

The Burkhardt Review

Volume 1

Spring 2018

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Submitting to *The Burkhardt Review*

The Burkhardt Review seeks manuscripts dealing with all aspects of the historical past from graduate students currently enrolled in accredited M.A. and Ph.D. programs. The journal is especially interested in work that engages with methods traditionally considered beyond the purview of archive-based historical scholarship, including anthropology, archaeology, and even biology. Each issue strives to offer a mix of traditional and interdisciplinary approaches. Manuscripts are to be carefully edited to follow the Chicago Manual of Style, 17th Edition, word processed using the latest version of Microsoft Word, and should not exceed 8000 words inclusive of footnotes. All manuscript submissions and other inquiries should be directed to the Editor-in-Chief via burkhardtrev@bsu.edu.

Table of Contents

Editorial Staff	ii
Letter from the Editor-in-Chief Frank Lacopo	iv
Gone but Not Forgotten: Death and Burial of Unidentified Individuals at the Bottom of the Social Scale in Dayton, Ohio Shelby Frideger Cornett, with contributions from T. Joshua Keeton, Jesse Kidd, Danielle Linder, and Miriam Wilkins	1
“Woe to those who look backward into the ever-vanishing past!” Bolshevik Women in Russia and the Soviet Union, 1900- 1924 Katy Evans	14
Nella Last’s War Diary: The Silent Witness of Self-Therapy and the Emergence of Self-Identity and Independence through Writing and Volunteerism Patricia Brand	34

Letter from the Editor-in-Chief

The dynamic and ceaseless becoming of the human experience – and thus the process of historical development – does not exist in a bubble neatly delineated by the archive and the library. Paradoxically, historical experiences go to archives in the form of tangible documentary evidence both to begin long, curated lives and to die as a result of the stasis which that curation ensures. Archival curation provides both a boon to historical scholarship and a grand illusion – that historical human experience was as static as boxes of documents on shelves and as self-assured as the walls of the archive itself.

The three articles in this first issue of *The Burkhardt Review* demonstrate the fallacy of the archival illusion by augmenting traditional research with insights from the other human sciences. In their article “Gone but Not Forgotten: Death and Burial of Unidentified Individuals at the Bottom of the Social Scale in Dayton, Ohio,” archaeologist Shelby Frideger Cornett and her co-authors offer new insights into the burial records within the Wright State University Archives. They show that perceptions of class and gender impacted the ways in which modern Americans are remembered and forgotten within the venue of the cemetery. In the article “‘Woe to those who look backward into the ever-vanishing past!’ Bolshevik Women in Russia and the Soviet Union, 1900-1924,” Katy Evans shows the ways in which Bolshevik women fostered solidarity across barriers of space and status using kinship-oriented attitudes and terminology. Patricia Brand illuminates the inner world of Nella Last, a heroic woman of the British Homefront during the Second World War, by examining the ways in which psychological research reveals the mechanisms that helped Nella cope with personal and societal crises.

With no premeditated outcome other than to provide a venue for top-quality interdisciplinary scholarship, this first issue of *The Burkhardt Review* has become a *de facto* venue for research on traditionally ignored voices and their undeniable importance and agency. All three articles show that the dimensions of class and gender intertwine and interact in actual historical experience. Our researchers have not eschewed complexity in favor of neat categorization, nor have they resorted to a dubious search for traditionally ignored historical actors’ “silences” in place of positive evidence. Too often, the fruits of historical scholarship are used to reinforce persecutory ideas that “silences” are justified and that some historical actors are persecuted and otherwise subjugated for a morally or even scientifically legitimate reason. This issue provides robust, positive evidence-driven rebuttals against discriminatory attitudes. We on the editorial board are encouraged and proud that these rising researchers have chosen our first issue to showcase their impactful work.

On behalf of the entire editorial team, I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to the Ball State Department of History and especially to Drs. Jennifer Mara DeSilva, Daniel Ingram, and Abel Alves for their invaluable support. Without the generous support from the Burkhardt family, this nascent journal would not be possible. This first issue is dedicated to them.

Frank Lacopo
Editor-in-Chief
April 2018

Gone but Not Forgotten: Death and Burial of Unidentified Individuals at the Bottom of the Social Scale in Dayton, Ohio

By Shelby Frideger Cornett

With contributions from
T. Joshua Keeton, Jesse Kidd, Danielle Linder, and Miriam Wilkins

Introduction

Woodland cemetery is a garden cemetery founded in 1841 in Dayton, Ohio and claims status as one of the United States' oldest garden cemeteries.¹ The concept of the garden cemetery was popularized during the Victorian Era. Garden cemeteries were far from the gloomy cemetery stereotype of today. They were places to take a stroll, have a picnic, and beautifully memorialize departed loved ones. In *Landscapes of Memory* Sarah Tarlow describes the multifaceted appeal of these garden cemeteries to the living. She also notes garden cemeteries were often displays of status and emotional identity for the dead.² If opulent headstones indicate high socio-economic status, then burial without a headstone denotes the opposite end of the socio-economic ladder. In *This Republic of Suffering* Drew Gilpin Faust describes the Victorian notion of a "good death" as dying in the comfort of one's own home after making peace with god.³ As Faust applied this concept to death in the American Civil War, we will apply it to the case of Woodland's unknown burials. "Good Deaths" were not possible for people occupying lower economic echelons. This research examines the burials of unidentified individuals in Woodland Cemetery, whose burials reflect death and internment at the bottom of the social scale in turn of the century Dayton, OH. The interred individuals examined in this study consisted almost entirely of men and children, whose bodies were found

¹ "Woodland Cemetery and Arboretum," accessed October 30, 2017. <http://www.woodlandcemetery.org/>.

² Sarah Tarlow, "Landscapes of Memory: The Nineteenth-Century Garden Cemetery." *European Journal of Archaeology* 3 (2000): 217-39.

³ Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008).

under mysterious or unexplainable circumstances. How did these individuals die? Who were they in life, and why were their bodies never claimed? How were they buried in Woodland Cemetery and who was responsible for these burials? This topic is appealing initially for its mystery but careful archival research can provide answers to these questions, and reveal Daytonian attitudes toward the unidentified dead.

Methods

To identify the status of unknown individuals, data was collected from several primary sources found in the Wright State University Archives. The first being a book of Internment Records from May 1876 to September 1944.⁴ The book lists individuals by date of internment. The majority of entries detail the name, age, place of origin, and place of residence at death for each burial. Unidentified individuals were not listed by name, but a short description of the deceased occupied the name column. Descriptions ranged in age with terms including: unknown “foetus”, unknown infant, unknown baby, and unknown man. The internment records attempted to estimate the ages of some unidentified men. Occasionally the records included details of where the body was found, the race, gender, and physical attributes of the deceased. Another primary source, a receipt ledger, provided a lesser quantity of information but aided in our understanding of who funded these burials and how much they cost.⁵ Microfilm of newspapers from the same time period proved to be a useful source for local historical context. Literature review established additional context. Two researchers took several pedestrian surveys of Woodland as a whole with specific attention to the City Lot which contained the majority of our subjects.

⁴ Records of Internment, May 1876-September 1944, box 93, file 8. Special Collections and Archives, Wright State University Libraries.

⁵ Record of Payments, 1874-1883, volume located in box 60, file 2. Special Collections and Archives, Wright State University Libraries.

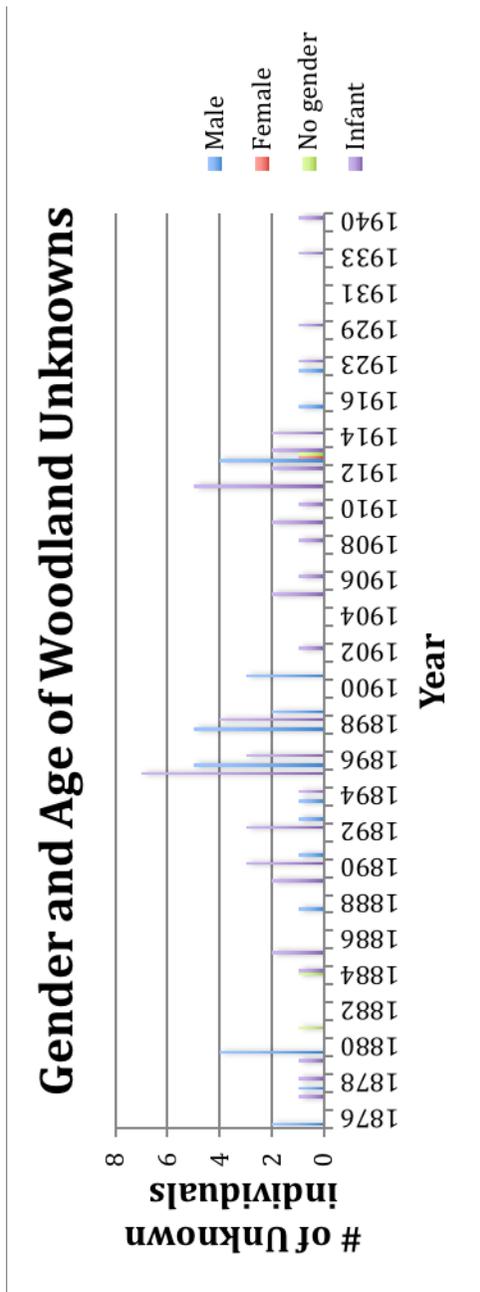
Results

Internment records revealed a total of 83 internments of unidentified individuals recorded between 1876 and 1940: 28 males, 1 female, and 3 individuals of unrecorded sex and age. The remaining 51 burials fell within the category of infant, fetus, or child. Children, and infants constitute the greatest number of unidentified individuals interred at Woodland. The chart below details the gender and age of subjects along with the location of discovery, if recorded.

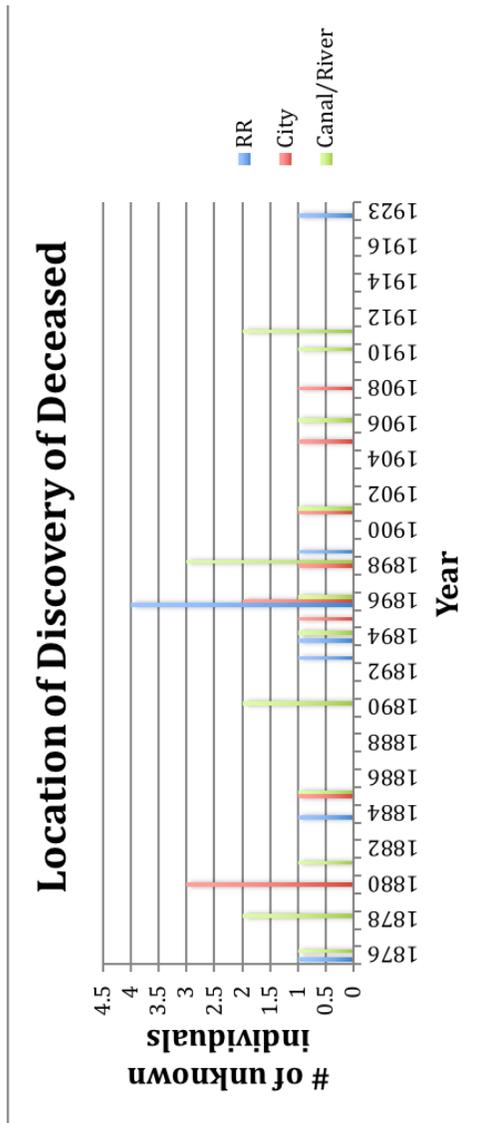
IDENTIFICATION	TOTAL # (UNSPECIFIED)	CH&D RAILROAD	CANAL/RIVER	CITY
MALE	28	9	4	15
FEMALE	1	--	--	1
INFANT/FETUS/CHILD	51	--	12	39
UNRECORDED SEX OR AGE	3	2	--	1

Table 1: Location of discovery, gender, and age of unidentified

The bar graph below is a depiction of the death rates by year of our population. Trends vary between slightly between the male and infant categories. Due to the minimal sample size of both female and unknown



gender individuals, trends could not be established over time for these categories. First let us examine the death rates of Woodland’s unknown men. Four years (1880, 1896, 1898, 1913) represent four spikes in the discovery of unidentifiable dead. The two highest spikes occur at the turn of the century. In contrast to male death rates infant mortality trends occur in two gradual increases followed by steady decline. Two peaks occur in 1895 and 1911.



