

Will There Be Another Lost Generation?

BY MARY AGNES HAMILTON, M. P.

IN Britain to-day, young women are giving the best of their youth to the war machine, as young men are giving, and preparing to give, their lives.



The burden of war production has, for more than four years, rested mainly on the shoulders of women. Of girls between the ages of fourteen and seventeen, more than 67 per cent are on whole-time war work. Some 90 per cent of unmarried women, between the ages of eighteen and forty, and 75 per cent of married women without young children dependent on them are, in the same way, wholly taken up by the war effort, in one form or another.

Britain's women either wear the uniform of the Services, of Transport, of the Post Office, of Civil Defense, of the Women's Voluntary Services, or the somewhat drab clothes suitable for long hours in factory or office. They do not grumble. But they do cast a questioning eye towards an uncertain future.

What about that future? Is this willing and selfless service to end, as it did after 1918, in dust and ashes? Do we face the prospect of another "Lost Generation?"

Here is a question that calls up long and bitter memories. Idle to mumble, in answer, a mere "It can't happen." It did happen once—after World War I. It happened in the United States; it happened in Britain. It broke hearts that have never healed since.

I lived through World War I and its grim aftermath. Between 1914 and 1918, as now, there were appeals, urgent appeals, to young men and women alike.

Women were called upon to do work they had never done—or been allowed to do—before. They came. They worked. They were praised, and rightly, for their work. They believed what they were then told about a Crusade: a war to end war; a new and better world, after the fighting stopped; "Homes for Heroes," and so on.

The war ended. They found that the exhortations and promises were not true. The ideals for which they had given their youth seemed sham. They felt they had been betrayed.

Moreover, they soon found that they were not wanted in the old world that came back. There was no work for them. None for the women; soon, not much for the men. The whole affair now looked bogus.

As hopes died, faith crumbled. How could one now believe in anything? Nothing was solid, save the pleasure to be snatched from the passing moment,—the pleasure of bed and board.

This was no class reaction; it affected all classes. The young and the, by now, not-so-young, went "gay." They grew hard and cynical. Folly to bring children into such a miserable world. The birth rate went down as the unemployment rate went up.

One compensation, and only one, is to be extracted from the grim fact that for the second time within a generation the world is plunged into total catastrophe. It is possible to compare *now* with *then*. *Now* looks like *then*, because, once more, Germany has brought this frightfulness upon the world. But *now* is not *then*. *Now* need not see the Lost Generation that *then* endured. In Britain, anyhow, we are quite sure that this time our young people are to find, not lose, themselves.

Between *now* and *then*, there are two decisive differences. First: the war itself is different. Second: the young, and, above all, the young women, are different.



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To begin with, take the difference
is fundamental.

In 1914, there was a tremendous amount of highly-idealistic talk, but it was largely unreal. Since 1940, there has been little talk in Britain. We don't need to talk. We know that we have been very near to losing everything that matters to every one of us.

If, even at the darkest hour, we never believed in German victory, the sole reason then was that our will, as a people, was set. It prevailed. It was, in the fullest sense, a national will—everybody's will.

From the beginning, this is, as 1914 was not, a people's war. It is about the right of people to be people. Therefore every human being has a stake in it; women perhaps an even more obvious one than men. The Nazi system which, since 1933, Germany has been preparing to impose by force upon the entire world, denies the value of the human soul as such. That is the essence of the appalling creed. Women, it relegates to the lowest category; even German women are mere breeders of cannon fodder and instruments of sexual satisfaction for men.

The crimes committed against women in the conquered and occupied countries of Europe are even more atrocious than those committed against men. Women are shot, starved, tortured. Their children are reft from them. They themselves are deported in great numbers to brothels for the service of German soldiers.

The Nazis are logical. Their fearsome logic has stirred in the minds of the men and women who fight, and will defeat them, a revived and burning knowledge of what it is in which they themselves believe.

We see more clearly than we ever saw before that human life and the freedom of men and women to know



"CASUAL ABOUT SEX. PERHAPS. BUT FURTIVE — NO."

and become the best that is in them, is the point of worthy endeavour and the substance of democracy. Here is something worth fighting and working for; something which concerns us all.

It was not so in 1914. That was a war of the old sort. Its aftermath produced, among other things, a sincere and well-nigh universal horror of war as such, and, as the Dictators began to arise, a paralyzing fear. This fear was the parent of appeasement. But the young never had any confidence in appeasement. It never made them feel safe. A sense of doom brooded over them. Yet their attitude was never merely passive. With teeth set, they faced what was coming.

Although they were nearly all of them pacifists, they saw, more truly than their guides, what was happening in Germany, and what it meant; and, facing that fact, they drew from it one tremendous lesson—there is something worse than war: surrender to evil. They faced what was coming and, in their own way, were ready; knew, somehow, that they could take it.

This brings me to my second point—the difference that divides the young of to-day from the young who got lost after 1918. See them at work, watch them in training, observe their bearing during the Blitz, and you know, without any argument, that they are not the stuff of which surrender is made. There is something unmistakably gritty about them, boys and girls alike.

In the peace years, before we needed their grit, we often thought them a bit hard, in their clear-eyed honesty and unblinking selfishness. We forgot, then, how sick they were of the empty phrase-making and false illusions of the recent past; how determined not to be “caught;” how intent on being “realistic.”

Often, their hardness was mainly conversational. In the thick fog of

the appeasement epoch, they grew up, with eyes open to unpleasant facts. They used their tongues in ways that shocked—and were intended to shock—their elders. Their vocabulary was neither refined nor modest; on the lips of pretty girls it could pronounce a very jarring effect. Yet, while they saw and spoke of evil and called it by its name, they also, without

talking about it, saw more of good than they let on.

