

## *Frontline Narratives: Uncovering Women's Voices in War Journalism*

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### **Abstract**

In the shadows of the First World War, amidst a landscape dominated by male narratives, emerged a corps of women war correspondents whose stories and perspectives brought a unique lens to the horrors and heroism of the time. This study zeroes in on Margit Vészi, a pioneering Hungarian journalist and the only female member of the Austro-Hungarian War Correspondents' Corps. Through her, we explore not only the significant yet underrecognized contribution of women to war journalism but also the broader implications for our understanding of liberty and equality during the era. By navigating the trenches of a male-dominated field, Vészi and her contemporaries challenged the traditional roles of women, offering insights into the battlefield that blended emotional depth with critical observations. This research, grounded in a thorough analysis of over a hundred articles and two travelogues authored by Vészi, seeks to answer critical questions: How did these women secure their positions on the front lines? What drove them to embrace such peril? And most importantly, how did their narratives diverge from and enrich the existing historical record? Employing an interdisciplinary approach, this study draws upon history, journalism, gender studies, and European studies to illuminate the unique contributions of women war correspondents. By doing so, it not only enriches our understanding of the First World War but also underscores the evolving role of women in the public sphere. Margit Vészi's experiences offer a compelling case study for examining the intersection of gender, war, and journalism.

Keywords: War Journalism, Women Correspondent, History, Narratives, Communication

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## Introduction

It is no exaggeration to say that reports of war are almost as old as humanity itself. However, the art of war reporting only started to emerge at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, when 'professional' journalists began to send their war stories to the mother country. It is important to note that the development of the profession was also fuelled by a number of social, technological and economic developments, including the invention and spread of the telegraph, which allowed for the rapid exchange of information over long distances. The development of war reporting as a profession was thus the result of a number of factors, and at the turn of the century 'everything was in place'. It is worth mentioning the Crimean War of 1853-1856, which was one of the first conflicts to be covered in detail and on a regular basis, and where journalists' reports had already had a significant influence on public opinion and political decisions. In another important example, the American Civil War, which lasted from 1861 to 1865, saw many journalists and photographers<sup>1</sup> working on the front lines; but the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-1871 also had a major impact on public opinion and, not least, contributed to the development of war reporting.

In fact, the journalistic profession has changed considerably over its long history. The first journalists initially used leaflets, pamphlets and manuscripts to spread information, but industrialisation and the development of newspaper technology made cheaper and faster printing possible, which revolutionised the profession. By disseminating news more quickly and reaching a wider readership, journalists were able to increase their influence throughout the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. Their role gradually became one of conveying information, maintaining objectivity and critically assessing society. It is important to note, however, that the journalistic profession has constantly changed and evolved as a result of new technologies and social changes in the media, and has faced and continues to face challenges and opportunities. And this is still the case today.

During the First World War, journalists played a major role in covering events and spreading the news. However, content journalists faced many challenges in a wartime environment, made more difficult by technological limitations and divergent political, economic and cultural interests: censorship, dangerous working environments, physical difficulties, communication barriers, psychological burdens, propaganda and manipulation, linguistic and cultural challenges, and the fatigue of accessing information. These are just some of the more significant examples of the difficulties faced by journalists working in the First World War.

It was then, at the end of the 19th century, that some women began to break out of the so-called traditional social roles of wife, mother and housewife, and more and more of them began to challenge themselves in new roles.

As we know, in this historical era, women at European level had relatively few opportunities to participate in public life or to play any role (other than as factory workers or in certain professions such as saleswoman, nanny, governess, etc.) in the male-dominated civil labour market. However, a few bold and unconventional women recognised the potential of literature, drama, the visual arts and later journalism, among others, as early as the second

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<sup>1</sup> Photographs by Matthew Brady (1822-1896) and Alexander Gardner (1821-1882) documented the horrific events of the war in detail, and had a major impact on public opinion. As some of the best-known photographers of the era, their work was devoted to chronicling the war. Gardner is credited with the publication of Gardner's Photographic Sketch Book of the War, the first major collection of photographs of the Civil War. They both contributed to the development of photography as a recognized documentary tool.

half of the 19th century. I would have to say, that these women<sup>2</sup> were able to create financial independence or financial security.

The female journalists who first appeared in the second half of the 19th century often had to fight against the social expectations and preconceptions of the time, but their diligence and talent (determination and perhaps daring) eventually brought about a major breakthrough not only in the journalistic profession but also in the way women were perceived. Soon they were able to write on subjects that had previously been the exclusive domain of men: first on cultural and artistic issues, then on politics and social problems. In any case, the role and importance of women journalists gradually increased alongside women writers at the turn of the century, which greatly increased the diversity of cultural and press life.