The second graph reveals trends in location of discovery through time. The location of discovery was not provided for any individuals after 1923, as such this graph ends at 1923 rather than extending to 1940. The most frequently recorded location of death was in the city, then the canals or river, and lastly the railroad. Each of these locations spiked at differing times. 1880 experienced the highest number of deceased located in the city. Railroad deaths in this sample rose highest in 1896. Canal deaths spiked in 1898. By identifying these trends through time our research was better able to understand possible cultural influences on the status of and attitude toward Woodland's unidentified dead.

Newspapers reported high incidences of people being killed by railroads in Dayton, as is reflected in the internment record descriptions. Microfilm also revealed the dangers of driving on bridges in Dayton with a number of horse and carriage crashes resulting in people falling into the river and drowning. Literature review showed historical trends of infanticide and abortion. Unlike many examples found in literature review which showed unknown individuals and infants buried in mass graves, each of the burials at Woodland was a single occupant grave. The cemetery records helped identify that 77 of the 83 unidentified individuals were buried in the City Lot, or lot 126. Not a single headstone marked the burials of unknown individuals.

Historic Context

Dayton's first white settlers appeared in the spring of 1796; they had traveled north on the Great Miami River from Cincinnati. Dayton continued to grow in population with Ohio's statehood being established in 1803. Construction of the Dayton-Cincinnati Canal in 1827, opened the city up to new opportunities in commerce.⁶ Dayton was also home to numerous

⁶ Robert W. Steele, *An Outline of the History of Dayton, Ohio, 1796-1896* (Dayton, OH: W. J. Shuey, 1896).

inventors, including the Wright brothers. The first mechanical cash register, leaded gasoline, and LCD screen were all invented in Dayton. Paul Lawrence Dunbar, the influential poet also lived in Dayton during the turn of the century.⁷ Over Easter holiday 1913 the Great Dayton Flood devastated the city of Dayton leaving over three-hundred dead and thousands without homes. This flood spurred much innovation in the science of hydraulics.⁸ Dayton's status as an industrial powerhouse made it a central location in the war effort on the home front, producing tanks, planes, and soldiers.⁹

Discussion

This research speaks to the status, identity, and social relationships of the unidentified individuals interred at Woodland Cemetery. We demonstrate ways in which the community of Dayton chose to support, or not support such individuals in both antemortem and postmortem contexts. First let us examine the status of these individuals. What can be said about their perceived socioeconomic status after death? Does this research point to the possible socioeconomic status of the interred in life? Woodland Cemetery occupies the highest point in all of Dayton; the terrain of the cemetery is hilly. The City Lot is located in one of the lowest points of the cemetery and was used for individuals of low socioeconomic status who could not afford the more opulent burials on the cemetery hilltops. However, if this lot was for low cost burials who was paying for the burials of unclaimed individuals? These social outcasts had no one to claim their body and obviously could not pay for themselves. Examination of a receipt ledger resulted in 7 entries from 1876 to 1881, which correlated with a segment of the internment records.¹⁰ The City Infirmary and the City of

⁷ "Innovators," Ohio Humanities Council, <http://daytoninnovationlegacy.org>.

⁸ Trudy E. Bell. *The Great Dayton Flood of 1913*. (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Pub., 2008).

⁹ "World War I Exhibit." Dayton History. <https://www.daytonhistory.org/visit/things-to-see-do/world-war-i-exhibit/>.

¹⁰ Record of Payments, 1874-1883, volume located in box 60, file 2. Special Collections and Archives, Wright State University Libraries.

Dayton paid for all 7 burials of unknown individuals found in the receipt ledger. The average cost of a burial in the City Lot at this time was \$4.00 for the burial of an adult, and \$1.00 to \$1.50 for the burial of a child or infant. At least in death these people were regarded as low status by the city who paid for their burials and by patrons of the cemetery who pass by these unmarked graves to this day with little or no regard. Despite their burial in Woodland, these graves are only identifiable through the historic paper trail. The importance of this research resides in the potential to tell the stories of these individuals who are long gone, with no one to visit their graves. Daytonians felt that a proper burial or “good death” was important for these individuals demonstrating a form of social responsibility. Did this responsibility also apply to unclaimed individuals before their death? What can be said about the lives of these individuals, before their mysterious demises?

The first step to understanding the lives of unknown individuals is identifying the possible circumstances of their deaths. As stated above, infants and children constituted the largest group found in our sample. This research proposes three possible explanations for the high proportion of infant deaths: susceptibility to disease, stillbirth or miscarriage, and unwanted pregnancies. The relatively large number of unknown infants buried in Woodland Cemetery hints at possible infanticidal practices in Dayton. It is probable that these children came from low socioeconomic homes and may have been stillborn, died from disease, poor sanitation, or malnutrition; and parents decided to dispose of the body or did not have enough money for a proper burial. However, a portion of the deceased infants were found in the river or canal, one was found in a hydraulic main, and another near the county fairgrounds. Though it is difficult to say for certain what circumstances surrounded infant deaths represented in Woodland Cemetery interment records, the fact that these infants were never claimed by any family and buried simply as “unknown infant” implies that their deaths were intentional, and if the death was not intentional the

neglect or disposal of remains was. Notably the term "foetus" is used twice, implying that the child found was not carried to full term, which begs the question: where these "foetuses" the products of illegal or home abortions? Leslie Reagan shows that despite its criminal status abortion as an open secret, it was understood that unwanted pregnancies resulted in the woman getting an abortion and the man paying for it.¹¹ Abortions were performed by doctors, but for a fee. Low socio-economic status individuals would not be able to afford such an abortion. It is also possible that the mothers were simply hiding miscarriages?¹² One child was described as coming from the Children's House on Riegold St. It may be possible that there were institutional factors involved in the deaths of this child and possibly others.

Similar patterns of infant death existed concurrently in New York in the Five Points District, a location known for prostitution.¹³ Infant remains were excavated in the privies of known brothels. Though we did not investigate the intersection of prostitution with our sample, prostitution was historically present in Dayton. A pop-history article even discusses the "Queen of Dayton's red-light district" who is buried at Woodland Cemetery.¹⁴ Infanticide serves as a means of determining the economic environment for women, as well as their social status. When women are forced to work for wages that are not livable, infanticide becomes an "only option" for a starving mother. Or maybe a child potentially means losing a job in an unstable economic environment? This raises the question of how women were treated in Dayton, Ohio during the late 19th, and early 20th centuries.

Though only one woman was represented in the sample, it can be safely assumed that all unknown children listed in the interment records had

¹¹ Leslie Jean Reagan. *When Abortion Was a Crime: The Legal and Medical Regulation of Abortion, Chicago, 1880-1973* (Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms, 1992).

¹² Aeron Hunt. 2006. "Calculations and Concealments: Infanticide in Mid-Nineteenth Century Britain." *Victorian Literature and Culture* 34 (1). Cambridge University Press: 71-94.

¹³ Thomas A. Crist, "Babies in the Privy : Prostitution , Infanticide , and Abortion in New York City's Five Points District," *Historical Archaeology* 39 (2005): 19-46.

¹⁴ Amelia Robinson, "What You Need to Know about the Queen of Dayton's Red Light...", accessed October 29, 2017, <http://www.dayton.com/what-to-love/dayton-red-light-district/>.

mothers. These children could have died as the result of accident, miscarriage, abortion, or possibly infanticide. While it may be tempting to paint these women as bad mothers, due to the nature of the infants' deaths; literature review shows that the years between 1876 and 1944 were difficult for women. At this time, American gynecological practice was only in its infancy, a field dominated by men. The turn of the 20th century saw the demonization of birth control and abortion by "professional" medicine and religious organizations, and the push for legislation on the matter began in force. Abortion occupied a grey legal area before this push and home abortion was not unheard of. Women were held solely responsible for the way their children turned out, and many women chose not to bare this burden stipulated by cultural standards. In fact, in 1898 the Michigan Board of Health estimated one of every three pregnancies ended in abortion in their *Report of the Suffolk District Medical Society on Criminal Abortion and Ordered*.¹⁵

Following infants and children, unidentified men accounted for 34 percent of our sample population. Though the largest portion of these men were found in an unspecified location, 4 men were found in the river or canal, and 9 were found near the railroad. The Cincinnati, Hamilton, & Dayton Railroad (CH&D) was specifically listed in the interment records and several news accounts from the period reported deaths being caused by this railroad. The Woodland interment records listed 9 unknown males killed by the "CH&D" or "on railroad". No information was given on how they were killed only where they were found. Microfilm of Dayton Daily News and Dayton Weekly Paper revealed articles about "tramps" traveling the rails, and walking the tracks. These "tramps" were mainly Civil War veterans that kept to the rails as a form of transportation.¹⁶ This could help

¹⁵ Carroll Smith-Rosenberg and Charles Rosenberg, "The Female Animal: Medical and Biological Views of Woman and Her Role in Nineteenth-Century America." *Source: The Journal of American History* 60 (1973): 332-56.

¹⁶ Frank Tobias Higbie. *Indispensable Outcasts: Hobo Workers and Community in the American Midwest* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003).

explain their demise, and the prevalence of unknown individuals being found dead on the tracks, or in box-cars during this period. Illegal rail travel may have increased due to an economic downturn at the time which took place in 1873, leading to the increase of tramps as described in *Voices Education*.¹⁷ If men were traveling the rails in Dayton at this time it is feasible that some of these men died from accidents, being hit by trains, or dying unexpectedly in a rail car. It is likely that these transient men would not have been known to the people of Dayton, offering one possible explanation as to why they were not identified after their deaths.

In addition to railways, bridges and canals also played an important role throughout the Midwest. 4 men and 12 infants were listed in the internment records as being found in the canals or rivers of Dayton. Today the use of bridges and canals is more regulated and the overall infrastructure and architecture of Dayton is much safer than it was historically. During this time canals and rivers regularly flooded, and bridges were poorly structured, narrow deathtraps on which many people lost their lives. Several accounts from historical newspapers describe carriages and buggies going over the sides of bridges and dumping their passengers overboard, or of individuals being run off the road or falling into the canal. Though these accounts offer some explanations of the circumstances surrounding the death of individuals found in canals and rivers, it does not explain why these people were not identified by family or acquaintances after they had been recovered. The Great Dayton Flood took place between March 21st and 26th of 1913. This event is represented in the internment records by 5 individuals, buried within a week of the event. These unidentified individuals were the first to be followed by descriptions of their physical attributes; this was also the first mention of race. These descriptions were likely added to help identify the deceased in the wake of the chaos caused by the flood, but for unknown reasons no one came to claim them and they remained unidentified.

¹⁷ Charles Baker. “Veterans, Tramps, & the Economic Crisis of 1873 | *Voices Education Project*,” accessed October 29, <http://voiceseducation.org/node/208>.

Beyond the drive to satisfy a dark curiosity, why is this research important to our understanding of the Victorian Mid-West? Despite being unclaimed and unidentified by the people of Dayton, archival research of these individuals helped paint a more complete picture of their status, identity, and social relationships. This research speaks to community attitudes toward such individuals in both antimortem and postmortem contexts. Determining the socioeconomic status of the children and mothers would require further archival probing, but contextual research shows that reproductive rights were hotly contested then as they are now. The cultural climate at the time was a hostile environment to women of all socioeconomic statuses. In life, the status of men reflected in the internment records is likewise illusive; with the only hint being extracted from men who had been killed by the railroads. A life on the rails would explain their unknown status in death, and point to the low socioeconomic status associated with transient lifestyles. These deaths can also indicate possible criminal activity in Victorian Dayton, and reveal wider trends of accidental death due to poor infrastructure. The personal relationships of these individuals in life remain unknowable, but as they were unclaimed in death these relationships may have been strained or distant. The unknown burials of Woodland Cemetery reflect a sense of social obligation to the dead. These burials provided the departed dignity, but no status.

