"Une solidarité naturelle": French Schoolmistresses and the Suffering Community, 1914-1918

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Just after the outbreak of World War I, *L’Action féministe*, the mouthpiece of the Fédération féministe universitaire de France et des Colonies (FFU), published an article that read, in part, “The women teacher members of the Fédération féministe universitaire bow with respectful admiration to the memory of all of our dead.”\(^1\) In 1917, the same newspaper would print a piece that included the bitter line, “Man is a God, woman worships him (*l’adore*) and makes herself his slave.”\(^2\) These two sentiments, written a mere three years apart, demonstrate a marked shift in the way the newspaper addressed the male community, which was still engaged in war. How did this group of women go from the quiet solidarity of the early war years to the radical feminist expressions of the later? What do this and other contrasts tell us about how this group of women defined itself? This article examines the content of the FFU’s newspaper to demonstrate how its adherents identified themselves by their “finite, if elastic boundaries,” to invoke Benedict Anderson.\(^3\) These shifts are indicative of the warring allegiances and goals that, as Steven Hause and Anne R. Kenney have demonstrated, plagued the suffragist movement following the war.\(^4\) More immediately, they demonstrate that these women sought to define and redefine themselves throughout the course of the war by who they were, and, just as importantly, by who they were

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This article argues that the evolution of community identity corresponds to the drawing out of the war, and the growing sense of frustration and despair felt by France as a whole. While there are many examples of shifting identities in the pages of *L’Action féministe*, this article focuses first on the competing strands of pacifism, patriotism, and international feminism, and then turns to the expression of disdain for the men of France itself.

Before delving into these shifts, the background of the FFU and its newspaper must briefly be examined. Founded as a study group in 1903 by Nancy-based schoolteacher Marie Guérin, by 1908 the Fédération féministe universitaire boasted 200 members across France. The paper was published from 1908 until the 1920s, and at two francs for a year’s subscription during World War I, FFU adherents received at least five four-page issues a year. The three main voices in the newspaper came from members of the FFU executive board. These women were Jeanne Méo, the secretary-general, Marthe Bigot, the adjunct secretary, and Marthe Pichorel, the treasurer. Méo, the FFU’s second secretary-general and editor of *L’Action féministe* during the war, had been instrumental in creating links in the 1910s between the FFU and the powerful, moderate Union française pour le suffrage des femmes. Bigot would stand as a Communist Party candidate in the 1922 Paris municipal elections. Pichorel received an official warning in 1917 and then was dismissed from her teaching post due to her extreme pacifism (*outrancier*). Other contributors included poet Noëlie Drous, lawyer Pauline Rebour, and Hélène Brion.

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5 Defining identity through exclusion is not unique to these women, or to France. See Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

6 Although the FFU’s full title includes “les colonies,” the only wartime mention of *outre-mer* comes in the form of two 1919 (i.e. postwar) updates from the Tunisian chapter, no. 61 (April-June 1919) and no. 62 (June 1919).


8 Available archives and secondary literature suggest that the newspaper was published until at least 1925, although further research may reveal a longer stretch of publication.

9 Hause, *Women’s Suffrage*, 139.


11 Notably, the pages of the newspaper contain no mention of this event, although it may have been addressed in a section excised by censors. See Bard, *Les Filles de Marianne*, 104, 249, 385.
When the war broke out, the FFU responded similarly to other pacifist organizations, shelving these ideals and pledging itself to the sacred union of France (l’union sacrée). In L’Action féministe’s second wartime issue, in December 1914, Pichorel wrote, “We neither can nor wish to demand the immediate end of the war for a peace at any price; such an attempt would be in vain, and what’s more, hardly desirable.”\textsuperscript{12} However, the FFU continued to express a belief in women’s natural propensity for peace, suggesting that had they wielded political power the war would not have come. That same issue included a letter written by Clara Zetkin, in which the German socialist feminist declared, “Socialist women of all nations, we are not at all responsible for the tragedy that, like a wild animal, devours the people. It is not our fault. By removing our political rights, have we not been withdrawn from the means of deciding war or peace?”\textsuperscript{13} Pichorel’s acceptance of war’s necessity – or at least the danger of peace – and the editorial choice to include the piece by Zetkin, demonstrate the line toed by the women of the FFU. Acknowledging that pacifism was no longer tenable, they still looked toward an ideal of the strength of the international community of feminists.

