

# British Journal for Military History

Volume 7, Issue 3, November 2021

---

Review of *Sisters in Arms: Women in the British Armed Forces during the Second World War* by Jeremy A Crang

**Linsey Robb**

---

**ISSN:** 2057-0422

**Date of Publication:** 25 November 2021

**Citation:** Linsey Robb, 'Review of *Sisters in Arms: Women in the British Armed Forces during the Second World War* by Jeremy A Crang', *British Journal for Military History*, 7.3 (2021), pp. 163-165.

[www.bjmh.org.uk](http://www.bjmh.org.uk)

---



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.



The BJMH is produced with the support of **Goldsmiths**  
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

## REVIEWS

Similarly, finding meaningful employment – again deemed a crucial part of the treatment process – was more challenging in the Irish Free State where unemployment was significantly higher. There were some cases of discrimination, and the King's National Roll system was not introduced owing to resistance by republicans and trade unionists, but there is little evidence of systemic efforts against ex-servicemen (indeed, anti-Treaty republicans would also complain about unemployment in the aftermath of the Civil War). Importantly, societal prejudice and reluctance to accept the potential financial impact of hiring shell-shocked veterans whose symptoms could be unpredictable also fatally hampered the Ministry of Pensions' policy of voluntarism and cooperation from civil society.

This is a book that will be of great interest to scholars of the Irish Revolution and its aftermath, those interested in the welfare of Great War veterans across Europe, and the history of medicine more generally. It deserves a wide readership, and it is to be hoped that the publisher releases an affordable paperback soon.

BRIAN HUGHES

Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick, Ireland  
DOI 10.25602/GOLD.bjmh.v7i3.1581

**Jeremy A Crang, *Sisters in Arms: Women in the British Armed Forces during the Second World War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. xii + 341pp + Index + 46 images. ISBN 978-1107013476 (hardback). Price £25**

600,000 women served in the British armed forces during the Second World War. Entering the most masculine of realms, these women took on a variety of roles. These ranged from the resolutely feminised (for example cooking and cleaning) to, despite the enduring combat taboo, near combatant roles (such as gunners in anti-aircraft batteries). Their service threw up often intractable questions about femininity, masculinity, British society and even the role and construction of the military itself. In *Sisters in Arms* Jeremy Crang presents a new history of these militarised British women during the Second World War. *Sisters in Arms* is a comprehensive analysis of the organisation and experiences of British women's military service during the Second World War, covering their service from volunteering or conscription until their demobilisation at the war's end. Looking collectively at the Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS), Women's Royal Naval Service (WRNS), and the Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF), Crang presents a wide-ranging study of the operational decision making in these forces themselves as well as discussing state level opinions and decisions regarding the auxiliary services.

The book also neatly incorporates the experiences and views of the women who served in all three services. The book's scope and themes are, therefore, diffuse. Crang covers the operational history in depth from the re-establishment of the services, recreated from their First World War counterparts, in the 1930s to the decisions around their permanence in the post-war period. Yet this is far from a straightforward top-down history of the organisations as Crang also explores the lived experience of the 600,000 women who served, exploring topics as far ranging as food, menstruation, leisure pursuits and uniforms. Indeed, Crang places women's military experience firmly in its socio-cultural context, showing the symbiotic relationship between the military and society in this period. To this end the book is meticulously researched, drawing on a variety of official and private sources to build a carefully considered portrait of women's wartime military service and the wider impacts of such service. *Sisters in Arms* is also well written and extremely readable. Indeed, despite the often lengthy discussions of policy and policy making, often tedious in the wrong hands, the book remains engaging throughout.

*Sisters in Arms* is a welcome addition to the already profuse scholarship on Britain's Second World War. Indeed, one of the key strengths of the book is its successful merging of military, social and women's history, fields of study which often remain frustratingly separate despite the obvious intellectual benefits of taking a holistic approach such as Crang's. As such this book presents a useful companion to the more extensive work on women's civilian work which exists in this vein as well a necessary addition to the military historiography. Moreover, Crang's decision to tackle all three services, rather than the more common approach of examining them in isolation works well. What could have become confusing or fragmented is skilfully woven together to highlight the key institutional similarities and differences at both a policy and experiential level which serves to nuance what could have been rendered as simply 'women's military services' and, moreover, presents an important dimension to what could have at points felt like well-worn ground. Similarly, Crang does not treat wartime serving women as a homogenous mass, instead he seeks to distinguish experience and treatment based on, for example, class, rank and wartime role therefore presenting an impressively holistic view of female military wartime service.

*Sisters in Arms* will almost certainly become the standard text on the women's auxiliary services during the Second World War. It's scope, breadth and detail mean it will be of use to many different types of scholars and researchers working on the military and socio-cultural histories of the Second World War as well as of interest to women's

## REVIEWS

historians and gender historians alike. Moreover, given its scope and readability, it will be an essential addition to many university reading lists on courses which cover Britain's Second World War or British social history for years to come.

LINSEY ROBB  
Northumbria University, UK  
DOI 10.25602/GOLD.bjmh.v7i3.1582

**Bair Irincheev, *Vyborg 1944: The Last Soviet-Finnish Campaign on the Eastern Front*, translated by Kevin Bridge. Warwick: Helion, 2020. Index, 233pp, Bibliography. ISBN 978-1912390274 (paperback). Price £29.95.**

On the wall of Marshall Carl Gustaf Mannerheim's wartime operations room in Mikkeli, Finland there was a large map of Western Russia. During what the Finns refer to as the Continuation War (1941-44), a member of Mannerheim's staff would periodically use a different coloured pencil to shade in the territory occupied by the German *Wehrmacht*. The summer of 1941 is represented by broad swathes of red, blue and green. As Barbarossa progressed so the gains diminished and the shaded areas around Leningrad and Moscow became a mess of different colours on the map. This important historical document serves as a striking metaphor reflecting the dilemma faced by the Finns following Germany's attack on the Soviet Union. Would it be best to invest in an alliance with Nazi Germany in the hope that territorial gains would ensue, or should a more nuanced position be taken, so that an accommodation with the Soviet Union could be reached in the event of Barbarossa failing? Opinions differ as to what Mannerheim's real intent was but, having pushed the Red Army back down the Kerelian Isthmus to the gates of Leningrad in September 1941, the Finnish High Command must have been increasingly anxious as the Axis forces faltered and then, in early 1944, began to retreat through the Baltic states. This book critically examines Finnish and Soviet responses to this reversal of fortunes.

After the Siege of Leningrad lifted in early 1944 Stalin offered the Finns a proposal which would have involved a reinstatement of the pre-Barbarossa border and a number of other concessions. Mannerheim refused and, on 10 June, the Red Army launched a massive attack which, upon the signing of a peace treaty three months later, resulted in a settlement which was not dissimilar to the one that had been proposed.

Irincheev presents a useful overview of this historical context before offering up a detailed account of the *Vyborg-Petrozavodsk* offensive operation. The book focuses on