



HER WAR, HER STORY: WORLD WAR II



HER WAR, HER STORY: WORLD WAR II

Discussion Guide

For community screenings, panels, and workshops, and for college courses and seminars



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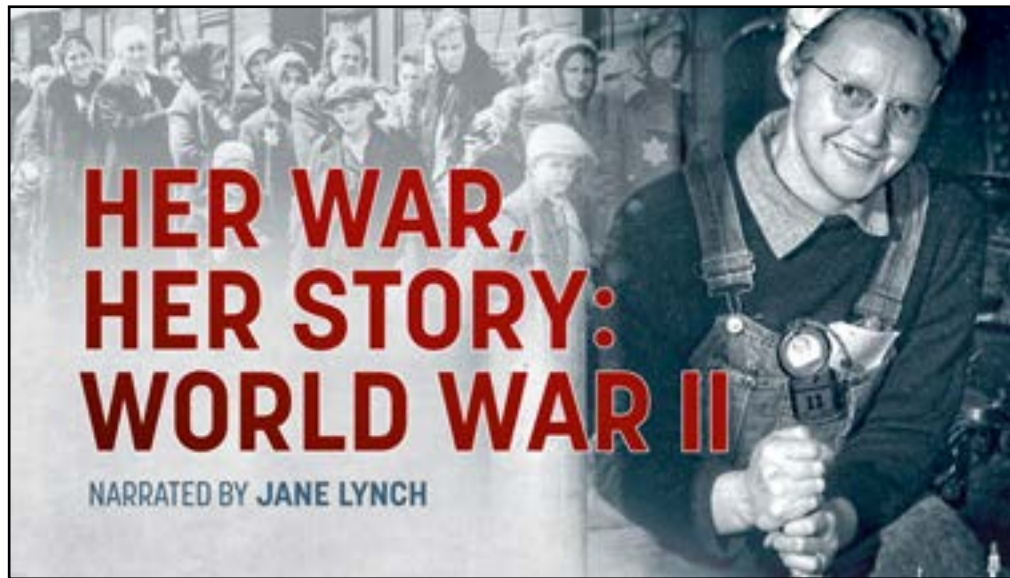
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Facilitation Guidelines

Filmmakers use immersive storytelling to produce intense thoughts and emotions in the viewer. **Journeys in Film** uses this powerful medium as a springboard for meaningful dialogue around humanity's most pressing issues. In this guide, you will find suggestions for leading productive conversations that broaden perspectives, increase global competency, encourage empathy, and build new paradigms for education.

- When watching a film or having a powerful discussion, normalize taking breaks and exercising bodily autonomy. Acknowledge that conversations around complex topics can be vulnerable, complicated, and challenging. Encourage members to voice and do what is right for them without needing to explain or apologize.
- People do their best when they know what to expect. Start and end your meetings on time.
- Share or co-create your intentions for the meeting.
- Create your space. If possible, share snacks or find other ways to create an inviting, comfortable atmosphere.
- Create a trustworthy space. Maintain confidentiality and only speak to your own experience.
- Minimize distractions while you are together. Silence cell phones and devices so you can give your full attention to the conversation.
- Practice whole-body listening. Listen to words, tone, body language, and the feeling in the atmosphere.
- Acknowledge voices that may be absent. Is there a lived experience that isn't represented in your group? Who are the bridge people who might be able to connect you with other people in your community who might bring new perspectives to the table?
- Adopt an attitude of positive intent. If someone says something that bothers you, assume positive intent and ask for more information.
- Ignite your curiosity around other people's views and opinions. Listen to understand, not to respond. You don't need to agree with others in your group or make it known that you are "right" to have a worthwhile conversation.
- Words matter. Be open to learning and practicing new ways to communicate with others.
- Be clear, direct, and kind in your communication. Nobody benefits when you bottle your opinions.
- Everyone has blind spots and biases; cultivate a space of grace as you enter into new territory together.
- If a conversation gets heated, practice acknowledging the tension, pausing as a group, and taking a collective breath together before diving back in or taking a longer break to reset.
- Privilege your relationships with others over the content or agenda of the meeting. Show each other kindness.
- Create a closing ritual that celebrates the time you've spent together and either gives closure or gives members something to think about before your next meeting.

Introduction to the Film



In this compelling documentary narrated by actress Jane Lynch, we consider World War II through women's lives. Viewers hear firsthand accounts from a cross section of women from America, England, France, and Germany. From children sent from London to the countryside during the Blitz to top-secret Enigma code breakers to munitions factory workers, the breadth of experience and contributions of women to the war effort is staggering and inspirational.

The individual stories of more than two dozen women provides a view into the role of women in one of history's most violent conflicts, from the perspectives of those who served, witnessed, or were caught up in a war that proved women were the equal of men when it came to patriotism, service, or in some cases, self-preservation during crises that called for steadfastness.