Other examples of Pichorel’s writing also demonstrate an attempt to maintain an internationalist feminist identity, even as French women declined to attend the April 1915 Women’s Peace Conference in the Hague.\textsuperscript{14} In May of that year, Pichorel suggested that attempts to drive a wedge between the women of France and Germany were plotted by sensationalists. In her article, “No Blind Hatred” (Pas de haine aveugle), Pichorel railed against the aggressive tone taken by the French press, which, with exaggerations and lies, equated “bloody” Wilhelm II and his “thieving financiers” to the German population as a whole, who were tricked into believing that they were fighting a defensive war.\textsuperscript{15}

Pichorel blamed alcoholism and “the habit of blind discipline imposed from childhood on the Germans” for atrocities committed by German soldiers. This sets male aggression and extreme violence within the realm of social ills that women, with their supposed moral influence, were meant to erase, and in the


\textsuperscript{13} Clara Zetkin, “Un Document: Aux femmes socialistes de tous les pays!” L’Action féministe, no. 37 (December 1914-January 1915): 4. The newspaper also had kind words for Rosa Luxembourg.


\textsuperscript{15} Marthe Pichorel, “Pas de haine aveugle,” L’Action féministe, no. 40 (May-June 1915): 1-2.
education of a people, which would be a natural concern for the schoolteachers of the FFU. Pichorel attempted to appeal to a global female community ready to attack societal scourges and re-educate the young, rather than resorting to unhinged patriotism. Hate mongering on the part of French journalists could only lead to future wars, which, like this one, would falsely pit the French and German populations against one another. Thus, Pichorel identifies the French population, and not just German women, but also duped German men, as pitiable victims of both the patriarchy and the false consciousness imposed by an aggressive, elite German leadership.

However, we see from within the FFU a challenge to this assertion of community. In the same issue as Pichorel's embrace of a larger suffering community comes a piece by Bigot which explicitly excluded German women (let alone men) from sharing a common identity with the women of nations like France, Belgium, and Serbia. Bigot asks:

Must one underline how many German women pass voluntarily blind, in silence over the shameful ultimatum on Serbia, the violation of neutral Belgium; who don't see, don't want to see, or maybe – this is even worse – don't know how to see that it's their country, while the rest of the world wanted peace and made every effort to accomplish a pacifist solution, that it is, I say, their country alone, that definitively sent to the flames of the readied funeral pyre a great many billions of all the countries of Europe?

By the spring of 1915, one can already observe in the FFU the push and pull of various identities, including solidarity with the French population as a whole, support of pacifist political movements, and sympathy for women of other nations. Based on their prewar political and moral convictions, an identification with not just women from other countries, but specifically German women, was strongly felt by at least some contributors to the newspaper. Indeed, not only could German women be sympathized with, but even German workers were to be embraced, reflecting the socialist worldview of members of the FFU. Alternatively, patriotism led to expressions of the impracticality of pacifism, and

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declarations of the treacherous nature of German women.

Yet as the war droned on, one can mark a major shift in the elastic boundaries of the FFU’s community. If early in the war these women struggled to define themselves as associated with, or distant from, pacifists and foreign women and workers, the end of the war saw an increasingly narrow definition of community, in which the FFU’s identity came to exclude not only foreigners, but also their French male counterparts. In wartime, public interest wanes after months (and especially years) of conflict. Jean-Jacques Becker posits that disinterest in World War I may have begun as early as 1915, suggesting that the public quickly became incredulous of the “bourrage de crâne,” or brainwashing, of optimistic war reporting. Analyzing public opinion in wartime, Sandi Cooper suggests that mass disillusionment typically follows two years of fighting without victory. This can be observed in the content of L’Action féministe. The February-March 1916 edition of L’Action féministe was the first issue since the war’s outbreak to feature no war-specific content on the front page. Waning public enthusiasm for the war may have emboldened L’Action féministés contributors to attack once-sacred figures, especially French soldiers (poilus), and to defend critics of the conflict, a position that would have put the newspaper, and the FFU, at great risk earlier in the war. As disinterest in the war – or at least less explicit interest in the war – spread, L’Action féministe began to once again redefine its community, and reformulate its indignation to fight against the suffering of its new, even narrower group: French women. Women suffered not just because of the war, L’Action féministe asserted, but also because of injustices committed by their own countrymen.

