate criticism of American troops because “the prime concern for the authorities in both Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK was to keep US troops and, consequently, the US authorities happy and healthy.”¹¹ For Britain, France, and Northern Ireland, these internal anxieties about national identity led to reliance on white masculinity *as* national identity to maintain unity and stability in an otherwise chaotic time of war. However, the gendered quality of the relationship between these countries and the United States also made this white masculinity inherently vulnerable to emasculation in an international context.

The Venereal Disease Crisis as a Location of White Masculinity

As Alexandra M. Lord writes, the US military was no stranger to venereal disease (VD) when it entered World War II in 1940, having lost 7.5 million working days to VD among World War I soldiers just a generation ago.¹² The American military was also aware that the already difficult-to-control domestic venereal disease crisis could be exacerbated by millions of young men bringing back to their communities sexually transmitted infections (STIs) that they had contracted abroad. The government had already attempted to address the rampant rates of VD at home through educational films, partnerships with private health educational organizations, pamphlets and posters,¹³ and importantly, one of the first widespread campaigns to implement sex education in high schools.¹⁴ Such campaigns had been fraught with controversy, but the breakout of war signaled a departure from the government’s previous obligation to mediate objections from parents and religious figures. For the US government, World War II marked a significant opportunity “to present citizens in the armed forces with a uniform and mandatory sex education program.”¹⁵

The military’s sex educational campaign attempted to wield control of soldiers’ sexual activity through “stress[ing] that venereal disease caused lasting damage to one’s health, fertility, sexual capacity, and family life.”¹⁶ By convincing soldiers

11. McCormick, “‘One Yank and They’re Off,’” 238.

12. Alexandra M. Lord, *Condom Nation: The US Government’s Sex Education Campaign from World War I to the Internet* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 84.

13. Lord, *Condom Nation*, 78.

14. *Ibid.*, 81.

15. *Ibid.*, 84.

16. Lord, *Condom Nation*, 85.

that VD was dangerous, soldiers could be persuaded to use condoms, go to a prophylactic station after sex, and importantly, have discretion about the women they slept with. Significantly, this campaign only applied to male GIs; women in the Women’s Army Corps did not have to complete such education and certainly were not distributed condoms.¹⁷ Health videos geared toward women in World War Two describe anatomy and how to menstruation, but do not at all address participation in sexual activity while discharged.¹⁸ These facts reveal the military’s assumption that male soldiers would have sex anyway, which rested on patriarchal ideas about men’s sexual needs, virility, and inability to control impulses. The US government knew they were powerless to stop deployed soldiers from engaging in sexual activity, and furthermore, many officials at least tacitly favored GIs having access to sex because showing sexual restraint would undermine traditional ideas of masculinity. Roberts cites an infamous quote by General George Patton that illustrates the opinion many officers held that frequent sex made for better performance in battle: “if they don’t fuck, they don’t fight.”¹⁹ This quote demonstrates the belief that only should soldiers be allowed to engage in sex abroad, but entitling them to sexual activities—and female bodies—was imperative to the war cause. It was therefore essential that the military’s sex educational materials convince the American GI to avoid sexual risk so that soldiers were not taken out of combat for treatment, but also avoid damaging soldiers’ masculinity in blaming them for having contracted VD. This inadvertently shifted the blame of transmitting VD onto the women they had sex with.

In posters, films, and pamphlets that the military distributed to educate soldiers about VD, soldiers are held responsible to the extent that they are told to use condoms, go to prophylactic stations, and report for treatment as soon as they suspect they have an STI. However, there is a stark difference in the sexual morality attached to men versus women in these materials. The primary moral consequence for men who contract VD is undermining the war effort by not being able to fight; this can be seen in posters that declare statements such as “Sex Exposure Without

17. Roberts, *What Soldiers Do*, 165-166.

18. “Personal Hygiene for Women. Part I (US Navy, 1943),” YouTube video, posted by U.S. National Library of Medicine, Apr. 8, 2013.