Conclusions

Infants, and by proxy mothers, and migrants interred at this time were treated in a way that reflected the importance of a proper burial for all people in Dayton during the late 19th and 20th centuries. This trend also fulfills Woodlands goal of being a nondenominational cemetery for all. While these unknown individuals were given burials, they were buried in unmarked graves in sections of the cemetery that are now all but forgotten. Daytonians felt a social obligation to these individuals in death that was likely not felt

for those same individuals in life. Ironically, the unidentified dead were memorialized in the bureaucracy and paperwork of Dayton despite their lack of a physical memorial in the form of a headstone. Nationally women were renegotiating their societal roles, and subverting the strict Victorian standards. America was dealing with the repercussions of the Civil War, and would participate in both World Wars in the time covered by the Woodland interment records. While this research examined the status and gender of Woodland’s unknown interments, future research might look at the intersection of race within this group. The possible connection between prostitution in Dayton and infanticide during the turn of the century also warrants closer investigation, as does the legal history of both prostitution and abortion in this area. Research on the Riegold St. Children’s Home may turn up fruitful evidence of the influence of institutions on the child burials. Lastly bioarchaeological investigation of the City Lot could reveal more information about the interred. Nondestructive geophysical survey methods such as ground-penetrating radar and magnetometer survey of the City Lot could reveal buried headstones and the layout of graves without disturbing the ground. Ground-penetrating radar uses radar pulses which penetrate the ground, when the radar encounters a buried object, changes in material properties, or cracks, the radar is reflected, refracted, or scattered back to the surface and measured. This method is used to digitally map the subsurface of the research area. Magnetometer survey can be similarly used to measure variation in the earth’s magnetic field, materials buried below the surface will cause disturbances in the earth’s magnetic field which can then be digitally mapped. Destructive archaeological methods should be carefully considered in mortuary contexts as they involve the excavation of the grave and skeletal remains. If appropriate to the circumstances, archaeological excavation of skeletal remains can reveal marks of trauma and disease left on bone. Diseases such as Paget’s disease, osteoporosis, arthritis, and bone tumors leave distinct marks on the bones which can be seen on skeletal remains. Fractures to bone if healed can reveal various injuries suffered by

the individual in life. Unhealed bone fractures or perimortem injury could point toward a cause of death in these individuals.

The low social status of these individuals made a “good death” impossible. Laderman observes the low status of such burials; these people relied on charity in both life and death.¹⁸ These unknown people passed into the afterlife without ceremony and joined the silent ranks of the poor and departed before them. Though these individuals are gone and unidentified, careful investigation shows they are not entirely forgotten.

¹⁸ Gary Laderman, *The Sacred Remains: American Attitudes toward Death, 1799-1883*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).

**“Woe to those who look backward into the ever vanishing past!”
Bolshevik Women in Russia and the Soviet Union, 1900-1924**

By Katy Evans

In late 1904, Rozaliia Zemliachka, a Jewish revolutionary from Ukraine, wrote a letter to Vladimir Lenin from the St. Petersburg branch of the Social Democrats, proclaiming that morale and the day-to-day affairs of the branch had drastically improved since and “because ‘Absolute’ had been released from prison.”¹ Absolute, the *nom de guerre* bestowed upon Elena Stasova, was but one of many *Bolshevichki* (female Bolsheviks) putting her talents to use for the good of the socialist cause in early twentieth-century Russia. Earning her pseudonym from her steadfast devotion to the cause, Stasova, like many of her comrades, championed both human and women’s liberation.

It is women such as Stasova that drew scholars’ attention amid second-wave feminism. Their passion for liberation and dedication to the betterment of human life inspired an expansive historiography that centers upon a previously ignored demographic. Scholars began to examine the women who helped bring such a monumental social shift to fruition, studying legal documents, memoirs, and letters composed by and about women during the prerevolutionary, revolutionary, and Soviet periods of Russian history. The women’s collective identity has been broken down into its more basic components so that scholars might analyze the women’s social origins, motivations for and methods of mobilizing, and roles played within the larger scheme of revolution. Relatively untouched within the historiography is an examination of these women’s actions in relation to the larger trends of human behavior across time.² Despite the fact that this paper only covers a twenty-four-year period, the trends demonstrated by the research are at work within much longer time spans as framed by Big History.

¹ Barbara Evans Clements, *Bolshevik Women* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 71.

² Nancy Shields Kollman discusses the interaction of kinship ties, one component of Deep History, in the Russian imperial period in her monograph *Kinship and Politics: The Making of the Muscovite Political System, 1345-1547* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987).

The field of Big History makes a simple argument: that, on large timescales, “some underlying principles of change may be universal;” it studies “the fragile ordered patterns that appear at all scales, and the ways in which they change.”³ These consistent underlying patterns govern the ways in which humans interact with one another and allow historians to make comparisons between centers of human civilizations across geographic regions and time. In considering “processes [that] shaped long-term patterns of collective learning and innovation,” judgments can be made as to how and why certain phenomena occurred and the ways in which they both came about and effected humankind.⁴

One of the most important factors within the study of the large-scale interactions between humans is the concept of collective learning, especially within established communities and civilizations, such as the one upon which this paper concentrates. Networks of exchange provide the medium through which collective learning takes place but are not necessarily restricted to transfers of information. As they are extensive within agricultural communities, such as Russia at the turn of the twentieth century, networks of exchange “shape processes of collective learning on the largest scales and determine the pace and the geography of innovation over long periods.”⁵ Other factors must be considered when looking into such expansive regions as an entire state, or in this case, empire. Human diversity must play a role in the evaluation of the Russian Empire. As can be seen within the intelligentsia—those members of the upper classes dedicated to improving society through ideological change—at work within the empire, “diversity itself was a powerful motor of collective learning, for it increased the ecological, technological, and organizational possibilities available to different communities, as well as the potential synergies of combining these technologies in new ways.”⁶ Diversity, especially of economic standing, gave the idealists of early twentieth century Russia the

³ David Christian, *Maps of Time: An Introduction to Big History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 7.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 283.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 290.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 284.

spark they needed to affect change within their society. They noticed “a clear gap in status, wealth, lifeways, and habits of thought between the mass of primary producers [the former serfs] and the tribute takers [the upper echelons of Russian society] who stood above them.”⁷ The inequality demanded by this type of exchange became the driving impetus of social revolution, as the students of radical ideology believed they could enact change.

Within socialist ideology, however, the female activists found little—if any—sympathy for their own plight. Many male socialists placed little stock in the betterment of women’s everyday lives, even if that meant the improvement of society on the whole. The idea of a separate women’s movement, focused upon the issues of a segment of the population, seemed contradictory to the ideology the socialists perpetuated. Theoretically, if the socialists were to overthrow the oppressive patriarchy, each segment of the population would find its problems resolved without having to place one group’s needs above another’s. The grievance many women found with this approach lies with the fact that the implementation of socialism was not ridding them of oppression but rather altering the identity of the oppressor. Utilizing Big Historical theory on networks, this paper aims to show how *Bolshevichki* simultaneously adapted and developed the framework of revolutionary change into their own high functioning network advocating women’s liberation within the socialist society they were working to implement; despite its revolutionary context, the movement itself was not necessarily the crucial turning point it is traditionally viewed as, since women carried on the same methods of networking and kinship before and after the uprising.

The Historical Context of the Russian Women’s Movement

The Russian Revolution

Pivotal point in Russian women’s history or not, the Russian Revolution remains an important point in the country’s history and provides context for the

⁷ Christian, *Maps of Time*, 287.

research at hand. Dissatisfied with the way Tsar Nicholas II ran the country, leftist factions began to take action against the government. Abysmal living conditions drove the lower classes to join the rebellion, which culminated in strikes and riots in February 1917. The tsar's power weakened considerably as the army refused to carry out orders to suppress rioters and strikers; the loss of power gave rise to the Provisional Government, which ruled until the October Revolution. Following the seizure of the Winter Palace, the Bolsheviks controlled the government and propagated socialist policies based upon Vladimir Lenin's interpretations of the writings of Karl Marx. A civil war ensued for five years with the "red" Bolshevik forces struggling against the "white" monarchist opposition, which rejected the Leninist-Marxist ideals of the Bolsheviks. It was this atmosphere of upheaval that allowed women to take greater roles within public life.

Women's Participation in Social Movements

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, following the end of the Crimean War and the emancipation of the serfs by Tsar Alexander II, a women's movement developed among members of the intelligentsia. This movement initially concentrated upon the availability of education coupled with philanthropy. Many advocating for better systems of education and access to the existing institutions of higher education argued that improving women's education would allow them to be more adept mothers or philanthropists, who could help out their less fortunate counterparts in the inner cities or countryside. One of the branches of this argument developed into making women more skilled and productive members of society, a factor that was crucial to the Social Democrats' Marxist ideology.

Key to the intelligentsia's movement from their close-knit circles into the surrounding world was the "sense of responsibility to the dark people, the peasant masses, and [they were] frustrated by their real cultural alienation from

these masses.”⁸ Many felt that the old culture, wherein the members of the upper classes had owned other humans through the practice of serfdom, had corrupted society. As members of the more privileged echelons of Russian society, the young and idealistic intelligentsia felt the need to commit themselves to a “moral regeneration, the self-formation of ‘new men’ and ‘new women’ who could take on the task of overthrowing the old evils.”⁹ Those idealists that took this calling to heart concentrated their efforts on educating themselves as best they could to go into rural villages and attempt to better the lives of those living there. Their philanthropic deeds served a civic as well as penitent role, as many took lower positions than would traditionally be dictated by their social standing to “expiate the guilt of privileged birth and grant entry into the homes and hearts of the common people,” a difficult task at times. The peasants often distrusted members of the intelligentsia and some of those members, such as the twenty-four-year-old Vera Figner, had never interacted with peasants before their sojourn into the countryside; others, like Alexandra Kollontai, had experienced the hardships in passing and at a distance.¹⁰

Idealistic women of the intelligentsia quickly found that their opportunities for education were limited in the nineteenth century, making their path to philanthropy in the countryside all the more difficult.¹¹ The *gimnaziia* (gymnasium) and *pro-gimnaziia* (pro-gymnasium), equivalents to secondary education, were not available until 1858, and women were not legally permitted to audit higher education courses until 1859. As they were only allowed to audit

⁸ Robert H. McNeal, “Women in the Russian Radical Movement,” *Journal of Social History* 5, no. 2 (1971-2): 146.

⁹ McNeal, “Women in the Russian Radical Movement,” 147-8.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 153. Vera Figner, *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*, trans. Camilla Chapin and G.A. Davidson, ed. George R. Noyes and Alexander Kaun (New York: International Publishers Co., 1927), 53; Alexandra Kollontai, *The Autobiography of a Sexually Emancipated Woman*, trans. Salvator Attanasio, ed. Iring Fetscher (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971), 11. Laurie Manchester notes that wives and daughters of clergymen were prime agents for bridging the gap between rural and urban women as they had integrated themselves among women of the peasant class, becoming a part of their fictive kin groups; Laurie Manchester, “Gender and Social Estate as National Identity: The Wives and Daughters of Orthodox Clergymen as Civilizing Agents in Imperial Russia,” *The Journal of Modern History* 83, no. 1 (2011): 48-77.

¹¹ For more on women’s education before the revolution, see Sophie Satina, *Education of Women in Pre-Revolutionary Russia*, trans. Alexandra F. Poustchine (New York, 1966).

the classes rather than receive credit or degrees, women often took to advocating for their full admission to institutions of higher education alongside their male comrades. These demonstrations led to their expulsion from the universities and their emigration to Zurich, where women were welcomed into universities and allowed to study what they pleased.¹² It was in these Swiss schools that the students, both male and female, began to accept and deliberate upon radical ideals and their applications in the political sphere.¹³

Arguably one of the most well-known women to journey to the University of Zurich, Vera Figner joined her future comrades in Switzerland, armed with a similar passion for knowledge. Figner intended to study medicine, believing that taking up the role of a doctor would be the best way to do her part in peasant villages. Devoted to her studies, she spent little time engaged with the more radical student elements in Zurich. As time progressed, however, she grew dissatisfied with the aims of the study circles with which she was involved and joined the more radical student organization that her sister had become a part of. In her memoirs, Figner recalls being five or six months away from obtaining her degree when she decided to return to Russia in order to give herself “unreservedly,” like her comrades who had done as much “with all their souls.”¹⁴ She left Zurich without completing her doctoral thesis, certain that she “already possessed the knowledge necessary for a physician, lacking only the official stamp of that calling.”¹⁵ Her time at the university united her with scores of other youthful idealists in their attempts to realize “a goal so exalted that all sacrifices seemed insignificant before it.”¹⁶ By 1876, Figner had been certified

¹² Linda Harriet Edmondson, *Feminism in Russia, 1900-1917* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1984), 16.

¹³ The Russian government attempted to put a stop to the radicalization of the country’s youths and opened the Vladimir Courses in 1869 at the university in St Petersburg and the Bestuzhev Courses in Moscow in 1872. The Vladimir Courses were open to the public, while the Bestuzhev Courses were specifically designed for women. This expansion of education allowed the Russian government to force its students home as it delivered an ultimatum which stated that any female students studying abroad would forfeit education and employment in Russia. For more explanation, see Edmondson, *Feminism in Russia, 1900-1917*, 17-9.