Letter from the WWII Foundation

Storytelling is at the core of the WWII Foundation, an organization founded in 2011 with a mission to raise awareness and appreciation, through film, of the many sacrifices made by American men and women in securing our basic freedoms. Humankind is hardwired to respond to “once upon a time,” and the Foundation is singularly positioned to leaven the facts and statistics of history, bringing them to life through stories. Our goal is to instill the lessons the War taught us and make them accessible, relatable, and impactful at no cost to students, educators, veterans, or the public. We don’t produce World War II films. We produce documentary films on individual personal stories from World War II. I think there’s a significant difference.



We educate younger generations about the war. We do not approach this in the way WE think is best. We teach based on how students are learning and what tools they themselves are utilizing today to explore history, whether that be through strong visual storytelling in films that capture their attention and imagination or by utilizing new storytelling technologies such as Virtual Reality (VR).

We distribute much of this content through social media channels, as well as via traditional national and international television networks. We film all these documentaries, narrated by some of the biggest names in television, music, sports, and the movies, in the locations where the events unfolded during the war. Often, we bring back a veteran or survivor with us to where their own individual WWII story began and ended. Our studio is in Europe, the Pacific, and the Far East.

We hope these award-winning films, which rank among the top five most-requested programs nationally by PBS and its affiliates, will motivate not only students but also everyone to learn more about this critical period in world history. The lessons of which still strongly resonate today. We make all these resources available for free to anyone who wants to explore World War II’s impact on the lives of those who lived through it.

- Tim Gray, Writer, Producer, and Director, The World War II Foundation and Tim Gray Media

To learn more about the WWII Foundation visit <https://wwiifoundation.org/about/>

U.S. Women Recruited to Work in WWII



<https://catalog.archives.gov/id/513671>



<https://catalog.archives.gov/id/513650>

After the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, the United States entered World War II. Women were recruited from the start to work in the factory jobs left vacant by servicemen. Women also supported the war efforts by enlisting in specialized, female-only branches of the military. Their jobs varied greatly, from machinists to mail sorters, nurses, and “human computers.” Images of women working, like the iconic Rosie the Riveter, were essential and powerful symbols of a country united and everyone doing their share. However, many were worried that women were incapable of performing “men’s jobs” or that their femininity might be irrevocably damaged by service in the war. To allay concerns, media and recruitment efforts emphasized that women’s contributions were only temporary.



Discussion Questions

1. How did women's visible participation in war work serve as both a practical necessity and powerful propaganda that lifted morale and built a sense of unity in the country? How did these images balance celebrating women's contributions while reassuring the public that traditional gender roles would return post-war?*
2. After the war, women's stories were marginalized in films and popular culture. What is the effect of erasing or minimizing these stories as the narrative of the "Greatest Generation" developed? Why is it important to tell the story of women's contributions?
3. What specific changes did wartime work bring to women's sense of capability and independence? How did the abrupt return to domesticity create tension between their expanded sense of self and societal expectations?
4. How might women's work experiences during WWII shape later activism and the women's movement of the 1960s?
5. Compare women in the military during WWII to the integration of women in the military today. What new opportunities are available to women? How is their gender an asset in building community connections in conservative foreign regions?

**Consider looking at a variety of recruitment posters from the time.
A link is provided in the Additional Resources at the end of this document.*

One War, Many Experiences: How Identity Shaped Women's Wartime Experiences



The impacts of gender, race, and nationality on civilian and enlisted women during the war varied. During WWII, British women were conscripted to fulfill jobs related to the war, and while they did not serve in battle, they confronted the horrors of war through frequent bombings and in jobs like repairing tanks that returned from the battlefield with fresh traces of death. In the United States, 350,000 women signed up to work in jobs that they'd had no access to before the war, offering economic power. Many women in the European or Asian theatres were focused on daily survival, through limited food rations, forced assimilation, as well as being firsthand witnesses to the war. So much depended on where they lived, their nationality, and their religion.



Discussion Questions

1. During WWII, American women entered the workforce and became economically empowered, whereas women in occupied territories were concerned with daily survival. How did the war create or amplify different realities for women depending on their identity? What does this disparity reveal about how war's effects are distributed unequally across different populations?
2. How did the contradictory messages of national unity—"we are all in this together"—and the realities of racial segregation affect women's experience during WWII?
3. How do the recollections of young German women like Irmgard and Helga Schmidt compare with those of Jewish survivors like Anna Arbeiter? What do the similarities and differences in their lived experiences reveal about how identity shaped individual experiences of the same historical moment? What can that perspective illuminate for later generations? What can it help us avoid?
4. Why is it important to collect and preserve the stories of civilian witnesses like the young women and children who observed Dunkirk, experienced the attack on Pearl Harbor, or lived through air raids? What perspectives on war do civilian accounts illuminate that military histories might miss, and how can these testimonies help future generations understand the full human cost of conflict?
5. What makes personal stories and oral history valuable for understanding the diverse experiences during WWII? How do these individual stories complement or challenge the broader historical narratives we typically learn about the war?