The venerable image of the soldier was directly attacked in a discussion of rape published in July 1917. While early in the war the newspaper praised French men who accepted children resulting from rape, now these men were cast in a new light. An unsigned article recounted two Versailles women who were “beaten up” by a soldier, Jules Chambroiset, who when arrested said he “wanted to amuse himself a bit.” The article continues:

Feminist moral: Ladies, know how to defend yourselves. Man is your natural protector, very well, like kings are the natural protectors of peoples, like shepherds and butchers are the natural defenders of sheep. And the Jules in question wants very much to protect and defend you

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19 For the early war attitude, see for example Marthe Pichorel, “Pour les femmes victimes des violences allemandes,” L’Action féministe, no. 38 (February 1915): 3-4
against les Jules of Germany.

Only voilà: There aren't only les Jules of Germany. And no one can defend you from those of the interior but yourselves.

A frank discussion of rape is only one example of the way in which the newspaper's content began to reflect the frustration and anger the FFU would come to express towards men — even the once-unimpeachable soldier. In an earlier article in 1917, Hélène Brion contrasted a “picturesque,” spirited soccer match between French soldiers, which concluded with a multi-course meal, with a starving, tubercular mother in a hospital. The woman says, “They said I have to lie down for at least two hours after each meal; - that I mustn't work. And then to eat (Et manger alors)? I have two kids…”21 Brion informed her readers that the “real victim of the war, it's you,” — i.e. women — and “your equals” (vos pareilles).

Beyond war-specific accusations, L’Action féministe reserved some of its harshest criticism for the men of the working class. In late 1915, the newspaper included an excerpt of a Bataille syndicaliste article penned by E. Jaccoud, the secretary of the Mass Transit Union (Union des transports en commun).22 Jaccoud sympathized with public concern that women tram conductors (wattmen) would pose a danger because of their lack of “sang-froid” and “comprehensible weakness.” Rather than launch an editorial attack, L’Action féministe declared it would “limit” itself to copying below the letter part of a 1915 Petit parisien article noting the courage of conductor Madame Perrin, who, when a male conductor lost his nerve as his train headed toward a collision, kept her calm and “cushioned” the impact, suffering contusions. Including Jaccoud’s critique and highlighting his “hypocrisy,” L’Action féministe demonstrated inequality within the working class and the disrespect of its leaders. Thus, FFU members would have understood that although they sympathized and identified with the working class, their sex blocked them from full membership into that community.

L’Action féministe aimed many of its most disdainful attacks of working men’s sexism at the writers of L’Humanité. In Spring 1917, an unsigned article critiqued L’Humanité for running a piece which concluded that women could not deliver the post, as “the work is tough [rude] and the bags are heavy.”23 The FFU author expressed outrage that “the newspaper of Jaurès” could publish the line, “The equality of rights does not signify the equality of work.” L’Action féministe railed not only against their male counterparts’ dismissal of women workers, but also their opinion of what should concern women. In 1916, L’Action féministe threatened to organize a boycott of L’Humanité if it continued to run content that suggested women were either “frivolous dolls” or “slaves […] unable

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23 “Nos Bons Amis,” L’Action Féministe, no. 50 (March-April 1917): 3. The title of the article is instructive.
to understand their role in the organization of a better society.”24 The infuriating content included a February 1916 article, “Secrets of Beauty and Health,” which instructed women on how to achieve white hands and make a rose-colored lip ointment. Hélène Brion’s scathing remarks follow the article, which she labeled “criminal stupidity”:

Rejoice, all you who work in the gutting-houses (babyauteries), in the tanneries, you who look for shrapnel or sweep the streets! Rejoice, all you who live in rags, you who work in glue, in wax, in grease; you who clean the machines! Rejoice, farmers’ daughters and rough peasants who worked the land nearly alone this year! Rejoice, you who work in the mines, you who work in the refineries and whose poor fingers eroded by sugar are no more than a wound! Rejoice!25

The frustration expressed by Brion and other contributors exemplifies the challenges the women of the FFU faced. Educated and politically involved, they nonetheless experienced the patronizing contempt of their male colleagues.

As the FFU narrowed its definition of identity and began to attack its fellow countrymen during the second half of the war, we can observe less explicit war-related references, but also many more signs of government censorship. There are two possible explanations. One is that the censorship board became more sensitive as the war progressed, especially when Clemenceau began to rally against defeatism. Alternatively, it is possible that early in the war, the newspaper chose to self-censor, perhaps out of patriotism or cynicism, while as the war progressed, content became more radical, drawing the censors’ ire.