### Who Was the First Female War Correspondent?

If we were to name the first female war correspondent, we would have a difficult task. More than one would "run for the honour". We don't know for sure. In fact, several women have played a significant role in establishing the profession of war correspondent at different times and places in history. And these brave and often bold women have also contributed for example to social change and the promotion of women's equality.<sup>3</sup>

The pioneering role of women war correspondents is significant in many ways:

- **Promoting gender equality:** the presence and work of women war correspondents has fundamentally changed traditional gender roles and prejudices. At the turn of the century, the majority of women had a triple role: housewife, wife and mother.<sup>4</sup> But women war correspondents proved that they could perform (almost) as dangerous and challenging tasks as men.
- **Women showed new perspectives:** women journalists often approached war events from a different angle than their male counterparts. Women's narratives put more emphasis on the human suffering, the situation of the civilian population and the social consequences of war.<sup>5</sup>
- **Nursing and humanitarian assistance:** in the context of Florence Nightingale<sup>6</sup> and other nurses, the reports focused not only on the war, but also on health care and the physical and mental health of soldiers, thus increasing the recognition of humanitarian assistance.

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<sup>2</sup> Nash, R., & McNamara, J. (2018). American Women and World War I. *Teaching Literacy Through History*, 4.

<sup>3</sup> Andersen, K. (2017). Female War Correspondents and their Effect on Female Military Positions. *Journal of Undergraduate Research and Scholarly Excellence, Volume VIII*. Retrieved from <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/57e07645e6f2e1f209bad8f9/t/58e2df3f03596e1e82b06dc3/1491263437638/Female+War+Correspondents.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Jeki, G. (2023). Újságírók az első világháborúban - a női haditudósítók megjelenése. *Somogy*, 106-115.

<sup>5</sup> Buonanno, M. (2012). Women war correspondents: does gender make a difference on the front line? In *Libro de Actas del I Congreso Internacional de Comunicación y Género*. Sevilla, 18-19. Published in: Libro de Actas del I Congreso Internacional de Comunicación y Género. Sevilla, 5, 6 y 7 de Marzo de 2012. Dir. Juan Carlos Suárez Villegas; comité organizador Irene Liberia Vayá y Belén Zurbano Berenguer (pp. 800-816). Sevilla: Facultad de Comunicación. Universidad de Sevilla

<sup>6</sup> Florence Nightingale (1820-1910), British nurse and statistician, founder of modern nursing. She is best known for her work during the Crimean War, where she revolutionized hospital hygiene and nursing practices, significantly reducing mortality rates. Additionally, by applying statistical methods, she promoted healthcare reforms and the development of health policy. Nightingale remained actively involved in advancing health education and women's rights throughout her life.

- **Relations with the local population:** several women war correspondents were good at establishing contacts with the local population and communities affected by the war. In many cases, their empathy<sup>7</sup> and communication skills helped them to produce reports from the field, which often contained more detailed and accurate information than a 'general' report.
- **Using new style in the journalism:** Margaret Bourke-White,<sup>8</sup> for example, was a pioneer in war photography, setting new standards in photojournalism and contributing to the development of visual storytelling.
- **Courage and determination:** female war correspondents (like their male counterparts, of course) were often put in life-threatening situations, where they showed courage by example. Martha Gellhorn,<sup>9</sup> for instance, was committed to reporting first-hand on the war and often broke the rules to get to the front line.
- **A pioneering role in the journalism profession:** by creating a pathway for women in war reporting, they created opportunities for later generations. The first women war correspondents contributed to the growing role of women in journalism and war reporting<sup>10</sup> and related professions.

We don't know who was the first female war correspondent. However, we should definitely talk about these some ladies. I have already mentioned some of them above, but in the following I would like to go into a little more detail about these pioneering women who could "aspire" to the imaginary title of the first female war correspondent.

**Margaret Fuller** (1810-1850): the American Margaret Fuller worked in the mid-19th century, and many literatures consider her (and Jane Cazneau, mentioned later) to be among the first female war correspondents. Fuller was an American philosopher, writer and journalist who was a quick learner, had an excellent memory and an extraordinary talent for language. She was constantly training and improving her skills, which later enabled her to become a successful editor, writer, journalist, war correspondent and philosopher. She was the first woman to have access to the Harvard College library. She wrote for many newspapers and reported for the New York Tribune (later becoming its first woman editor) from England and Italy, but was also sent to cover the Italian Revolution and War of Independence of 1848-49.<sup>11</sup> She interviewed many prominent writers, including George Sand and Thomas Carlyle. Her seminal work, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, was published in

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<sup>7</sup> Fowler-Watt, K. (2018). Women War Correspondents: From the Frontline, with Empathy. *BSA Auto/Biography Yearbook*, 9-10.