19. Peter Schrivers, as cited by Roberts, *What Soldiers Do*, 160.

Prophylaxis: Pro Axis.”²⁰ Aside from this patriotic moralization, men featured in VD educational materials are predominantly depicted as passive victims of diseases that temporarily inconvenience them or, if they do not pursue treatment, permanently handicap them. By contrast, the women in these media are infectious agents who are permanently rendered immoral by carrying VD, subverting the traditional sexual script where men take an active role and women a passive. Men are “struck by the disease”;²¹ women are “diseased.”²² In the films *Pick Up* and *Easy to Get*, soldiers sleep with women who, for various reasons, the soldiers presume must be “clean,” but are revealed by a physician to have had VD. In *Easy to Get*, the soldier insists that the woman he had sex with was clean, but the doctor tells him, “where you touched her, she was filthy and diseased.”²³ In *Pick Up*, the physician tells a soldier with gonorrhea that the army knows GIs have enough sense “to leave women who look like real tarts alone”²⁴ and that it is “the so-called nice girls”²⁵ that cause trouble; both films focus on reiterating that all women, whether prostitutes or small-town girls, can be infected. Similarly, a 1940 poster features art of an innocent-looking young girl with the accompanying text, “She may look clean—but pick-ups, ‘good-time girls,’ prostitutes spread syphilis and gonorrhea.”²⁶ These materials clearly communicate to GIs that if they contract an STI, they had been irresponsible, but were also the ignorant victim of “a special sort of hard-boiled dame”²⁷ who was permanently made filthy by VD—and by extension, indiscriminate sex with men in general.

Although the media distributed to American GIs was rooted in misogynist ideas about female

sexuality, the way the US managed soldiers’ sexual activity also relied on compulsory heterosexuality and white supremacy to maintain white masculinity. Roberts recounts that one of the arguments US military officials used to justify permissiveness in soldiers’ sex with women was to raise “the specter of ‘perversion’”;²⁸ if abstinence was forced upon men, they might seek out sex with other men or even animals instead.²⁹ This homophobia coupled with a belief in the unstoppable male libido absolved GIs of any real responsibility for their sexual actions while deployed. The other factor that supported the supremacy of white masculinity was “racial prejudice [that] inverted the gendered logic of contamination: European women became victims rather than agents of contagion.”³⁰ Black members of the army, due to poor access to healthcare and a host of other socioeconomic factors, had higher rates of VD, but the hyper-sexualization of men of color led officers to assume black soldiers were also responsible for the vast majority of VD cases contracted during deployment.³¹ The hyper-sexualization of men of color refers to the belief perpetuated under white supremacy that non-white men, especially black men, have higher sex drives, exhibit less sexual discretion, and engage in violent sexual behavior, especially toward white women.³² As an illustration of this belief during World War Two, Roberts reports that statistics about the spread of STIs are inherently flawed because commanding officers would often blame a divisions’ high VD rate on black units.³³ In this way, the US was faced with the task of managing the sexual activity of soldiers so that VD rates could be minimized without undermining the white masculine image of the military. To address this contradiction, misogyny, homophobia, and white supremacy underlay the military’s sex education campaigns and sexual healthcare services.

In France and the UK, civilians and government officials were also faced with the problem of regulating sex between American GIs and European women, but their approaches directly targeted the women with whom soldiers had sex. These approaches were much more punitive than the educational and health-centered campaigns that the US military used to manage male soldiers’ sexual activity. In France,

20. U.S. National Library of Medicine, “Visual Culture and Public Health Posters: Venereal Disease,” *National Institutes of Health*, last modified September 8, 2011, accessed November 24, 2017.

21. “WORLD WAR II U.S. ARMY VENEREAL DISEASE SCARE FILM FIGHT SYPHILIS 48394,” YouTube video, posted by PeriscopeFilm, Dec. 1, 2016, 17:03.

22. “WORLD WAR II U.S. ARMY VENEREAL DISEASE SCARE FILM ‘PICK UP’ 88434,” YouTube video, posted by PeriscopeFilm, April 5, 2016, 23:37.

23. “Easy to Get (US Army Services Forces, 1947),” YouTube video, posted by U.S. National Library of Medicine, June 6, 2014, 4:55.

24. “‘PICK UP’ 88434,” posted by PeriscopeFilm, 18:10.

25. “‘PICK UP’ 88434,” posted by PeriscopeFilm, 18:14.

26. U.S. National Library of Medicine, “Visual Culture and Public Health Posters: Venereal Disease,” accessed November 24, 2017.

27. US War and Navy Departments, “A Pocket Guide to France,” 6.

28. Roberts, *What Soldiers Do*, 174.

29. *Ibid.*

30. *Ibid.*, 164.

31. Roberts, *What Soldiers Do*, 165.

32. *Ibid.*, 164.