Code Breakers



<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/how-women-codebreakers-wwii-helped-win-war-180965058/>

In addition to factory jobs and other military support tasks, women were enlisted as “human computers” to help write internal messages and decode sensitive information from enemy forces. In many cases, their code-cracking changed the trajectory of the battles that helped end the war. Nearly 10,000 women were employed as top-secret code workers with high security clearance, and they faced a grueling schedule where deciphered codes could be changed every twelve hours. They were ordered to keep their jobs secret under threat of treason charges and death. By publicly promoting the idea that they did only menial labor, women downplayed their involvement and impact on the war effort. This was an erasure that was not remedied after the war was over, and as a result of the scant official record, the significant contribution of these heroines’ work has been lost.



Discussion Questions

1. After experiencing intellectually demanding, high-clearance work that utilized their full capabilities, how did the expectation that women code breakers return to domestic roles after the war affect them? What does this reveal about society's view of women's wartime contributions as temporary rather than transformative?
2. Why were women code breakers not only denied recognition for their work, but also excluded from the heroic narratives associated with the "Greatest Generation"? How did this different treatment in public memory reinforce gendered expectations, even when women's intellectual contributions were vital to the war?
3. What does it reveal about gendered expectations that the military "did not discriminate when it came to brain-power," yet women were forced to downplay their jobs as "menial"?
4. How might the experience of doing highly classified, intellectually demanding work followed by erasure have shaped these women's senses of their own capabilities and career aspirations in the postwar era?
5. What lessons does the omission of women code breakers' contributions offer about how we construct historical memory? How might including these stories in the public record change our understanding of war and women's capabilities? What other stories might be missing?

After the War: Returning Home, Rebuilding, and Remembering



Ads like the 1953 Alcoa Aluminum ad above were a slap in the face to the women who were instrumental in the war effort through their work as machinists, engineers, pilots, medical personnel, and code breakers.

After the war, women faced various issues as they and society attempted to return to normal. In a powerful cultural backlash, women who had found economic and intellectual autonomy during the war were systematically pushed out of jobs and academia. The role of the postwar housewife gained traction and was heavily promoted as essential to national security and social stability.

In addition, the collective and individual traumas experienced by women throughout the war in the various regions were significant. These lingering effects of emotional scars, guilt, and post-war reflections were suppressed as people were encouraged to move beyond the war and rebuild. The impact of both loss of autonomy and wartime trauma affected women in significant ways. Learning and recording their experiences while still alive, or through archival research, is vital to an understanding of women's history and the broader effects of war.



Discussion Questions

1. How did the postwar impetus for women to return to domestic roles affect those who had experienced economic and intellectual autonomy during the war? What does the framing of housewifery as “national security” reveal about societal anxieties regarding women’s wartime gains?
2. How did women cope with different forms of war trauma, from guilt and complicity (like German women) to loss and displacement (like women in bombed cities)? Consider Julia Parsons’ poignant memory of her role in killing a German soldier who was a new father. How did societal expectations about the separation of duty from emotion, combined with the enforced silence surrounding the event, contribute to unresolved feelings?
3. How do personal stories like Irmgard Schmidt’s, the German woman who sought penance and redemption by working as a servant for Jewish families after the war, help others understand the complex emotions brought on by war and possibilities for healing?
4. Why is it critical to record these women’s stories before the generation that lived through WWII is gone? What unique perspectives on trauma, recovery, and resilience might be lost if we don’t capture these voices?

Additional Resources

Timeline of WW2

<https://wwiifoundation.org/timeline-of-wwii/>

Efforts and resources for creating a WWII women's memorial

<https://wwiowomenmemorial.org/home>

"Rosie, Wendy, and the Government Girls: The women behind the war"

Online article, rich with imagery from the National Museum of American History

<https://americanhistory.si.edu/explore/stories/rosie-wendy-and-government-girls>

World War II recruiting Posters

<https://catalog.archives.gov/search-within/513498?q=women&sort=nald:asc>

"Untold Stories of Women in WWII"

A review of the exhibition at the National WWII Museum

<https://www.aarp.org/veterans/women-world-war-ii-exhibit/>

"6888th Postal Battalion Delivered High Spirits to Weary WWII Troops"

Article from the National Archives

<https://www.archives.gov/news/articles/six-triple-eight>

The Women of the 6888th Central Postal Battalion

<https://www.womenofthe6888th.org/>

"How the American Women Codebreakers of WWII Helped Win the War"

Article in the Smithsonian Magazine

<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/how-women-codebreakers-wwii-helped-win-war-180965058/>

"The Future of Womanpower: Women's Military Corps After the War"

Article describing the uncertainty women met after serving in the war

<https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/womens-military-corps-after-world-war-ii>



Film Credits

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