¹⁴ Vera Figner, *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*, 45.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 45-6.

as both an assistant physician and midwife in Russia and devoted her time to helping peasants in rural villages.

It was from this contingent of highly educated and idealistic youths that many revolutionaries and radicals, such as Vera Figner, sprang. As Barbara Evans Clements notes in her monograph *Bolshevik Women*, a large portion of the later Bolshevichki included within her sampling cited a fellow student as the instigator of their revolutionary sentiments. Women engaged in the early Social Democratic party, struggling for both their own emancipation and the liberation of the Russian people as a whole, often took their time to study Marxism and fully comprehend the ideology of the party they were seeking to join before actually becoming members. This period of *khruzhki samoobrazovaniia* (self-education) often meant that the women would continue with their prerevolutionary jobs until they felt informed enough to become revolutionaries.¹⁷ Future revolutionary women formed student circles to discuss Marx and Engels along with other socialist writers. A few *Bolshevichki* of the younger generation, that is those who joined during the civil war rather than prior to the 1917 revolution, were guided into the party without much previous study, like Klavdiia Kirsanova, a middle-class girl from Perm, who noted that her reasoning for joining the Social Democrats was due to two factors: that one of her friends had been a member of the party for some time and because it was “for the workers, [and] it wants to free them slowly, without killing.”¹⁸ Their social connections facilitated their entry into the coalition, allowing them to become a part of the collective identity established by those already members. The Old Bolsheviks and Old *Bolshevichki* without immediate connections to existing members of the party relied solely upon their education and

¹⁷ Clements, *Bolshevik Women*, 48-9. Some women, like Alexandra Artiuknina and Klavdiia Nikolaeva, remained in their working-class jobs until they felt ready to join the party; Konkordiia Samoilova, like many of her fellow revolutionaries, remained in school; Inessa Armand and Evgeniia Bosh continued charity work with prostitutes and working men, respectively; Elena Stasova, Alexandra Kollontai, Vera and Liudmila Menzhinskaia, Praskovia Kudelli, and Nadezhda Krupskaia all worked to educate the poor, many of them in St Petersburg.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 50.

convictions, carefully molding themselves into staunch believers in the rhetoric of their chosen party.

As the educational system of Russia was based upon the design of Count Dmitrii Andreevich Tolstoy, the Minister of National Enlightenment, it left something to be desired, especially for young girls.¹⁹ The lack of a more balanced education available to girls drove them to form study circles with their comrades in order to further their education beyond what had been offered to them in public schools or even in home tutoring. They created for themselves the very institutions that would further their ambitions to better their own lives and that of those around them. The students concentrated on the teachings of simplicity and moral betterment as they joined together in intellectual pursuits.²⁰ Following the example of so many other young idealists, the endeavors of *khruzhki samoobrazovaniia* (circles of self-education) included readings designed to fully educate themselves to dedicate their lives to helping the peasants in the countryside and assuaging any guilt from being born into privilege.²¹

Khruzhki samoobrazovaniia produced scores of young individuals that were zealous about their vocation to aid those less fortunate. Young women within the Social Democratic party pushed themselves across new boundaries to display their dedication to their cause and collective group. Cecilia Bobrovskaia, a Jewish girl who emigrated to Warsaw for an education and chance at enlightenment, recollected in her 1902 memoirs that she was constantly on the verge of starvation upon returning home, where she joined the

¹⁹ Barbara T. Norton, "The Making of a Female Marxist: E.D. Kuskova's Conversion to Russian Social Democracy," *International Review of Social History* 34 (1989): 230. The majority of the education available for young girls in Russia was centered around the preparation of young girls for their future roles as wives and mothers. Clements, *A History of Women in Russia*, 117. Large portions of the Russian population viewed *institutka* (girls who attended government-run "high school" institutions) as a joke in Russian society, a "veritable synonym for the light-headed and ultra-naïve female." Richard Stites, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Russia: Feminism, Nihilism, and Bolshevism, 1860-1930* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1978), 5.

²⁰ Nadezhda Krupskaiia, "Autobiography" in *In the Shadow of Revolution: Life Stories of Russian Women from 1917 to the Second World War*, ed. Sheila Fitzpatrick and Yuri Slezkine (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 111.

²¹ Norton, "The Making of a Female Marxist," 234.

local party in Kharkov (in Ukraine). She notes that on some days, because she did not have regular employment, she would consume nothing more than a drink of water but remarked that she “would rather die than give up Party work and daily intercourse with comrades” in order to find a job.²² Many idealists such as Bobrovskaia were forced to choose between remaining a steadfast member of the party and finding a paid job with which they could support themselves. While some took jobs as educators or physicians, several revolutionaries identified their occupation in prerevolutionary years as ‘revolutionary,’ fully committing themselves to the cause.²³

Many who became devoted revolutionaries such as Bobrovskaia were forced out of their natal coalitions—in regards to both families and social classes—due to differences in ideology; they made new, quasi-family ties with their fellow revolutionaries, a group which could be broadened beyond those that shared identical political views to include Mensheviks, social revolutionaries, or any other sympathetic soul in the case of Bolsheviks. Their differences aided their process of forming new bonds rather than limiting them, as each new person within the group brought a unique desire to further the socialist cause. In his *Structures of Elementary Kinship*, Claude Lévi-Strauss argues that bringing in members from outside the community is the surest way to achieve the greatest degree of cohesion among members.²⁴ Those who had been expelled from their families for continuing along the revolutionary path desperately sought a new coalition to which they could belong, one that would serve as a foster family. Revolutionaries who found themselves in a similar situation, being forced from their parents’ or spouse’s house, were able to easily identify with one another, giving them a firm foundation for collective identity and solidarity. As Clements notes, staying “within the circle of comrades can then become as important as the cause for which the group is fighting.”²⁵ The network which the

²² Tsetsiliia (Cecilia) Samoilovna Zelikson-Bobrovskaia, *Twenty Years in Underground Russia: Memoirs of a Rank-and-File Bolshevik* (New York: International Publishers, 1934), 34.

²³ See Clements, *Bolshevik Women*, 44, table 6 for more information.

²⁴ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Les Structures Élémentaires de la Parenté* (Paris: Mouton and Co., 1967), 550.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 82.

revolutionaries built for themselves became vital; it provided them with social connections through which they could find shelter, provisions, intellectual companions, and validation for their radical political views. As women, the members of these revolutionary circles could create the language through which the sense of belonging was conveyed, thus giving them a more solid stake in maintaining solidarity and furthering the aims of the group as a whole.²⁶

One such dedicated individual to the cause, Alexandra Kollontai, left behind her husband and young son in order to study politics and economics in Zurich alongside the other members of the Russian intelligentsia. Because of this, she paid special attention to issues of maternity and child welfare, becoming the leading proponent of socialized childrearing; Kollontai lamented the lack of attention paid to women's issues by the Bolsheviks following the massacre of Bloody Sunday²⁷ in her 1920 memoirs, commenting that in the midst of her time as a Social Democrat, she "realized that in Russia little had yet been done to draw women workers into the liberation struggle."²⁸ Echoing the beliefs of the radicals a generation before her, she defended the visibility of the woman question, arguing that it was a problem that must be solved in conjunction with the overall human question. Kollontai declared in 1909 that the Social

²⁶ Lévi-Strauss, *Les Structures Élémentaires de la Parenté*, 569.

²⁷ The Bloody Sunday massacre took place on January 9, 1905 outside the royal palace in St. Petersburg. A large crowd of workers and their families gathered in the square outside the Winter Palace, driven to demonstration by poor working conditions; they insisted upon presenting a petition to Tsar Nicholas II, which contained their demands for improved facilities, wages, and hours. Guards outside the palace notified the crowd of the absence of the tsar and his family and refused to pass along the petition. Despite the peaceful nature of the gathering—where many held religious icons or sang hymns—and the non-revolutionary intentions of the workers, the soldiers outside the palace took the workers' refusal to disperse as a sign of belligerent rebellion, and officers began ordering the soldiers to fire into the crowd at will. The massacre triggered waves of strikes and became a revolutionary tool, as the slaughtered workers evolved into martyrs to the socialist cause.

²⁸ Alexandra Kollontai, *The Autobiography of a Sexually Emancipated Communist Woman*, 13 n. 41. The editor has chosen to include the parts of the autobiography that were crossed out by the author herself, presenting both the finalized and original text; in this instance, Kollontai originally placed the onus of attending to women's issues on the Bolsheviks, lamenting "how little our Party concerned itself with the fate of the working class and how meager was its interest in women's liberation." The author's self-editing reflects the overall tendency within the autobiography to take the focus off one specific group and place it upon the whole of Russia, though, curiously enough, this is one of the few instances where Kollontai does not replace her personal pronouns with collective pronouns to indicate that the Bolsheviks did something as a cohesive whole.

Democratic party “is not only the defender of women in terms of its theoretical positions but always and everywhere adheres to the principle of women’s equality.”²⁹ The party would best aid women and promote their equality, in Kollontai’s opinion, by “creating communalized social services—cafeterias, childcare centers, public laundries—that would liberate them from domestic labor and allow them to enter productive work on an equal basis with men.”³⁰ Another of her aims for women, the discarding of traditional marriage, earned Kollontai scorn from her revolutionary peers. She proclaimed—and herself practiced—the concept of free love among the members of the new Russian socialist society, arguing that should the bonds of formal marriage be done away with, society could truly claim to be one united and equal whole. In socializing the aspects of everyday life that separated women from men, tethering them to their households and children, the Social Democrats might have succeeded in truly equalizing society.

Activists within the Social Democratic party, arguing that women should be active and equal participants within the government, faced a serious challenge. Russia’s population was incredibly diverse, both in terms of ethnicity and economic status. Many within the party began with the group that first attracted so many of the first generation of idealists: the working class. This class stood to gain the most from overthrowing the old regime that had oppressed them and trapped them within the confines of capitalism, barely making a living. The issue, they found, was getting the working-class people—and the peasants—to accept the advice and help of the more affluent members of their society.

“The woman worker will not come to us...”³¹

In 1904, Dora Lazurkina, a teacher from St. Petersburg and member of the Social Democrats working amongst the working class, commented, “The

²⁹ Alexandra Kollontai, “The Social Basis of the Woman Question” in *Selected Writings of Alexandra Kollontai*, ed. Alix Holt (Toronto: George J. McLeod Limited, 1977), 58-9.

³⁰ Thomas G. Schrand, “Socialism in One Gender: Masculine Values in the Stalin Revolution” in *Russian Masculinities in History and Culture*, ed. Barbara Evans Clements, Rebecca Friedman, and Dan Healey (Houndmills, UK: Palgrave, 2002), 195.

³¹ Clements, *Bolshevik Women*, 105

workers' wives greet us coldly; at times they declare openly that they don't like our visits. And this is understandable, for we draw their husbands into party work and the results are almost always prison or exile."³² Unlike Lazurkina, most Bolshevichki grew frustrated with the working-class women and their distrust towards revolutionaries, writing them off as "backwards" and dismissing the idea of bringing the women into the party; some turned their attentions to the working-class men and focused their efforts on educating them, specifically in party rhetoric.³³ Kollontai made a call to action to the working-class women, though much later during her time as People's Commissariat of Social Welfare, in "From the Commissariat of Social Welfare" in 1918. Within the address, she declares, "The new Soviet Russia calls all you working women, you working mothers with your sensitive hearts, you bold builders of a new social life, you teachers of the new attitudes, you children's doctors and midwives to devote your minds and emotions to building the great edifice that will provide social protection for future generations."³⁴ Identifying the working women with the collective identity the Social Democrats, and later Bolsheviks, had been working to build allowed Kollontai to both ingratiate herself with the working class and draw them in to the collective that promised them drastic changes in their everyday lives.

Peasant women, too, constituted a challenge for Bolshevichki attempting to unify women across Russia as many of them were firmly outside the industrializing centers and rooted in their traditional customs. The lack of continuous exposure to revolutionary ideas made it much more difficult to establish and maintain any traces of a new collective identity. Many remained devoutly religious and left politics to their menfolk, conscious of the facts that the political sphere was typically male and that women were largely illiterate. Those who were literate preferred to read from *The Lives of the Saints* or the

³² Clements, *Bolshevik Women*, 101.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Alexandra Kollontai, "From the Commissariat of Social Welfare," in *Selected Writings of Alexandra Kollontai*, ed. Alix Holt ((Toronto: George J. McLeod Limited, 1977), 140.