33. *Ibid.*

where national identity had been challenged by the presence of Germany and then the US, women who had had sex with either German or American soldiers had threatened French white masculinity, especially if they had been prostitutes. The *tonte* ritual at the Liberation, in which such women had their heads shaved and were paraded through the streets, epitomizes an attempt “to reappropriate women’s bodies from *both* German and American soldiers.”³⁴ Roberts continues, “in this way, sexual possession of the female body became inextricable from national sovereignty.”³⁵ The French state had also maintained the *maison* system of prostitution regulation where sex workers would be regularly examined to ensure they did not have VD. However, this system had fallen in disarray after the Liberation, because prostitutes were vulnerable to abuse at the hands of the state if they were found to have VD and would therefore actively evade medical examination.³⁶ This system reveals misogyny at the hands of the French government, and its failings also “reinforced prejudices about French sexual decadence”³⁷ among American military personnel. The perceived willingness of French women to sleep with American men, combined with the emasculation of French men, led to a crisis of French white masculinity which the French people struggled to reclaim by punishing sexually immoral women.

In Northern Ireland and the British mainland, there was also widespread anxiety “that a wave of ‘moral laxity’ was engulfing the country.”³⁸ This fear was especially challenging to Northern Irish identity, where both the Protestant and Catholic church held “an influence reflected in the more conservative ideas and stricter standards of sexual conduct than those that existed in many other parts of the United Kingdom.”³⁹ The arrival of American men would have ordinarily piqued female interest, but their wealth and allure was magnified in comparison to British soldiers who had already been at war for years. The Americans’ smart uniforms glorified on the silver screen and their access to goods that had been rationed in the UK made US soldiers “almost mythical”⁴⁰ objects of desire to many British women. The perception that British women preferred American men—especially

African-American men—threatened British white masculinity, cutting to the heart of anxiety about female sexual immorality. VD rates had been rising since the beginning of the war, and after educational campaigns proved ineffective, Parliament passed Regulation 33B, where anyone who was reported to have VD by two people would be required to undergo treatment or face arrest.⁴¹ Although 33B did not at first apply to Northern Ireland upon passage in 1942, the UK government implemented it in Northern Ireland and Scotland in 1943, with similar consequences.⁴² While the law itself was gender-neutral, McCormick reports that it unfairly targeted women; in the first six months of its passage, sixty-four women but only two men were informed on.⁴³ This anxiety about female sexuality was complicated by the fact that the UK government was highly sensitive to any public criticism of the Americans. “Such sensitivity combined with a historically enduring sexual double standard shielded American men from being held responsible for the presumed breakdown of moral standards of women and girls”⁴⁴—but only when those American men were white. White British women sleeping with black American soldiers heightened concerns about female sexual immorality because of the hyper-sexualization of black men and directly challenged white British masculinity.⁴⁵ The attempted regulation of VD reveals the British attempt to manage a crisis of white masculinity as national identity brought on by World War II.

White Masculinity in the Management of Rape

The public health challenge of regulating VD became central to the negotiation of white masculinity and national identity in the context of consensual sex between American soldiers and Western European women. However, investigating how each of these countries managed rape reveals how heteronormativity, misogyny, and racism resulted in violence against Western European women and African American soldiers. As seen in the management of VD, the belief that soldiers should have sexual access to Western European women rested on misogynistic ideas about masculinity and virility as well as homophobia. This

34. *Ibid.*, 88.

35. Roberts, *What Soldiers Do*, 88.

36. *Ibid.*, 177.

37. *Ibid.*

38. Rose, “Sex, Citizenship, and the Nation,” 1150.

39. McCormick, “‘One Yank and They’re Off,’” 231.

40. *Ibid.*, 234.

41. Rose, “Sex, Citizenship, and the Nation,” 1150.

42. N. P. Shannon, “The Compulsory Treatment of Venereal Diseases Under Regulation 33B,” *The British Journal of Venereal Disease*, (1943): 74.

43. McCormick, “‘One Yank and They’re Off,’” 248.

44. Rose, “Sex, Citizenship, and the Nation,” 1151.

45. *Ibid.*, 1157.

belief among officials in the US military caused Western European women, but never US soldiers, to be held accountable for spreading VD. In the context of sexual assault, this belief became a more malevolent justification for soldiers' entitlement to Western European women's bodies—but only if the soldier was white. Just as systemic hyper-sexualization of men of color led black GIs to be blamed for any VD within the army, black soldiers were assumed to be guilty of any rape accusations, resulting in horrific injustice for them as well as Western European women who were raped by white soldiers.