The increased censorship of L’Action féministe can be read as a combination of editorial decision-making, radicalization of ideas as the war became normalized, and increased government intervention. These three elements are all evident in L’Action féministe’s coverage of the defeatism trial of its contributor, Hélène Brion. Brion, a teacher and member of numerous feminist organizations and the Socialist Party, served since the war’s outbreak as the director of the Fédération des syndicats d’instituteurs et d’institutrices de France et des colonies. Suspended without pay in July 1917, she was arrested on November 17 of that year, accused of distributing defeatist propaganda.26 Along with a soldier charged as her accomplice, she was summoned before the First

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Council of War in March 1918. Numerous feminists, including FFU adjunc- 
secretary Marthe Bigot, spoke for Brion, who ultimately received a suspended 
sentence of three years.

Over the course of Brion’s imprisonment and trial, L’Action féministe 
closely covered the case, always expressing sympathy for the accused. In Bigot’s 
first article on the subject, she mocked those who were scandalized by Brion but 
who remained silent over the controversy of Le Journal director Charles 
Humbert, accused of taking German money, including from Bolo Pasha, who was 
executed for treason in April 1918. Censors effectively ended Bigot’s article, 
leaving blank white columns where presumably there had once been text.

Bigot’s vigorous defense of Brion demonstrates the community the FFU was left 
with at the war’s end. Unlike in the war’s early days, women like Brion – and other 
members of the FFU – no longer viewed la patrie as sacred; it, and its soldiers, 
could be critiqued. While Brion’s trial revealed hypocrisy, and possibly corruption, 
in the government, criticism was also leveled against men of the working class, as 
demonstrated in the FFU’s disdain for L’Humanité Even the beloved figure of the 
soldier was drawn into question. For the members of the FFU, identity was now 
viewed in large part by what they were not: corrupt, violent, thoughtless men.

By voicing their disgust with men across the political spectrum, the women of the FFU once more narrowed their definition of community. Lest it 
seem that L’Action féministe would then return to the fold of internationalist 
feminism, the October 1917 issue published a piece by Pauline Rebour, who wrote 
that reading the newspaper of the International Woman Suffrage Association 
brought “a certain melancholy,” as it announced suffrage progress and victories 
in various countries. Much as women in various Western nations shared a 
struggle for equality under the law, and to varying degrees, in the workplace, the 
final, legislative element of suffrage agitation left each nation on its own. As 
French women celebrated success in Denmark or the United States, the 
universalism of women’s struggles, and therefore common identity, diminished. At 
the war’s end, internationalist feminism lost its sense of common struggle,

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29 Marthe Bigot, “La Liberté d’opinion,” *L’Action féministe*, no. 54 (October 1917): 3. The early date of this article demonstrates that the newspaper took an interest in Brion’s alleged action even before she was arrested.


leaving the FFU with an even more limited sense of identity: the organization’s adherents, and the women they hoped to speak for.

For the women of the FFU, the war wrought suffering, which they experienced as citizens of a nation under attack. But the war also exemplified how the FFU was excluded from certain communities, and how it rejected others to strengthen its own sense of identity. In wartime, the FFU voiced its shifting solidarities, and expressed itself as the leader of a suffering community, through the newspaper *L’Action féministe*. This imagined community – a created space used to assert the identity and goals of the organization – evolved as the realities of wartime changed.

The pages of *L’Action féministe* demonstrate that women were by no means entirely silenced by the war, but the evolution of identity and the balancing of different groups’ demands do indicate the splintered nature of the French suffrage movement. How did the FFU’s decision to align itself in narrower and narrower terms as a community of suffering impact their view of the postwar suffrage push? Having already written angrily of the man’s mistreatment of woman, were they as shocked by the bill’s failure as other suffragists? Copies of *L’Action féministe* from the postwar years are scarce, so it is difficult to analyze their reaction. However, judging by the general waning of suffragist action after the Senate failed to extend voting rights to women, and considering the markedly quieter voice of internationalist feminist and pacifist organizations in the run-up to World War II, one could surmise that the disappointment of the legislative loss, combined with the frustrations of war, led these women to continue identifying with their now narrow community of suffering. It was the only one that had not failed them, even if it had failed to achieve its goal of equality.