Bible itself.³⁵ These peasant women resisted the Bolsheviks’ atheism and feared that the revolutionaries would not only get their husbands sent to jail or into exile, but that “their husbands who [now] ate meat on fast days and ceased going to church were damned.”³⁶ The threat against their *byt’* (daily life) occasionally drove peasant women to rebel through acts of solidarity amongst themselves. They rose up against high prices of food and goods, army recruiters, and the collectivization of farms under the supervision of the communists.³⁷ Numbering at an estimated 64 million as of 1928, peasant women provided a large, yet-unreached demographic to whom the activists of the intelligentsia could devote their time and energies.³⁸

“...so we will go to her.”³⁹

Organizations

As the formal branch of women’s work within the Party, the Zhenotdel, the *zhenskii otdel* or women’s department, was responsible for recruiting and training *zhenskii aktiv* (active women) to become a part of the larger party structure and to alter the *byt’* for both men and women.⁴⁰ Initially, the

³⁵ Beatrice Farnsworth, “Village Women Experience the Revolution,” in *Bolshevik Culture: Experiment and Order in the Russian Revolution*, ed. Abbott Gleason, Peter Kenez, and Richard Stites (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1985), 239.

³⁶ Farnsworth, “Village Women Experience the Revolution,” 240.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 241. In regards to the uprisings of peasant women, the Communists encountered a series of rebellions in the countryside led by peasant women in 1929. The *bab’i bunty* (woman’s riots) were “a spontaneous, forceful expression of peasant opposition,” a mass of “screaming, angry women, supported by men.” Wendy Z. Goldman, “Industrial Politics, Peasant Rebellion and the Death of the Proletarian Women’s Movement in the USSR” *Slavic Review* 55, no. 1 (1996): 60. Seeing the force mustered by the peasant women, Sophia Smidovich, one time leader of the Zhenotdel, the women’s branch of the Communist Party, argued that the Central Committee should put more resources into the women’s branch so that they could move into the countryside and organize these women who made up such a driven band of rioters. Smidovich’s request was paid heed and the Central Committee re-designated the Zhenotdel to bring the “backward layer” of peasant women in the countryside into the Party and make them advocates of communism. “Ob ocherednykh zadachakh partii po rabote sredi rabotnits i krest’ianok,” *Kommunistka*, 14 (1929): 43-8, as quoted in Goldman, “The Proletarian Women’s Movement,” 61. For more information on the peasant *baba* and her struggle against the communists, see Elizabeth A. Wood, *The Baba and the Comrade: Gender and Politics in Revolutionary Russia* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997).

³⁸ Clements, *Daughters of Revolution*, 59.

³⁹ Clements, *Bolshevik Women*, 105.

⁴⁰ Goldman, “The Proletarian Women’s Movement,” 52.

organization was not a welcome assignment for party women; many felt it was a less-than-equal posting and, upon promotion out of the Zhenotdel, found their origins in the women's department embarrassing.⁴¹ Other women, like Alexandra Kollontai, continued to insist upon the need to unify and organize women of the working and peasant classes. Indeed, over half of early membership in the Zhenotdel consisted of peasant women.⁴² For those Great Russian women of the working and peasant classes, the Zhenotdel became a place where they found allies in Bolsheviks. The Bolshevikki within the Zhenotdel largely came as a relief, as the majority of Bolsheviks believed these lower-class women were the dark masses incapable of understanding their socialist aims and ultimately unbothered by calls to action, one reason being that over seventy-five percent of villages had no organized activity from the Zhenotdel or even the party itself.⁴³ The lack of acceptance of and participation in the socialist collective identity aroused suspicion in many Bolshevikki. Because the peasant women displayed no solidarity with the group, they were viewed as a potential threat to the socialists and their aims. For many outside the ethnically Great Russian population, especially the Muslim population in Central Asia, the efforts of the Zhenotdel spelled disaster for women.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Goldman, "The Proletarian Women's Movement," 49.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 48-9. Within the local branches of the Zhenotdel, 59% of women identified as peasants, 14% as working class, 8% as white collar workers, and 10.5% as housewives; the occupations of women are listed as "workers in female-dominated textile factories and sewing workshops, exploited wives of soldiers, cheated widows of the villages and landless laborers in the countryside." Additionally, Goldman notes that nearly one third of the women involved with the organization were illiterate.

⁴³ Farnsworth, "Village Women Experience the Revolution," 244. Great Russian, a term mostly used in the past, denotes the section of the population that is ethnically Russian; it derives from the use of the term Great Russia for Russia itself, while Little Russia consisted of the surrounding countries incorporated into the empire, such as Ukraine and Belarus; even if villages received any activity from organized Party members, it could have been "merely a poorly paid district organizer, knapsack on her back, going by foot 20 to 30 versts [one verst is approximately 0.66 miles], from district to district," showing the overwhelming degree of underfunding and understaffing faced by the Zhenotdel.

⁴⁴ Clements, *Daughters of Revolution*, 60-1. Between 1926 and 1927, the Soviet government attempted to extend its control to the Muslim populations living in the mountainous regions of Central Asia still under the aegis of Russian government. Many within the Soviet government believed that the Muslims represented the same backwardness they feared in Great Russian peasants. Delegations were sent to the towns in Central Asia with the intention of liberating Muslim women and were met with violent retaliation from Muslim men. Over the course of

The *zhenotdelki* (women in the Zhenotdel, also referred to as *bytoviki* on occasion due to their association with bettering everyday life), besides being instructed in the ideology of the Bolsheviks, were encouraged and expected to become *tverdaia* (hard, reserved, steadfast). Leaders of the women’s movement were given *noms de guerre* that related them to the concept of *tverdaia*, unifying them as a strong force that propagated “a program for women’s liberation based on women’s full and equal participation in public life through the socialization of the domestic sphere.”⁴⁵ These epithets signified membership in an elite coalition, as they were only given to those who had truly proven their mettle. Letters concerning *zhenotdelki* gifted with these names take on reverential attitudes towards the women, speaking to how they kept the various party centers running efficiently and boosting morale through their relentless efforts for equality, like the one written about Elena Samoilova.

Women’s struggle to identify with typically masculine traits helped to fight suspicions that they were diverting their attentions away from socialist ambitions to a strictly woman-centered movement. In becoming efficient, relentlessly determined, and, most importantly, industrious, these *zhenotdelki* associated themselves with their male counterparts and strove to integrate themselves and their ambitions into the larger Marxist structure they were trying to implement in Russia. Women striving for *tverdaia* hoped that if they could align themselves emotionally and linguistically with the men with whom they collaborated, they would be able to escape the suspicions of aligning themselves with Western feminists. The atypically female behavior allowed them to become the pictures of Marxist dedication, placing them—to a degree—beyond reproach. The desire to separate themselves, however consciously, from their fellow women served only as a strain upon the bonds which they had created

two years, over 800 had been killed, including women of the Zhenotdel, Muslim women who attended their meetings, and other Communist officials.

⁴⁵ Goldman, “The Proletarian Women’s Movement,” 52; Clements, *Bolshevik Women*, 60. Clements notes that many of the most prominent *Bolshevichki* received epithets synonymous with being *tverdaia*; Elena Stasova was known as Absolute, Inessa Armand as Reserved, Rozaliia Zemliachka as Hard-as-a-Rock (*tverdokamennaia*), Konkordiia Samoilova as Stern (*strogaia*), and Evgeniia Bosh as Serious.

amongst themselves. Those wholly devoted to solving the woman question were thus given the idea that they were not as united as they had come to believe.

The Zhenotdel was not the only organization created to lessen the suffering of women across Russia. The “Drop of Milk” movement was established in 1904 under the umbrella organization of the Union to Combat Child Mortality in Russia to help distribute cow’s milk to infants whose mothers could not provide milk themselves. In addition to providing peasant mothers with free milk for their infants, activists, both male and female, within this movement began distributing funds amongst the peasant mothers to help them provide for their children beyond the free milk they received. In the cities, the physicians set up distribution centers where they could dispense milk to working mothers and established a variety of nurseries and walk-in clinics to assist in their endeavors. The campaign volunteers operated as physicians and midwives, encouraging mothers to employ methods of basic hygiene in order to reduce the staggering rates of infant mortality.⁴⁶ By connecting with the peasant and working mothers through the sometimes common bond of motherhood, female activists utilized similarities between themselves and the often distrustful women outside the collective; the similarities, coupled with the promise of a lightened burden with the implementation of socialized child rearing, drew working and peasant women into local action groups where they could be educated in socialist literature, or even educated in general.

Education

In a nation where just over thirteen percent of the female population was literate by the turn of the twentieth century, education became a vital method of establishing connections between members of the intelligentsia and those of the working and peasant classes.⁴⁷ Various educated members of the

⁴⁶ Adele Lindenmeyr, “Maternalism and Child Welfare in Late Imperial Russia” *Journal of Women’s History* 5, no. 2 (Fall, 1993): 121.

⁴⁷ Lindenmeyr, “Maternalism and Child Welfare in Late Imperial Russia,” 115. Lindenmeyr notes that the literacy rate, according to 1897 census data was 13.1% among females.

intelligentsia, many of them female, took to going into the countryside and continuing the education of many young Russians. These idealistic young women, deemed *kursistka* (a student in the women’s higher courses), arrived to educate both adults and children, often filling gaps left by education at a local school. Ekaterina Kuskova, a future leader in Social Democratic circles, recalled in her memoirs that her father had hired one such *kursistka* to come to their house in Saratov along the Volga River. The *kursistka* appeared at their home with the intention of teaching Kuskova and her sister music and brought with her, as Kuskova’s mother deemed them, nihilistic progressive ideas.⁴⁸

Observing that the peasant women were vastly illiterate, party officials encouraged them to attend schools and enroll in training programs to enter new sectors of the workforce. The women took note of the career opportunities described in *Rabotnitsa*, such as becoming metal workers or taking up other positions typically held by men, and began attending courses set up by the government. In 1930, the government triumphantly reported that eighty percent of peasant women in the European half of the country were now literate and able to take up skilled labor positions, while as many if not more in the Eastern half were now comparably skilled.⁴⁹ In increasing women’s literacy, the Bolsheviks were widening their base of support, as the women now had access to more of the Party’s literature.

Publications

⁴⁸ Barbara T. Norton, “The Making of a Female Marxist: E.D. Kuskova’s Conversion to Russian Social Democracy,” *International Review of Social History* 34 (1989): 230. *Kursistki* distinguished themselves from the rest of the Russian population not only by their ideology but also by their appearance, marking themselves as members of a specific group. Many cut their hair in a bobbed fashion as is iconic for the 1920s, like the *kursistka* that came to teach Kuskova and her sister, and sparked a reaction among more traditional members of society that complained of young women making themselves too masculine. Some of these masculinized women preferred leather jackets or shirts with ties. In adopting garb traditionally exclusive to men, *kursistki* attempted to insert themselves into the masculine culture that their male counterparts had established in the Russian underground; at the very least, they hoped to visually identify with the males, even if they were not necessarily equally involved or positioned within the party. Anne E. Gorsuch, “The Dance Class or the Working Class? The Soviet Modern Girl” in *The Modern Girl Around the World: Consumption, Modernity, and Globalization*, ed. Alys Eve Weinbaum, et al. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 183.

⁴⁹ Clements, *Daughters of Revolution*, 70.

The most wide-spread and successful method of communicating with women across the vast expanses of the Russian Empire was publication. Publications came in numerous forms and addressed the issue of women's liberation in a variety of ways. The use of language as a function and marker of society within the journals allowed bonds to form between the urban and rural writers and readers, drawing them together under the aegis of common struggle and inviting them to partake in the common identity of Marxist women seeking their equality. Women came together in back rooms of apartments or held secret meetings in order to compile articles, letters, and pamphlets that would be of use to the average woman when confronting the oppressive forces of patriarchal capitalist society; the publications could be adjusted to suit its desired audience, as was *Krestianka* (Peasant Worker), incorporating language and customs of local peasants in order to garner some degree of trust. Publications such as *Krestianka* could also utilize locally held beliefs and use them as a bridge to introduce peasant women to socialist ideology.