<sup>8</sup> Margaret Bourke-White (1904-1971) was an American photographer and documentary filmmaker, one of the first female war correspondents and the first woman to work for Life magazine. During her career, she took many iconic photographs, including images taken during the Great Depression and on the front lines of the Second World War. He is particularly well known for his documentaries on the Soviet Union, the struggle for independence in India and the life of Mahatma Gandhi. Bourke-White's style and courage revolutionised photojournalism.

<sup>9</sup> Martha Gellhorn (1908-1998), American journalist, war correspondent and author, considered one of the most important war correspondents of the 20th century. During her career she covered many major conflicts, including the Spanish Civil War, World War II, the Vietnam War and the Six Day War. Gellhorn's work was notable for its insight and human-centred approach, with a particular focus on civilian suffering.

<sup>10</sup> Glassler Nobert, & Mód, L. B. (Eds.). (2018). *A Nagy Háború hatása a mindennapok kultúrájának változására*. A Vallási Kultúrakutatás Könyvei 35. Szeged: MTA-SZTE Vallási Kultúrakutató Csoport, SZTE BTK Néprajzi és Kulturális Antropológiai Tanszék, 116-128.

<sup>11</sup> Szymkowska-Bartyzel, J. (2018). Successful Against All Odds? – Margaret Fuller: The Self-Made Woman in the Nineteenth Century. *Journal of American Studies*, 19, 143-154.

1845; after its publication, she wrote to a friend: "I had put a good deal of my true self in it, as if, I suppose I went away now, the measure of my footprint would be left on earth."<sup>12</sup>

It is important to note that, although women's war reporting as a relatively accepted profession and concept can perhaps only be discussed from the late 1930s, many female journalists, editors and correspondents could have been in the running for the imaginary title of "first female war correspondent."

**Florence Nightingale** (1820-1910): although known primarily as a nurse, Florence Nightingale also covered the Crimean War in the 1850s: she arrived in Turkey with a group of thirty-eight British nurses when Britain was at war with Russia during the Crimean War (1854-1856). She saw that patients were not given adequate food and medicine, and that the appalling conditions meant that more men died of illnesses 'contracted' in hospital than of their injuries.<sup>13</sup> Nightingale's writings contributed to the development of nursing and health reforms.

**Mary Livermore** (1820-1905): wrote for the Chicago Tribune newspaper during the American Civil War, while volunteering for the Sanitary Commission,<sup>14</sup> an organisation dedicated to improving health care. She and her husband edited the Unitarian newspaper *New Covenant*. Throughout her work on the commission, she worked on the belief that women needed the right to vote or to be eligible to vote in order to bring about social reform.<sup>15</sup>

**Jane Cazneau** (1807-1878): the first American woman to cover the Mexican-American War for the *New York Sun*. She is often called the most prolific female journalist on US foreign policy during the antebellum period. Cazneau has worked as a journalist, lobbyist and publicist, and has been contracted by several newspapers. She was sent by President Polk on a secret peace mission to Mexico in 1845 and wrote about the war under the pseudonym "Cora Montgomery."<sup>16</sup> She is known as the first woman war correspondent in the American history.

**Elizabeth Southerden Thompson** (as known, Lady Butler) (1846-1933): primarily known as a painter, she not only painted but also wrote reports during the Crimean and Afghan wars that had a major impact on British public opinion. She was recognised as a painter of the period, and her historical paintings were exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1874 - she was later elected a Fellow of the prestigious organisation. Her paintings and writings remained generally realistic, but she tried to portray the heroism of soldiers.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Slater, A. (1978). *In search of Margaret Fuller*. New York: Delacorte Press, 89.

<sup>13</sup> Skeet, M. (1988). Florence Nightingale – A women of vision and drive. *World Health Forum*, Vol. 9, 175-177.

