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Citizen, Invert, Queer: Lesbianism and War in Early Twentieth-Century Britain by Deborah Cohler

Rachel S. Wexelbaum

St. Cloud State University, rswexelbaum@stcloudstate.edu

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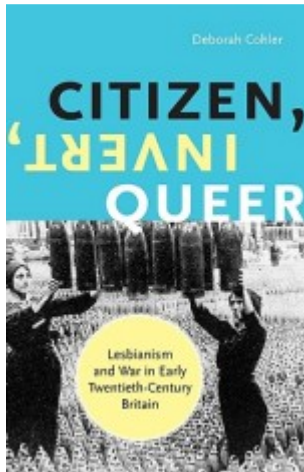
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‘Citizen, Invert, Queer: Lesbianism and War in Early Twentieth-Century Britain’ by Deborah Cohler

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CITIZEN, INVERT QUEER:

Lesbianism and War in Early Twentieth-Century Britain

by Deborah Cohler

[University of Minnesota Press](http://www.umn.edu/press)

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Paperback, \$25.00, xxii, 296 pp

Deborah Cohler’s *Citizen, Invert, Queer: Lesbianism and War in Early Twentieth Century Britain* (University of Minnesota Press) deftly explores the concept of “mannish women,” and how they were viewed as a threat to national security in the days when the sun did not set on the British Empire.

Colonizers often justify their declarations of war as the method to protect national interests. Today, Western governments justify wars with foreign countries to defend “national security.” One could define “national security” as freedom from terrorism. “National security” could also be described as maintenance of status quo, blocking out the infiltration of ideas and systems considered “foreign” to ours.

In many instances, defending “national security” has involved restricting the flow of “foreign” people into the nation of the colonizer, even though the aim of the colonizer is to send colonizers to those foreign parts of the globe.

This was especially true for the British Crown, who believed that defense of “national security” coincided with the propagation of white English men, defenders of Empire against barbaric Germans, and masters of the Empire composed predominantly of Indians, Africans, Australian Aborigines, and Irish (still considered inferior to the White Anglo Saxon Protestant).

Cohler argues that before World War I, lesbianism as an identity did not yet exist in British culture. In late nineteenth-century England, “mannish” women were considered socially deviant but not identified as homosexual. A half-century later, such masculinity equaled lesbianism in the public imagination, and was considered a threat to national security. Cohler proposes that the equation of female masculinity with female homosexuality in the West is a relatively recent phenomenon, a result of changes in national and racial as well as sexual discourses in early twentieth-century public culture.

How did this shift occur?

To trace the evolution of English lesbian identity, Cohler incorporates cultural histories of prewar women’s suffrage debates, British theories of sexology, examples of women’s work on the home front during World War I, and discussions of early literary representations of English female homosexuality to map the appearance of lesbian identities as defined by a heterosexual male culture in relation to the decline of empire and the rise of eugenics in England. Cohler also makes the point that English lesbian identities were constructed in reaction to the advancing Germans who posed a threat to domestic and economic security in England.

As German psychologists were the first to publish positive works about homosexuality and the gay movement started in Germany, the English propagandized this as their enemy’s weakness. Good English men went into the military and fought for the Crown, while good English women waited for them and raised their children.

While the number of children a good English woman should have was up for debate, British authorities at the time agreed that a good English woman served the Crown through domestic labor and childrearing. As English women at the dawn of the twentieth century could not vote, and women of the privileged classes were discouraged from earning their own wages, the only form of true citizenship in England was male citizenship.

Cohler shows many examples of cartoons published in British newspapers and war propaganda posters demonizing suffragettes and independent women as unfit mothers, unresponsive wives, man haters, unpatriotic, and eventually mentally ill. An English woman who dressed and worked as a man was certainly suspect. With this in mind, it is no wonder that the works of Virginia Woolf and Radclyffe Hall were considered subversive and often banned from British libraries and bookstores.

Citizen, Invert, Queer is a timely read, as demonization of “mannish women” and lesbian-baiting are taking place today, in the twenty-first century, in the United States. Many people have criticized Elana Kagan for her masculine appearance, behaviors, and interests, and have accused her of being a lesbian, hoping that this would keep her off the Supreme Court. Female athletes often feel the need to wear long hair in ponytails in order not to raise suspicion of coaches who might kick them off the team for being lesbians.

Of course, we need not mention the countless number of women in the United States military who still feel pressure to present a particular “image” just to complete their tour of duty and receive an honorable discharge.

In fact, policies exist to protect pregnant enlisted women, which technically would make them not fit for service (AR 40-501, August 1995). These military policies that allow pregnant enlisted women to continue to serve in the military are an example of what type of feminine image the United States government would like to promote, even during times of war.

Works Cited:

The United States Army. (1995, August 30). 7-9. *Profiling pregnant soldiers*. (Army Regulation 45-501). Washington, DC: Army Publishing Directorate.