Following the success of her column "The Labor and Life of Women workers" in *Pravda* (Truth), Konkordiia Samoilova gained permission to begin an entire journal devoted to the working woman entitled *Rabotnitsa*. Inessa Armand and Liudmila Stal, a journalist from Ukraine, supported the idea while Nadezhda Krupskaja wavered due to the worry that the journal would encourage the spread of feminist ideas. Vera Slutskaia, a 1902 initiate of the Social Democratic party from the Caucasus, asked for a series of publications to be funded that appealed directly to the poor, working-class women she was trying to recruit, including a revitalization of *Rabotnitsa*. Once she had gained permission from the new Bolshevik government, Slutskaia put together an editorial staff and prepared the board to be handed over to Samoilova, Nikolaeva, and Krupskaja upon their return to Petrograd.⁵⁰ In the second

⁵⁰ Clements, *Daughters of Revolution*, 131. Samoilova, Nikolaeva, and Krupskaja had all been in exile due to their well-known revolutionary sentiments. Many revolutionaries of this time had gone into Western exile out of necessity or because they had escaped Siberian exile and wished to join their comrades out West until the time was right for a revolution.

configuration of *Rabotnitsa*, the authors argued that women’s issues would only be considered politically if the women joined the struggle for socialism; most importantly, the contributing authors did not place the blame for their oppression on the men of their society but on the old regime.⁵¹

Women wrote in the journal about the need for *samodeiatel’nost’* (the concept of developing the independence and initiative of revolutionary women) in their quest to improve concerns of *byt*. Anna Artiukhina expanded upon this concept in an article entitled “For the Socialist Transformation of Life” in 1930: “Our task consists not of making the individualized *byt* easier. Our task is to build a socialized *byt*. It is better now to suffer with old dish mops, flat irons, frying pans, so that we have the means and strength to put into the construction of new social institutions— cafeterias, nurseries, kindergartens, laundries.”⁵² Other revolutionary women contributed, promoting *samodeiatel’nost’* as the key component in getting legislation passed for women’s emancipation, with one proclaiming, “No one is going to do our own business for us.”⁵³ *Samodeiatel’nost’* operated in a similar manner to *tverdaia*. It became a component of the collective identity, a stepping stone on the way to becoming an equal member of the collective; through building their own independence and revolutionary integrity, the women could prove themselves loyal to the larger collective while also cultivating connections with fellow idealists, strengthening the family-like bonds.

Conclusion: The End of Collective Identity?

The bonds of fictive kinship fostered by the revolutionary women of the early twentieth century provided a means through which they could disperse information on the need for women’s equality under the banner of a new

⁵¹ Clements, *Daughters of Revolution*, 132.

⁵² “Za sotsialisticheskuiu peredelku byta,” *Rabotnitsa*, no. 4 (1930): 3, as cited and translated in Barbara Evans Clements, “The Utopianism of the Zhenotdel,” *Slavic Review* 51, no. 3 (1992): 494.

⁵³ “Chto dolzhny delat’ delegatki v konferentsii na mestakh,” *Rabotnitsa*, no. 13 (January 1918): 8-9, as cited in Clements, “The Utopianism of the Zhenotdel,” 494.

socialist government. Facing the struggles of an impossibly diverse population, expansive grounds to cover, and deeply ingrained patriarchal structures, women working to improve the lives of their comrades utilized bonds of language and constructed familial bonds to build a base of support for oppressed women across the country. By creating new bonds to enhance or replace the old and oppressive ones, women gave each other the basis of solidarity in their ability to identify as people struggling with the same burdens. Their networks of print media and organizations allowed these bonds to stretch across the expanses of Russia, bringing more women closer than ever before.

The dedication with which revolutionary women of the early twentieth century formed bonds is a testament to their zeal for solving the woman question. The pseudo-familial connections they formed with women across class lines and across the country operated as a support network and source of strength for women struggling to improve the *byt'* of their comrades. Through their use of language, they were able to make connections with and gain the trust of women with whom they might never have interacted under different circumstances; the use of print culture and education allowed for the shaping of networks and building of bonds across such an expansive region. Uniting in such a manner allowed for closer ties between group members, providing a way in which they could both create and maintain the networks of communication as described in Big History.

**Nella Last's War Diary:
The Silent Witness of Self-Therapy and the Emergence of Self-Identity
and Independence through Writing and Volunteerism**

By Patricia Brand

“We who remember the long-drawn-out agony of the last war feel ourselves crumble somewhere inside at the thought of what lies ahead.”¹ Nella Last, British housewife and mother, penned these words in her Mass–Observation diary on Thursday, 14 September 1939, the day before her youngest son Cliff left for active duty in the Second World War. Those who had served and suffered on the battlefields of World War One, and those who had served on the home-front, survived to share in the disastrous effects of modern warfare in post-war Britain. Amputations, maimed bodies and faces from the burn of poisonous gases, the trauma of “shell shock” as well as personal and national financial impoverishment had failed to teach world leaders that war begets war. Disillusionment, and a feeling of profound personal loss plagued the generation who had fought World War One. They had discovered the war that had been promised “to end all wars” had in truth been a breeding ground for the rise of totalitarian regimes that would ignite another world war, once again to claim the lives of sons and daughters, husbands and wives, friends, and lovers.

The Mass-Observation project that Nella and over four-hundred British citizens participated in was first initiated in 1937 by anthropologist Tom Harrisson. The objective of the movement stated by its founder was to create a study of Britain, to observe and record the opinions, attitudes, and activities of the people. Initially, Tom Harrisson conducted an ethnographic study in the town of Bolton, England. Harrisson acted as a participant-observer among the citizens of the town; observing and recording their behavior as well as collecting information from the study group through interviews. After the war began participants responded to survey questions posed by Harrisson and analyzed by trained specialists. In the final phase of the study people were asked to volunteer to make personal

¹ Richard Broad and Suzie Fleming, ed., *Nella Last's War: The Second World War Diaries of Housewife* (London: Profile Books, Ltd.), 7.

observations in a diary about their daily lives. Once a month, mass observers were asked to write about their personal opinions and beliefs on a variety of topics such as religion, marriage, and death. The data collected from diarists and opinion surveys provided a micro and macro level perspective of British society

A growing number of historians and practicing psychoanalysts have examined diaries of different groups such as wartime writers, victims of abuse, and veterans of war as well as students who are engaging in the process of self-writing. Findings indicate that keeping a diary acts as a type of self-therapy that has proven beneficial in the processing of painful, life-altering memories that tend to inhibit self-growth. Wendy Wiener and George Rosenwald note in *A Moment's Monument: The Psychology of Keeping a Diary*, "Rather than ask what life experiences have survived repression, we might accordingly do better to study what the subject has selected for preservation. For the act of remembrance is a choosing, a highlighting, a shaping, an enshrinement (even when it hurts). A life story is not simply that which has escaped forgetting."² It is of interest to note here that diary-keeping and journaling was a common practice prior to and during World War Two and is a rich source of knowledge about the experiences of those who lived during this traumatic time.

Historian James Hinton examined the diaries of Nella Last and eight other Mass Observation diarists in his book entitled *Nine Wartime Lives* and argued:

They were people on a quest, looking for meaning and purpose in their lives beyond the mundane satisfactions of everyday life, feeling a need to participate in society not only as members of families and friendship networks, consumers, and workers, but also as active citizens making a voluntary contribution to the greater social good.³

Hinton also argued that a sense of "dutiful active citizenship" inspired Nella Last and the other women he wrote about in the biographical narratives from Mass

² Wendy Wiener and George Rosenwald, *A Moment's Monument: The Psychology of Keeping a Diary* in R. Josselson and A. Lieblich, eds., *The Narrative Study of Lives* (London: Unknown Publisher, 1993), 31.

³ Hinton, *Nine Wartime Lives*, 204.

Observation. He noted, “Their stories can be read as testimony either to the long after-life of Victorian notions of ‘character,’ or as skirmishes in a struggle for female equality in the intimate sphere.”⁴ After researching Nella’s life story and reading her diary entries, Hinton concluded that regardless of Nella’s achievements and progress in self-development, her inability to gain autonomy was caused by her “weak streak,” and this was the reason she remained with her husband, Will.⁵ In regard to this Hinton wrote:

Nella Last, for all the vigour of her self-assertions, remained trapped in her unsuitable marriage, fearful that whatever gains she had made would not outlast the war. It would be, she believed, for the next generation to establish autonomy which her ‘weak streak’ had prevented her from laying down earlier in her own marriage.⁶

I argue that rather than answering to the call of “dutiful active citizenship,” Nella used the diary she submitted to Mass- Observation as a survival strategy in a twofold way: to help her live through the war and control the great fear that her youngest son, Cliff, would be killed in combat as well as to aid her in avoiding a second nervous breakdown.⁷ In addition, I argue that Nella’s diary became a multifunctional tool she employed as a confidant as well as a record of the development of independence and self-identity she gained through volunteerism in the war effort and participation in the Mass-Observation project. It was through these two avenues that Nella Last, wife and mother, did achieve independence and autonomy: the ability to depend on one’s self and govern one’s self.

The repression and isolation of Nella by her husband, Will Last, resulted in continual health problems and a complete nervous breakdown in the years prior to the war. Through the examination of Nella’s diary, her thoughts and feelings can be observed as she records sad and happy times, cruel repression from her husband and times of self-victory, the relentless fear of losing her sons through

⁴ Hinton, *Nine Wartime Lives*, 204.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 202.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, 204.

the violence of war to becoming a stalwart figure for other mothers to lean on through her courageous spirit.

Nella's growing relationship with her diary provided a healing self-therapy that resulted in the personal discovery that she was strong and self-reliant in times of personal and national crisis. The middle-age housewife who felt so belittled and unaccomplished before the war due to demeaning criticism and control by her husband, accomplished what might be considered a lifetime of growth in a short period of time. Evidence of Nella's resolve to overcome the limitations placed on her can be witnessed by the considerable political space she cleared for the development of selfhood while remaining in the place her Victorian training had taught her that she belonged; staying by her husband's side and taking care of him, and as she had promised Cliff, she would "keep the home fires burning."⁸

On 3 September 1939 France and Great Britain declared war on Germany. It was also the first day that Nella Last began writing in her diary. On that frightful day that all of Britain had feared, Nella shared her first confidence in her diary when she said, "I'm a self-reliant kind of person, but today I've longed for a close woman friend-for the first time in my life."⁹ Nella felt the intensity of a building vacuum in her life because her son Cliff, whom she regarded as her closest friend, would leave for the war within a few days, and her eldest son and strong supporter, Arthur, was already training as a tax examiner for the war effort in London. The diarist wrote of her pain when she thought of Cliff being subjected to violence as well as doing violence to others. She said in her Thursday, 14 September 1939 entry, "It's dreadful to think of him having to kill boys like himself - to hurt and be hurt. It breaks my heart to think of all the senseless, formless cruelty."¹⁰ Regardless of Nella's emotional needs she could not turn to her husband for comfort or solace as her anxiety built in anticipation of Cliff's departure, because she had been waging a personal war for survival since the beginning of her marriage to a man who treated her feelings with disregard, demanded her

⁸ Broad and Fleming, *Nella Last's War*, 93.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 7.

acquiescence in all matters, and manipulated the isolation of Nella that sapped her strength and joy for life.

At the heart of the marital problems that sorely afflicted Nella’s life were the vast differences between her personality and that of her husband. When they first met, Nella was a light-hearted, happy individual who thrived in the company of friends, family, and active social circles. Will Last, on the other hand, was serious, remote in his personality, and craved the solitude and privacy of their home and isolation from social situations; more importantly, he wanted this for Nella and his sons as well. Making matters worse, class conflict created a wedge between the couple that chipped away at the family’s solidarity. Nella was born into the middle-class and Will’s family was part of the working-class of Barrow-in-Furness, the town where he grew up, and where they lived together. Strife between the couple escalated due to the interference of Will’s family and their disapproval of his wife who had aspirations of elevating their growing family to the level of middle-class. Will was dismissive of his wife’s middle-class desires as well as how she encouraged the boys to invite their friends to the house where she too would enjoy their company. When the boys were of school age Nella carefully planned for the future of her son’s education as well as lessons in the social arts; this also made Will unhappy as he thought it unnecessary. Speaking of this Nella wrote in her Monday, 21 October 1940 diary entry:

I wonder if all parents – mothers anyway – feel the same towards their boys, and want them to have chances they did not have in life. Me – I’ve always missed things, somehow. Ill health and other circumstances have always beaten me, however much I tried to do things – and also my ‘weak streak’, as the boys call it, that could never be ruthless and made me give up many a cherished plan when it would give pain or annoyance to others. Weak I might be on top, but not underneath. Down underneath, I fought – and plotted – all for my boys. No woman ever had two such boys, I feel! Such nice men they are – and they like me – which is my crown and joy.¹¹

¹¹ Broad and Fleming, *Nella Last’s War*, 72.