<sup>14</sup> The United States Sanitary Commission (USSC) was a private relief agency created by federal legislation on June 18, 1861, to support sick and wounded soldiers of the United States Army (Federal / Northern / Union Army) during the American Civil War. 1-22. p. See the details: Robertson, Elisabeth: The Union's "Other Army": The Women of the United States Sanitary Commission. Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, accessed May 11, 2023,

[https://www.gilderlehrman.org/sites/default/files/inline-pdfs/Elizabeth%20Robertson\\_0.pdf](https://www.gilderlehrman.org/sites/default/files/inline-pdfs/Elizabeth%20Robertson_0.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> Ulysses S. Grant: Mary Livermore. Retrieved

from <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/grant-livermore/>

<sup>16</sup> Hudson, L. S. (2001). *Mistress of Manifest Destiny: A Biography of Jane McManus Storm Cazneau, 1807-1878*. Texas State Historical Association, 34-96.

<sup>17</sup> Butler, E., Lady (1907). *Who's Who*. Vol. 59, 264.

**Martha Gellhorn** (1908-1998): one of the best-known American women war correspondents, she covered a wide range of conflicts from the Spanish Civil War to the Vietnam War. Although she was the third wife of Ernest Hemingway, who also fought in the wars, her career remained entirely independent of her husband. During her lifetime, she published no fewer than six novels, six collections of short stories, one co-written play, and more than 140 articles and short stories in magazines and newspapers.<sup>18</sup>

Although they are not the first female war correspondents, as they represented the female journalists of the later era, I believe it is important to mention **Margaret Bourke-White** and **Clare Hollingworth**, both pioneers in their fields. Margaret Bourke-White (1904-1971) was the first female photographer for Life magazine and one of the first female photojournalists to cover the front lines of the Second World War, from which she photographed iconic images.<sup>19</sup> Clare Hollingworth (1911-2017) was the first war correspondent to cover the outbreak of the Second World War for The Daily Telegraph.<sup>20</sup> Her coverage of the 1939 German invasion caused a sensation. She reported from many countries after the outbreak of the war and. After the war broke out, she reported from many countries and – according to many accounts – her work was respected by her male colleagues and she was seen as an expert on the strategic and political background to the conflicts she covered.<sup>21</sup>

### **Women in the First World War**

During the First World War, few women were accredited to the Imperial and Royal War Press Headquarters,<sup>22</sup> which was directly subordinate to the army.<sup>23</sup> War news was therefore often reported from the place where they lived, worked or visited for one reason or another. Some were allowed to visit the front lines with official permission, others stayed away from the actual war sites but were able to report on the fighting as eyewitnesses. Nurses who worked in field hospitals during the First World War often wrote about their experiences. Others focused on the home front and the impact of the war on civilians. Although they were a kind of amateur and casual observers, their notes and reports proved essential to understanding the war narrative. During the war, the Press Headquarters grew into a larger and more important institution, employing hundreds of artists and journalists.<sup>24</sup>

But we must not forget the skilled women journalists who worked as journalists before the war broke out and then went to the front with the men. Women war correspondents from warring and neutral countries were present in the main theatres of war in Europe and the Middle East from 1914 to 1918.<sup>25</sup> Although the Allies and the central powers strongly

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<sup>18</sup> Salamon, H. L. (2003). Martha Gellhorn and Ernest Hemingway: A Literary Relationship. (Master's thesis). University of North Texas, 1-55.

<sup>19</sup> Gaze, D. (Ed.). (1997). *Dictionary of Artists, Volume 1*. Taylor & Francis, 1512.

<sup>20</sup> She was in Poland on 1 September 1939 when the Third Reich launched an attack on the country. She informed the embassy in Warsaw, but nobody didn't believe her.

<sup>21</sup> Sebba, A. (2017). Clare Hollingworth obituary. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2017/jan/10/clare-hollingworth-obituary>

<sup>22</sup> Its original name, in German Das kaiserliche und königliche Kriegspressequartier, KPQ for short.

<sup>23</sup> KRIEGSARCHIVE AOK-KPQU Box 1, Geschichte

<sup>24</sup> Andrea, S. (2014). Ein Raum, dessen Zugang nur den dort Unbeschäftigten gestattet ist“. Die Schriftsteller im Kriegspressequartier. In *Der Erste Weltkrieg*. Retrieved from <https://ww1.habsburger.net/de/kapitel/ein-raum-dessen-zugang-nur-den-dort-unbeschaeftigten-gestattet-ist>

<sup>25</sup> Grayzel, S. R. (2017). *Women's Identities at War: Gender, Motherhood, and Politics in Britain and France during the First World War*. W. Ross MacDonald School Resource Services Library.

restricted the entry of journalists into the war zones, a significant number of women managed to enter the front lines or their surroundings.

