History professors Susan Grayzel and Tammy Proctor

A century later, book responds to still-unanswered questions about gender

A hundred years ago this year, the world changed.

Hundreds of thousands of young men died in combat or sickness in a war so catastrophic and unthinkable and sweeping that their mothers and buddies called it simply The Great War.

This year, the 100th anniversary of America’s entrance into World War I, we’ve seen programs, speeches and symposiums commemorating the war, which left more than 116,000 Americans soldiers dead and 204,000 wounded. Worldwide, there were 41 million casualties.

“There was a hope the anniversary would provide a moment of unified reflection, that 100 years ago we were involved in this major catastrophe, and now look where we are,” says history professor Susan Grayzel.

But something this earth-shattering and complicated doesn’t translate well to speeches and soundbites. And Grayzel thinks we Americans only want “the simple version.”

The simple version has soldiers moldering in trenches and their women knitting socks when they weren’t hovering over sick beds. We’ve advanced in so, so many ways. (We now have flu shots.) However, says this scholar of World War I, on gender issues “it has hardly budged.” In 2017, she says, “There’s still this sense of there was ‘a women’s war’ in a completely isolated space called the ‘home front.’”

Grayzel and fellow historian Tammy Proctor are the editors of the just-published Gender & the Great War (Oxford University Press). The goal, says Grayzel, was “to help people tell a different war story.”

Each chapter comprises an essay written by a historian who examines one slice of gender issues. Proctor herself contributed a chapter titled “Gender and Age” where she explores the tired trope of a rich, older generation using “these hapless victimized young men” as ammunition fodder.

The scholarly work of war is, largely, a men’s history. It wasn’t until the 1970s that women studies gained legitimacy; gender history emerged later still. Proctor notes there’s been little research focusing on gender and war until the last couple of decades. Gender & the Great War “breaks down those boundaries between home and battle and looks at the way both of those things reinforce and define the other,” she said.

As the editors explain in the introduction, the book combines the two strands of gender and military history. “We thought this was a necessary collection because there hasn’t been a volume that brings that scholarship together and says, ‘OK, here’s what’s been done and here’s where we need to go,’ ” said Proctor.

The book, adds Grayzel, “aims to start a conversation that says, ‘This is where we are at the 100th anniversary.’”

USU’s Department of History is rich in scholarly resources of World War I research. Published work by Proctor, also the History Department head, includes Female Intelligence: Women and Espionage in the First World War (NYU, 2003) and Civilians in a World at War 1914-1918 (NYU Press, 2010). Grayzel has authored such books as Women and First World War (Routledge, 2002) and Women’s Identities at War: Gender, Motherhood and Politics in Britain and France during the First World War (University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

The book’s look at gender and war examines both sexes, including research on masculinity. An army of young male warriors “has to be told what they’re fighting for,” said Proctor. “And the initial story is, ‘You’re fighting to protect your women and children from bad things.’”
But when labor’s short, and women start punching in at the munitions factory, “then you’ve got a problem because the women are also contributing to their own protection,” said Proctor. “So how do you deal with that story?”

Or, consider the battle-ready soldier who is instead carried away in a stretcher to the influenza hospital ward.

“When you go home, how does that play?” said Proctor. “Notions of what it means to be a hero or what it means to be brave will play out in families and communities.”

In 2017, this dynamic of masculine heroics still remains, says Grayzel, a specialist on war and technology. Where’s the heroism to be found, for instance, in the actions of an unseen pilot who kills enemies with an unmanned aerial vehicle (or drone)?

It’s really no coincidence that popular retellings of World War I events, as rare as they are, persist as stories of tragedy. (All Quiet on the Western Front, for instance, or the film Gallipoli). World War II, on the other hand, gave us numerous heroes and the “Greatest Generation.”

“It’s a more comforting story,” says Grayzel. “The Second World War was a war of high moral stakes. We were on the right side, and we won.”

There’s no such satisfaction in the earlier post-war era. “The First World War is a mess,” she said. “And what happens afterward is a mess.”

*Gender & the Great War* makes the mess manageable. As one reviewer noted, “… focusing on gender furthers our understanding of the ways in which combatant nations mobilized, fought and remembered World War I.”

Each chapter could be its own book: “Gender and Violence” or “Gender and Mourning,” for instance.

“This book is very much meant for students to say, ‘I’m interested. Where do I go with this?’” said Proctor. “Here are questions to be asked; here are new ways of thinking about things.”

Each chapter ends with references for further research.

Although Proctor and Grayzel are both authorities on World War I, their focuses diverge. Proctor says she tends to look back at the pre-war years and the seeds of the conflict. Earlier this year, Oxford University Press released An English Governess in the Great War: The Secret Brussels Diary of Mary Thorp, which she co-edited.