Sometimes casual in sex matters, ill-mannered and egotistical to a boring degree they were; yet, also they were, and are, straightforward, candid, good at a job. Better educated, too, than their forerunners, they have hands that can cope with gadgets, drive cars, manipulate tools. Their bodies fined down and toned up by hard exercise.

Above all, they are not frightened of life, as was the generation before them. Unlike that generation, they know about their own bodies and—to a lesser extent—about their own minds. And this changes the picture.

Casual about sex they may be; furtive they are not. Theirs is a world in which men and women dwell together and know

one another. This, which is, to my mind, the biggest element of difference, may seem surprising in Britain, where there are few co-educational schools. But it is fact. Of it is born a clear-eyed comradeship which is giving grand results in work to-day, and holds out solid grounds for hope in the future.

Comradeship on the job holds in every department of the war effort. You can see it, any day, on any bus, between man driver and girl conductor; you find it between the R.A.F. and the W.A.A.F. (Women's

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"WOMEN HAVE A GREATER STAKE IN THIS WAR"

Auxiliary Air Force) who services his beloved machine; between men and women on A.A. guns, barrage balloons; in the control station, and the Warden's Post; in factory and office.

Comradeship in a common task and for a common end makes tolerable conditions which for a great many women, are as unfamiliar as they are intrinsically difficult. For them, it is something new. It is something which they are not going to let go. It holds the promise of a kind of life which, though its material standard may well be simpler than that enjoyed by a pre-war minority, will be morally richer, inasmuch as there is a common standard - one to which men and women alike contribute.

This new relation has its dangers as well as its promises. One must not be romantic about it. The old Adam and the old Eve are not dead yet, nor dying.



"NO LOSS OF FEMININITY DESPITE MAN-SIZED JOBS"

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Here are human beings. There are those who will tell you that the talk between these youths and maidens is all of "dates." There are those who are not exhilarated, but distressed, by the fact that Britain never had so many heads of elaborately waved and curled hair (granted it is done at home these days); those whom it exasperates to know that voluntary recruiting for the A.T.S. went up when a more becoming service cap was issued.

They point to the rising illegitimacy rate and the alarming figures of juvenile delinquency. And well they may. War does not make for orderly restraints. It drives home to every heart the horrid transitoriness of existence; reminds us that we have, as Marquand has put it, "so little time."

But if we hear much more of "immorality" than before, some of our hearing is due to the fact that what once went on in secrecy now goes on in the open. This exposure is all to the good. Public policy is on the line of frankness. The British Broadcasting Corporation runs straightforward talks on sex; the Ministry of Health has conducted a big campaign of public instruction on the facts of venereal disease; and there have been no protests. On the contrary, there has been much gratitude from people who had, hitherto, been largely ignorant.

Moreover, if there is laxity, there is also a less vocal, deeply serious approach to the whole sex problem. For to very many of Britain's young people marriage primarily means children. The marriage rate, although not at the high points it reached in 1939 and 1940 when the sense of "so little time" was most acute, stands well above the pre-war normal.

The birth rate has steadily risen, until at 16.8 for the first quarter of 1943, it has touched a new record, and stands higher than for any year since 1931. At the same time, new low records have been registered, both for Infantile Mortality and Maternal Mortality. Whereas, twenty years ago women shied away from child-bearing because it would interrupt their lives and spoil their figures, the



THE LAST WAR left behind it a lost and unhappy generation which struggled vainly to find a place for itself in a world without war. Mary Hamilton, former Parliament Member discusses the problem of whether we shall see this tragedy repeated.



"THE FUTURE HOLDS HOPE"

contemporary girl is all for a family and a home of her own. It is a small but significant sign of the times that the status of the housewife goes steadily up. The sacrifice of home and life within the home is the heaviest price of war for women.

It is, of course, a sense of the cause that makes possible this sacrifice and this unrelaxing effort, now in its fifth year. Britishers don't talk much about their country, but 99 per cent of them work better and more happily for it than for themselves. It is this that gets the worker to work on time after sleepless nights in the Blitz, and carries men and women, after a long day in factory or office, to the Fire-guard Station or Air Raid Warden Post; this that enables the hard-driven housewife, at the end of a gruelling day at the factory bench, to grin and exchange pleasantries as she stands in bus queue.

But, in addition, there is a new interest in work itself, and a new pride in the fact of working. There is some war work, like other work at any time, that is drudgery; but many women are doing interesting and responsible jobs, for which they have been thoroughly trained. Many who did not have regular jobs before the war, will certainly want to go on working after it, whether whole or part-time. And this is as well, for there will be work for all hands.

About the post-war world, there are many opinions. On one point, however, there is agreement—it will be a world of work. There will be an immense replacement, a vast program of construction and reconstruction to fulfill.

In Britain, preparations for this are well under way.

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A great overhaul and extension of educational opportunity is now going through Parliament. Plans have been outlined for a national health service on the broadest basis. The Ministry of Labor and National Service is working at schemes for training and placing in "black coat" as well as manual employments. Most important of all, the entire planning of post-war policies is geared to full employment of the entire available resources of man and woman power.

Prophecy is foolish. One can only hazard an opinion. Mine is clear. The future will call for efforts as great as, or greater than those being made in the present. They are our opportunity. This war is different from that of 1914-18, since, now, our whole democratic way of life is at issue.

The young people who carry its main burden are different. Out of this fiery furnace I see coming a generation that is not lost, but has found itself. It is our hope.

World

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