Will did not share in Nella's feelings of pride for their two sons. He said, "neither of the boys are like other people's lads," to which she retorted: "well so what, hasn't that always been the battle cry of your folks about me?"¹² Perhaps the most troubling aspect of Will's dominance of Nella were the actions he took to keep her at home, tending to his needs and demands, while keeping her friends and family at bay through his sullen and unfriendly manner. Nella's inability to cope effectively with the stress and pressure placed upon her by Will and his family, altered her outlook on life, making her uncertain of her position and greatly afflicting her health.

Nella's health problems had haunted her throughout her marriage with a long list of reoccurring symptoms that seemed to be random, but intense when they appeared: heart trouble, anxiety, vomiting, the inability to eat, and extreme frustration. In 1937 and 1938, Nella suffered a complete nervous breakdown that affected her ability to walk. Initially, the diagnosis of her ailment was multiple sclerosis, but new medical knowledge had recently surfaced that suggested symptoms such as Nella's were not always physical, but sometimes psychological. Nella's ongoing physical problems had puzzled Dr. Millar, her general practitioner, due to the fact that she was strong and had basic good health as well as a healthy lifestyle. For some time, the doctor suspected that his patient's problems were emotional rather than physical, because of different experiences she shared in the privacy of the doctor/patient relationship. Dr. Millar decided his only alternative in saving the health of his patient was to visit her home and confront Will about Nella's condition. Dr. Millar openly challenged Will, saying, "Do you know the meaning of repression? ...What would happen to a kettle if you put a cork in the spout and tied the lid down tight and yet kept it at boiling point?"¹³

From this juncture, the doctor had finally broken through the barrier he had heretofore been unable to penetrate because of Nella's inability to understand the cycle of health problems she was experiencing was due to the continual emotional and mental assault by her husband that resulted in physical problems. The doctor

¹² Hinton, *Nine Wartime Lives*, 26.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 26.

counseled his patient to go out and enjoy the company of friends. He also encouraged Nella to overcome the Victorian notion that her husband could not prepare food for himself if she was not at home. Nella and the doctor had finally made a breakthrough in the long years of physical and emotional suffering. Dr. Millar warned his patient that if she continued to stay at home in the repression and isolation that had wrapped around her life like a cocoon she would indeed suffer another nervous breakdown. Life for the forty-nine-year-old housewife and mother changed as she began to work through the emotional and physical trauma with voluntary war-work and the self-therapy she was receiving through her Mass-Observation diary.

The entries in Nella’s diary bear witness to the fact that she followed the advice of her doctor and made great strides in an effort to get out of the house and among other people as well as work to transform her life with voluntary work at the Women’s Voluntary Service (WVS), and Hospital Supply, also called ‘the Centre.’ In this position Nella and other women who volunteered worked together to mend old donated clothing and turn them into blankets for sailors. Raffles were held daily to garner money to buy wool for volunteers at the ‘Centre’ to knit into articles of clothing for sailors. The transition from being essentially housebound and isolated to being in a highly public and active place was a large emotional and physical step; however, Nella’s efforts to take positive actions resulted in the beginning of transformations that would change the course of her life.

Voluntary wartime work acted as a catharsis for Nella who was struggling not only with her own fears, but with the growing fear of German invasion that the British people were feverishly preparing for. In the Monday, 11 September 1939 entry Nella bravely announces her plans and charts her progress as she writes in her diary:

Other friends look aged, and I have a cold feeling down inside when I think of my Cliff off on Friday. I will dedicate every part of my time when I’m not looking after my husband to the W.V.S. I’ll work and beg things and keep cheerful~outwardly at least. Now when I plan and work harder, I find my brain sharper and I don’t forget things. I’m following my doctor’s advice and have

not lost any more weight. I can sleep at least four hours a night and, although always tired, have not been so exhausted.¹⁴

Again, in the Tuesday, 19 September 1939 entry the diarist writes of more progress with establishing contacts and activity away from home. Although proud of her gains, she confides in her diary fear and uncertainty for the future:

Arthur (my older boy) thinks it's a 'wonderful philosophy' of mine to try and 'take each day as it comes and do the best I can with it', but it's not, it's just a kind of fear to look ahead. I'm just a woman who sees all the simple joys turning into luxuries that no amount of money could buy.¹⁵

This was indeed a difficult time in Nella's life, for she knew that to return to living in a controlled and isolated environment would be disastrous for her health, but for the first time in many years she faced the future alone with Will, because the presence and support of Cliff and Arthur had been interrupted by the war. Courage and determination pushed Nella forward in pursuit of establishing personal freedom as well as coping with the burdens of war that occupied her days. In the entry of Thursday, 29 February 1940 Nella confided in her diary:

Some days I am so busy I can only think of what I'm doing, or the immediate tasks ahead, and I'll have a static feeling of happiness-a rhythm of mind-when the realisation of WAR sweeps over me: for one dreadful second I could scream like a horse and a wave of coldness breaks over me. It passes, but I wonder what I would do if my days were not so full-and thank God I can work-not only for the bit I do, but for the strength it gives me to go on.¹⁶

Nella's writing clearly indicates that the war work she committed to was having beneficial effects for her physical well-being by occupying her days and keeping her thoughts distracted from the realities of war.

Wiener and Rosenwald theorized that recording one's chosen memories in a diary could aid in a self-progressive state. They noted:

¹⁴ Broad and Fleming, *Nella Last's War*, 6.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 32-33.

Biographical memory saves our most promising projects of self-transformation, and new living action seeks to complete and extend these. The diary preserves both poles of the transformation. Like a screen memory, it contains a partial representation of that which was in need of mastery as well as the record of its overcoming. The reminders of the old frailty have been covered over with a chronicle of acquired fitness.¹⁷

Nella’s diary entries are witness to the fact that in many ways the diarist used the technique described by Wiener and Rosenwald to record her troubled past with Will, but she also wrote about positive actions she was taking with her voluntary work as well as her efforts to relinquish the Victorian enculturation she had received as a female child to obey unquestionably the teachings of an outdated patriarchal system. This endeavor empowered Nella at a time that was critical to her well-being as the stress of the war weighed heavily on the strained relationship between Nella and Will.

In response to a monthly directive by Mass-Observation on the topic of sex, Nella expounded on the traditional roles that women were expected to perform in Victorian Britain. In the Sunday, 15 June 1941 entry she wrote, “A woman was expected-and brought up- to obey, and we had not got far from the days of Victorian repression: men expected to be masters in matters widely to do with sex. No woman was ever expected to be out, for instance, when her husband came in for a meal.”¹⁸ Nella’s voluntary war-work had provided her with the opportunity to be a member of a group of women who had moved beyond many of the limitations women had suffered under the patriarchal system, and this encouraged Nella to act boldly in her own self-interest. The diarist commented on her progress with this matter in the Thursday, 14 March 1940, entry:

I reflected tonight on the changes the war had brought. I always used to worry and flutter round when I saw my husband working up for a mood; but now I just say calmly, ‘Really dear, you *should* try and act as if you were a grown man and not a child of

¹⁷ Wiener and Rosenwald, *A Moment’s Monument*, 17.

¹⁸ Broad and Fleming, *Nella Last’s War*, 151.

ten, and if you want to be awkward, I shall go out – ALONE !¹⁹

As a result of her work at ‘the Centre,’ Nella was asked if she would be willing to work at the WVS canteen, managing and advising in the preparation of meals for military personnel as well as collecting supplies for the canteen. It was in this capacity that Nella blossomed and became highly regarded by the WVS for applying her homemaking skills of frugality and culinary arts to help in the creation of nutritious and attractive meals with only sparse supplies. Skills that heretofore in her home environment had drawn laughter from her husband, gained a certain level of fame and praise at the canteen. In the Thursday, 28 August 1941 entry Nella writes of the new opportunity offered to her by Mrs. Thompson, head of the canteen, and with confidence and excitement she wrote:

She wants me to give an afternoon and/or evening as advisory cook. She says I’ll not have to work really hard, only overlook and give advice on economical and tasty oddments. Mrs. Diss, who has taken over as head of W.V.S. had sent her. It’s what I’ve always wanted to do-I am realising more each day what a knack of dodging and cooking and managing I possess, and my careful economies are things to pass on, not hide as I used to do!²⁰

Nella’s transformation from being homebound, to being a team member of a large workforce, to taking on managerial roles at the WVS canteen was testimony to the diarists’ commitment to her self-development that she followed and documented in her diary with dedication. The woman who had suffered a complete nervous breakdown from severe repression was beginning to thrive on the opportunities that wartime offered women. Traditional restrictions that usually barred women from positions of leadership and male-dominated work was of necessity removed as women were forced out of the home and into the public sphere to aid in the war effort. The liberating conditions of wartime Britain presented the perfect opportunity for Nella to throw-off the domination of Will, and she came to realize her skills were indeed of value to other people. By

¹⁹ Broad and Fleming, *Nella Last’s War*, 37.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 160.

accepting new challenges, she was laying the groundwork for the creation of political space that she was quickly building in her public life as well as her home life.

Nella’s determination to move beyond Will’s inclinations to make life decisions for her regardless of her personal preferences can be seen in the Friday, 22 November 1940 entry. Will had been admiring Nella’s new permanent wave and he voiced his desire for her to always look the way she did, to never have to work, and to be dressed in fine garments that he knew she liked. Nella responded with a strong rebuttal saying:

I suppose you would only think I was putting a brave face on if I told you I’d sooner *die* than step into the frame you make for me. Do you know, my dear, that I’ve never known the content – at times, real happiness – that I’ve known since the war started? Because you always thought like that and were so afraid of ‘doing things’, you have at times been very *cruel*. Now my restless spirit is free, and I feel strength and endurance comes stronger with every effort.²¹

Anthony Giddens wrote in his book, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* a method whereby an individual could bring about change in their life by employing the suggestions of Janette Rainwater, clinical psychologist. Giddens wrote that she emphasized, “Living every moment reflectively is a matter of heightened awareness of thoughts, feelings and bodily sensations. Awareness creates potential change, and may actually induce change in and through itself.”²²

The beneficial effects of Nella’s writing developed into a quiet time of contemplation, a pondering of past and present events in her life, and thereby became a self-therapy, as suggested by Giddens and Rainwater. A reflective moment by Nella can be witnessed in her diary entry of Thursday, 28 August 1941. Mrs. Diss, head of the WVS, had invited Nella to take an advisory position at the canteen. Will commented about Nella’s willingness to accept more work

²¹ Broad and Fleming, *Nella Last’s War*, 82-83.

²² Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Cambridge: Unknown Publisher, 1991), 71.

and responsibility. He said, “You know, you amaze me really, when I think of the wretched health you had just before the war, and how long it took you to recover from that nervous breakdown.”²³ Nella was honest, but kind in her return comments:

Well, I’m in rhythm now, instead of always fighting against things’ - but stopped when I saw the hurt, surprised look on his face. He never realizes - and never could - that the years when I had to sit quiet and always do everything he liked, and *never* the things he did not, were slavery years of mind and body.”²⁴

As a result of Nella’s exemplary work at ‘the Centre’ and WVS canteen, in July of 1942, Tom Cross, Red Cross organizer, and Mrs. Diss approached her to see if she and a few others who worked at the canteen would care to locate a building for a Red Cross shop and gather donations of clothes, toys, and other household items to be sold to aid in the funding of parcels for British prisoners of war. Nella found a shop rent-free and formed a committee of women she believed would work well together. It was in this shop that Nella truly came into her own organizing and acquiring donations. In her diary entry of Thursday, 23 July 1942 Nella enthusiastically wrote, “Our shop is for the Prisoner of War Fund, so we *may* tap a fresh source of money. I’ve talked to everyone I know, and got lots of bits and bobs promised.”²⁵ Nella’s leadership skills were made apparent as she smoothly coordinated the work and led the management of the shop. In her spare time, she created her dollies, rag-babies, and rag-bunnies to be donated for auction for the funding of prisoner of war parcels as well as for supplies at ‘the Centre.’

The Red Cross shop began to flourish under the creative imagination and energy that Nella generously directed to the project. Dedicated volunteers worked tirelessly by her side and followed her lead by helping to create a thriving business to gather money for the prisoners of war. Nella wrote in her diary Tuesday, 1 September 1942:

²³ Broad and Fleming, *Nella Last’s War*, 160.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 204.