But who were these women war correspondents who did such a wide range of work in the First World War? Without wishing to be exhaustive, I mention the neutral Spanish journalist Sofía Casanova, who reported from the Eastern Front for the Spanish newspaper ABC; and American journalists Nellie Bly, Peggy Hull, Louise Bryant, Bessie Beatty, Rheta Childe Dorr and Helen Johns Kirtland, who covered events in Russia and sent news back home from the Western Front. On the Allied side, Louise Mack reported on the German invasion of Belgium for the British newspapers, while Flavia Steno wrote war stories in Italy for *Il Secolo XIX*.<sup>26</sup>

The Austro-Hungarian Monarchy granted official accreditation to women war correspondents in a unique way. In addition to a total of 271 male journalists during the First World War, seven women were accredited by the military's central press service. Among them stand out the Austrian Alice Schalek, the German Maria Magda Rumbold, the German Thea von Puttkamer and the Hungarian Margit Vészi.<sup>27</sup>

### **The Hungarian Voice: Margit Vészi**

During the four years of World War I, Margit Vészi travelled to a total of fourteen countries, where she published over a hundred articles, took photographs, conducted exclusive interviews (for example, with Pope Benedict XV), and created caricatures.<sup>28</sup> Her articles were not only picked up by Hungarian newspapers but also by foreign publications. I have to say, Margit was proficient in four languages: Hungarian, German, Italian, and French.

“I also photographed many of the horrors of the First World War, including the trenches, the wounded, and the villages blown to ruins” – wrote Margit Vészi in her report.<sup>29</sup>

Vészi wrote over a hundred articles during the terrible period of the First World War, including numerous front-page stories and exceptional editorials. She conducted interviews, gathered information at press headquarters, travelled extensively, talked to locals, but also wrote about her impressions and feelings.

By her own admission, both in her articles and in her book of reports, she was constantly “contemplating the terrible, destructive senselessness of war”. She reflects this mood in all her writings, which are both subjective and reportorial in nature, but also imbued with emotion while recreating the mood of the time and place, providing a real-time experience of contemporary events, but not neglecting the specificity of the female narrative. These writings reveal the mind of the war correspondent Margit Vészi, focusing on her attention, her techniques of information gathering, her journalistic attitudes, and both the difficulties and the beauty of her work. They also present the views and dominant ideas of the time, the

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<sup>26</sup> Seul, S. (2019). Women War Reporters. In U. Daniel, P. Gatrell, O. Janz, H. Jones, J. Keene, A. Kramer, & B. Nason (Eds.), *1914-1918 Online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War*. Berlin: Freie Universität Berlin.

<sup>27</sup> Margit Vészi is the central figure of my research and doctoral thesis.

<sup>28</sup> Based on research for my own PhD thesis, and on a map I made myself based on two volumes of reports by Margit Vészi, *The Burning Europe and On the Road*. (Vészi, M. (1915), *Az égő Európa*. Budapest: Dick Manó; and Vészi, M. (1918), *Útközben*. Budapest: Singer és Wolfner

<sup>29</sup> Sárközi, M. (2019). *Margit*. Budapest: Kortárs Könyvkiadó. 56.

political and social ideals that guided them. We can read about the soldiers' initial expectations, enthusiasm, and optimism entering into the First World War. We can observe the clear belief in victory held by the Central Powers initially.

It is evident that the multilingual war correspondent skilfully immersed herself in the social and political milieu she was reporting from. Thanks to her, we can meet real people, experience the daily life of the time, sometimes devastating, sometimes more peaceful, follow the historical events of the war, and observe the ever-changing narrative. Moreover, Margit Vészi used numerous adjectives, literary descriptions, and dialogues in her reports.

## **Conclusion**

Women war correspondents can provide a new, female perspective on the interpretation of historical events, which is not only interesting from a historical but also from an interdisciplinary point of view. They can represent the changing role of women in this challenging period while offering a broader framework for understanding a particular historical era. I believe that it will be worthwhile in the future to further explore the life histories of women who covered the First World War and the diversity of their writings, even from a comparative and transnational perspective.

Margit Vészi used numerous adjectives, literary descriptions, and dialogues in her reports. However, these literary formulations are often almost entirely interspersed with the sounds of machine guns in action, the devastation caused by shells, the failure of peace negotiations, and the horror of bombing. Her writings capture the prevailing mood of the times, enabling readers to witness the different perspectives on the war expressed by belligerents, politicians, diplomats, soldiers, the wounded, prisoners, and journalists.

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