Mary Louise Roberts discusses in detail how significant of a problem military injustice for rape accusations against black soldiers were in liberated France. Of 152 American soldiers tried for rape in the European Theater of Operations, 139 were men of color; twenty-nine of these men were hanged, of which twenty-five were African-American.⁴⁶ At the time, these statistics were used by military officials to justify the hyper-sexualization of men of color, but Roberts argues that racism on the part of French accusers and inadequate investigation of crimes on the part of the US army led “the French and the Americans [to become] deadly allies in racism.”⁴⁷ Within the American army, black soldiers faced intense discrimination in every arena of military life and were expected to adhere to unspoken rules of segregation while abroad in countries that did not have the same systemic segregation of “white” and “colored” spaces.⁴⁸ However, “the most dangerous color line to cross was, without a doubt, sexual relations with white women.”⁴⁹ Allowing black men the same sexual access as white men would have critically undermined American white masculinity. The assumption that soldiers of color were naturally violent and sexual combined with the incredulity that a white woman would consent to sex with a black man caused the court system to presume guilt even when there was a lack of evidence or credible witness.⁵⁰ At every stage in the process of being tried and punished for rape, this retaliation against threat to American white masculinity can be seen; it is clear that black soldiers were more likely to be convicted of rape, but were also given harsher sentences. The injustice of how many black soldiers were hanged

46. Roberts, *What Soldiers Do*, 195.

47. *Ibid.*, 197.

48. Roberts, *What Soldiers Do*, 199.

49. *Ibid.*, 201.

50. *Ibid.*, 223.

“lay in the grisly links between rape, race, and noose that had taken shape in the American South.”⁵¹ These often public executions both terrorized black soldiers and “scapegoated black soldiers for the crime of rape in order to save the reputation of the US army”⁵² — and by extension, protected the innocence of American white masculinity.

Both the UK and France imagined themselves to be lands of racial equality compared to the explicit racism revealed in American segregation, but racism in these countries also served to uphold British and French white masculinity. In France, particularly in the countryside where there was less exposure to racial diversity, racist sentiments “largely developed in relationship to the colonized people of western Africa.”⁵³ Racist beliefs in West Africans' hyper-sexuality, violence, and unintelligence easily transferred to African-American soldiers, leading to hysterical fear of black men raping white French women.⁵⁴ These beliefs informed racism that determined who was accused, tried, and punished for alleged rapes in liberated France.

However, in Britain, Rose writes that black Americans were often viewed favorably compared to white soldiers, but they still “became racial ‘others’ when it came to sexual relations with white British women.”⁵⁵ This relative tolerance can in part be attributed to the distance of the UK to its majority-nonwhite colonies such as those in the Caribbean, Africa, and India, but British racism is revealed when suddenly confronted with the possibility of black men having sex with white British women during World War II. Since publicly criticizing the US military was not tolerated, white British women who had sex with black Americans were still held partially to blame as sexually perverse⁵⁶ because the specter of this perversion “threatened to blur the racial lineaments of white British national identity.”⁵⁷ In both France and the UK, the presence of African-American GIs revealed racism with roots in these countries' imperialism. This colonization was essential to the maintenance of white masculine identity in these countries because in the context of their relationship with America, the US challenged British and French

51. *Ibid.*, 224.

52. *Ibid.*, 226.

53. *Ibid.*, 241.

54. Roberts, *What Soldiers Do*, 243.

55. Rose, “Sex, Citizenship, and the Nation,” 1155.

56. *Ibid.*, 1159.

57. Roberts, *What Soldiers Do*, 1157.

masculinity as the manly liberator. White supremacy in the context of British and French colonies allowed these countries to still conceptualize themselves as masculine, dominant colonizers in a global context.

Conclusion

In examining the regulation of sexual contact between American GIs and Western European women, American, British, and French attempts to uphold white masculinity as national identity are revealed. Through educational campaigns about VD and judicial management of rape, the US military shifted any blame for sexual misconduct onto Western European women and African-American GIs. The UK and France directly punished women for their perceived sexual immorality, as well as African-American GIs for undermining British and French white masculinity. At their simplest, these negotiations of race, gender, and national identity were located on the interpersonal level in sexual interactions between American GIs and Western European women. However, they spoke to international tensions in power dynamics that resulted from the breakout of World War II. ♦

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