People are getting to know about us and will give us things, though they must be reminded constantly, and we must all make any toys or fancy articles for Christmas. But keep it open we must and shall. I’ve told all the helpers they have not to ‘try’, they have to *do* it, and all must beg and beg. A hundred pounds is a marvelous thing – two hundred parcels of hope and comfort to heartsick men. Who knows who will be the next man to need a parcel? *Any* of our menfolk who have gone overseas.²⁶

When the war came to a close, Nella and her fellow-workers would remember their experiences in the Red Cross shop as some of their finest moments in their voluntary war-work. Monday, 18 June 1945 Nella confided in her diary feelings of sadness as the Red Cross shop was due to close at the end of the war. She wrote:

No one could have realised what that little junk-shop has been to me. I *loved* it, and felt a blessing from every 10s we raised. It’s not been always easy going. I’ve had a few fights, even if they *were* quiet ones. It grew and grew. We never *knew* the happiness we brought to the poor P.O.W.s, but could feel our work was worthwhile. I felt I was a soldier like my Cliff – and we will be demobbed about the same time.²⁷

Wartime volunteerism and participation in the Mass-Observation project would be Nella’s greatest self-victory and some of the happiest and most fulfilling times of her life aside from her fond memories of the boy’s childhood days. It is of interest to note that the diarist was open and revealing about the sad and difficult times of her life as she wrote of intimate details of her great fear that Cliff might be killed in active combat in Italy and the Middle East, the loss mothers endure during wartime as well as her concerns for the future relationship between her and Will that loomed ahead in the post-war years.

Suzette A. Henke, Sr. professor of Literary Studies at the University of Louisville, initiated a study of women’s life-writing in 1985. She found in the women’s literature she was examining a significant number of women writing in journals and diaries about physical and emotional symptoms they experienced associated with past traumas. Symptoms recorded in the women’s literature were

²⁶ Broad and Fleming, *Nella Last’s War*, 208.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 281.

consistent with those experienced by World War One veterans diagnosed with “shell shock, “or the fear of “active combat.”²⁸ Those who were diagnosed with “shell shock,” known today as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, suffered from: unwanted, repetitious and disturbing memories of the past, physical ailments produced by the memories such as nausea, pounding heart, muscle tension, guilt, shame, and feelings of being alienated. It is pertinent at this point to acknowledge that many of the symptoms associated with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder were also the symptoms Nella suffered frequently and wrote about in her diary on a regular basis such as heart trouble, muscle tension, guilt, nausea, shame, and especially disturbing memories of past events as well as the feeling of being alienated.

Henke’s findings led her to theorize that writing about trauma one was currently experiencing could be as effective as writing about past trauma and may well be as helpful as psychoanalysis. Henke wrote about the benefits of autobiographical writing in her book, *Shattered Subjects: Trauma and Testimony in Women’s Life Writing*, the author claimed, “Autobiography could so effectively mimic the scene of psychoanalysis that life-writing might provide a therapeutic alternative for victims of severe anxiety and, more seriously, of post-traumatic stress disorder.”²⁹ Henke supported her theory with the written work of practicing therapist, Judith Lewis Herman titled, *Trauma and Recovery*. Herman’s book presented a significant number of actual clinical cases in her practice who worked through trauma with life-writing. Henke stated, “As a practicing therapist, Herman was able to compare post-traumatic stress disorder precipitated by rape, sexual abuse, or battering with the symptoms of neurosis exhibited by war veterans and victims of terrorism.”³⁰ Combining her own research and findings as well as the case histories and life-testimonials submitted in Herman’s book, Henke theorized that different forms of autobiographical writing aided in analyzing one’s own history, thereby helping to establish empowerment through self-examination.

²⁸ Suzette A. Henke, *Shattered Subjects: Trauma and Testimony in Women’s Life Writing* (New York: Saint Martin’s Press, 1998), xi.

²⁹ Henke, *Shattered Subjects*, xii-xiii.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, xiii.

Henke noted a common element of women’s writing as, “Women daring to name themselves, to articulate their personal histories in diary, memoir, and fictional form, reinscribe the claims of feminine desire onto the texts of a traditionally patriarchal culture.”³¹

Scholars Hinton and Henke offer a much different evaluation of autobiographical writing that emerges for the diarist. Hinton perceived the diary when writing about Mass Observation diarists’ as a venue to fulfill their duty to the country, rather than acknowledge the self-discovery that occurred as the diarist records events, both good and bad, to be viewed in a physical format for analysis. On the other hand, Henke perceived the scene of autobiographical writing as a forum to record major events in one’s life as well as repetitious inner dialogue, and grant authority to one’s self to reflect on past events. Henke noted that often self-reflection could be a point of liberation and as effective as professional psychological help. Nella’s honest, and at times blunt truthfulness about her life experiences demonstrates that she was reflecting back on past events and working to find ways to resolve personal conflict.

Nella’s determination to maintain her physical, emotional, and mental health throughout the terrible war years can be witnessed through the life-writing the diarist practiced. As suggested by Suzette Henke, writing about the trauma, during the trauma, seemed to give Nella the inner-strength to carry on when dark times engulfed her. Nella penned Sunday, 6 April 1941 in her diary entry about the traumatizing thoughts and fears she had for the safety of her sons, she wrote, “I pictured terror and fear in the big cities, and thought of how I’d lost my life-long love of the sea and rolling, tossing waves—it made me think of shipwrecked men in little boats, of men left to drown when their ships were attacked by submarines.”³²

Tuesday, 9 March 1943 Nella comforted one of the mothers who worked at ‘the Centre,’ because her son had just been killed in Rzhev, Russia. The grieving

³¹ Henke, *Shattered Subjects*, xvi.

³² Broad and Fleming, *Nella Last’s War*, 115.

mother expressed her gratitude to Nella for the strength and support she had given the mothers in their volunteer group. Nella later that day wrote:

May God pity women ~ a poignant cry for us all. I look at Mrs. Hockey sometimes. I said to her one day, 'My dear, you are an example to us all. I pray if I've ever to meet a trouble like you I can have your courage.' She said, 'You will never know how all your friendship and kindness in the room meant – and does mean to me. I feel I'm not alone. Just one, in a group of mothers, strained and anxious – but my strain is over.'³³

As the intensity of the war built, Nella's worry and fear for Cliff's safety grew, and her thoughts and feelings turned to the strength and courage the mothers in the volunteer group gave to each other during the war years. Thursday, 19 August 1943 the diarist expresses her sorrow for the women in her volunteer group:

My heart aches and, even in that small circle, the bravery and courage, the 'going on' when only sons have been killed, when letters don't come, when their boys are taught to fight like savages if they are commandoes~ when they are trained and trained and *trained*, for bodies to endure, and go and kill other women's lads, to wipe the light from other mothers faces.³⁴

Nella's life-writing was helping her to pen down her deepest fears and face the awful possibilities of losing her sons as some of her co-workers had already experienced.

The war years slipped by, one upon another, Nella began to feel a sense of losing herself to the continual work, carnage, and effects of the war that reached into every facet of those on the battlefield and home-front. On Sunday, 31 October 1943 Nella confided in her diary:

Am I growing old quickly – or is it the strain of ceaseless effort which tires me at times to my soul-case? It's a long time sense I felt the keenness that always seemed a part of me. Is this what 'war weary' means? Will I *ever* feel gay and irresponsible again? Feel I could sing because the sun shines? Look forward to a holiday? I think I'm digging myself into a deep rut, and soon I'll not be able to see out of it – only along it. Yet I never

³³ Broad and Fleming, *Nella Last's War*, 234.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 249.

consciously worry. I chatter gaily at the Centre. It’s queer to feel numb and hollow, instead of vital.³⁵

The diary entries of Nella Last from December 30, 1943 to May 4, 1945 were lost in the confusion of the war before being sent to the University of Sussex where all Mass- Observation materials were stored during and after the war. The war in Europe was quickly coming to a close and Nella’s thoughts were returning to home and her problems with Will. In her diary entry of Thursday, 10 May 1945 the diarist once again confides in her diary that she will not return to the life she lived before the war:

I love my home dearly, but *as* a home rather than a house. The latter can make a prison and a penance, if a woman makes too much of a fetish of cleaning and polishing. But I will not, *cannot*, go back to the narrowness of my husband’s ‘I don’t want anyone else’s company but yours – why do *you* want anyone else?’ I looked at his placid, blank face and marvelled at the way he had managed to dominate me for all our married life, at how, to avoid hurting him, I had tried to keep him in a good mood, when a smacked head would have been the best treatment. His petulant moods only receive indifference now. I *know* I speak sharply at times, I *know* I’m ‘not the sweet woman I used to be’ – but then I never was! Rather was I a frayed, battered thing, with nerves kept in control by effort that at times became too much, and ‘nervous breakdowns’ were the result. No one would ever give me one again, *no* one.³⁶

It is apparent that Nella’s diary entries she so faithfully recorded was not merely from a standpoint of “dutiful active citizenship” or simply from the perspective of “looking for meaning and purpose” in her life as Hinton had theorized of most Mass- Observation writers.³⁷ More accurately, when reading Nella’s diary, one can witness the diarist sharing victories she had claimed through volunteer work, as well as intimate, personal details with a confidant, a companion, and perhaps

³⁵ Broad and Fleming, *Nella Last’s War*, 250.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 274.

³⁷ Hinton, *Nine Wartime Lives*, 2.

in a way that “close woman friend” she had wished for the first day she wrote in her diary in 1939.³⁸

Nella had been dedicated to her war-work and volunteerism for many reasons. Hospital Supply supervisors, the head of WVS, Red Cross organizers as well as co-workers recognized Nella’s talent and abilities that she had been unaware of prior to the war. Their appreciation of her contribution bolstered Nella’s self-image and helped to build a feeling of independence she had never experienced before. Nella’s creative energy, perseverance, and determination to do anything to help in the war cause inspired her colleagues at a time when they needed it most. Clearly, the work and selfless acts of Nella and the women volunteers she worked with in the war cause could not be attributed merely to a “testimony either to the long after-life of Victorian notions of ‘character’, or as skirmishes in a struggle for female equality in the intimate sphere,” as suggested by Hinton.³⁹ Rather, this was a network of women sharing their strengths and weaknesses, and their hopes and sorrows in bold actions for survival.

The diarist accomplished all she set out to do at the beginning of the war. She survived the terror and destruction of the war and managed through bold efforts to avoid another nervous breakdown. Cliff had been wounded, but recuperated, and both beloved sons came home safely. Arthur married and presented Nella and Will with two grandchildren. Nella acquired the political space in her marriage she desired through volunteerism and Mass-Observation writing; but remained by Will’s side the rest of their life as she said was her duty to do. She also kept the promise she made to Cliff. In the Thursday, 9 January 1941 entry Nella wrote that Cliff said, “Don’t change dearie – ever- fight *hard* against changing.”⁴⁰ The devoted mother pondered her son’s request and then promised him, “I’ll never change, in that I love my boys, and as long as I’ve health and strength I’ll keep the home fires burning.”⁴¹ Unlike most Mass-Observation writers who quit

³⁸ Broad and Fleming, *Nella Last’s War*, 2.

³⁹ Hinton, *Nine Wartime Lives*, 204.

⁴⁰ Broad and Fleming, *Nella Last’s War*, 92.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 93.

writing their diary at the end of the war, Nella continued writing for Mass-Observation until 1966. She died in 1968, as did Will.

One of Nella’s greatest ambitions was to write books, she said, “I’ve written enough letters to fill a few books – in words – and the boys tell me I’ve given them more pleasure than if I’d written best-sellers!”⁴² Dorothy Sheridan, Mass-Observation archivist at the University of Sussex, writes of the collection of papers that survived the war:

When the collection reached Sussex, it was in poor physical condition – the papers were trussed up in dusty old folders with string and perished elastic bands. They had been ravaged by mice and different sorts of fungi and eroded by rusty paper clips. Considering their history, which included the London Blitz and several moves on the backs of lorries, not to mention a flood or two; it is surprising that so much actually did survive.⁴³

The woman known as Housewife 49, because she was forty-nine- years- old when the war began and when she started writing for Mass-Observation, continued to reach her goals even after her death. All of the diary entries and written materials the diarist had devotedly written in times of stress and great peril were compiled, and as Nella Last had predicted she had indeed written two books, *Nella Last’s War* and *Nella Last’s Peace*.

⁴² Broad and Fleming, *Nella Last’s War*, 11.

⁴³ Dorothy Sheridan, *Wartime Women: An Anthology of Women’s Wartime Writing for Mass Observation, 1937-1945* (London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1990), 266.