



Women Warriors: An Unexpected History

Pamela D. Toler

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Who says women don't go to war? From Vikings and African queens to cross-dressing military doctors and WWII Russian fighter pilots, these are the stories of women for whom battle was not a metaphor.

The woman warrior is always cast as an anomaly--Joan of Arc, not G.I. Jane. But women, it turns out, have always gone to war. In this fascinating, lively, and wide-ranging book, historian Pamela Toler draws from a lifetime of scouring books for mentions of women warriors to tell their stories and to consider why women go to war.

Tomyris, ruler of the hard-riding Massagetae, and her warriors killed Cyrus the Great of Persia when he sought to invade her lands. She herself hacked off his head in revenge for the death of her son. The West African ruler Amina of Hausa, a contemporary of Elizabeth I, led her fierce warriors in a campaign of territorial expansion for more than thirty years. Like Elizabeth, she refused to marry; unlike Elizabeth, she never claimed to be a Virgin Queen. Contemporary accounts of medieval sieges in Europe describe women using firearms, participating in night raids, joining in the defense of breaches in the walls, and fighting hand-to-hand at the improvised barricades that often provided a last line of defense. Among the examples of female samurai in Japan are the Joshigun, a group of thirty seriously combat-trained women who fought against the forces of the Meiji emperor in the late 19th century.

These are the stories of those who commanded from the rear and those who fought in the front lines, those who fought because they wanted to, because they had to, or because they could. Considering the ways in which their presence has been erased from history, Toler concludes that women have always fought: not in spite of being women but because they are women.

Women Warriors: An Unexpected History Details

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From Reader Review Women Warriors: An Unexpected History for online ebook

Mimi says

Interesting primer on female warriors throughout history, with a nice balance time- and location-wise. If you already read up on the subject, you can pretty much skip this one, I already knew about most women mentioned...
Nevertheless a good starting point if you are interested in the subject.

Ashley says

Really informative, interesting and well-written. Has a academic bent to it, but is still accessible. Drawws on a very diverse variety of case studies (ethnically, historically, etc.)

Annarella says

An interesting read but it could have been better organized.
I appreciated the style of writing and the well researched material but it wasn't my cup of tea.
Many thanks to the publisher and Edelweiss for this ARC

Melisende d'Outremer says

The author states her intent is to bring women warriors out of the historical shadows; to consider the reasons that they have taken up arms and how those reasons related to their roles; and the consequences of their actions.

I am actually going to be very blunt here - this is very basic stuff that a good google search can produce. I myself have written about over half the women mentioned; have read the same books; have read the same internet articles. And if this is your area of interest, then you also have already - so nothing new, no "unexpected history". I could literally just publish my own blog as a book (which is what this looks like to me - at times I felt as if I was reading my own works).

There are lots of snappy titles - "father's daughter", "widows", queen" - you get the gist - but I felt it could have been better organised. Yes, there is a great spread of warrior women across time, but it is presented in a hodge-podge sort of way (under the snappy titles) rather than in chronological order. Had the author (editor, publisher) maybe presented the work in this way, we the reader may have been able to see more of a development in the ways women took to the battlefield. You don't unfortunately get this - just some randomly arranged biographies interspersed with some commentary and biographies that don't really seem to fit under any the chapter. We finish with a dozen or so references - six biographies - though the notes are a little more extensive.

No star rating from me - I surprised myself by even finishing it to be perfectly honest.

Please bear in mind that this is my review of the book and its presentation, not the author; I know how huffy people can get in defending their favourite authors.

I would be very interested in the thoughts of those for whom this area is something completely new.

Carol Kean says

Woman as Warrior may seem like an oxymoron, but women have a long history of fighting and taking lives. In the old world view, “It is no more possible for a mother to kill than for a warrior to give birth,” Pamela D. Toler writes.

If you’ve heard of only a few warrior women (namely, Joan of Arc and Boudica), it isn’t because there’s been no more than a few. It’s because men took charge of writing and record keeping, and women had no place there--especially not women who defeated men in battle--but some women are so extraordinary, their stories live on in spite of their neglect by historians.

How does one author decide which women to include in her own little volume on Women Warriors?

Toler explains, “Some women are warriors by any measure you choose--they wield a sword, fire a weapon, drop a bomb, or throw rocks down the wall of a besieged city. They get their hands dirty.” For the purposes of this book, Toler focuses on women “in the theater of war, near the front lines, giving orders, planning operations and making command decisions, but someone who is not expected to lead the charge personally.”

That must account for the glaring omission (in my opinion) of Lozen, the Chiricahua Apache warrior woman (c. 1840-1890). Her brother Victorio said, “Lozen is my right hand, strong as a man, braver than most and cunning in strategy. Lozen is a shield to her people.” She fought beside Geronimo and died of tuberculosis in confinement at Fort Sill, Oklahoma. I’ve blogged about Lozen, a Chiricahua Apache, and the Mescalero Apache warrior woman Dahteste (supposedly pronounced ta-DOT-say, which I would never guess from the spelling), said to be a beautiful woman who took great pride in her appearance. She married and had children, yet chose the life of the warrior. She could out-ride, out-shoot, out-hunt, out-run, and out-fight her peers, male and female, with grace. Courageous, daring and skillful, she took part in battles and raiding parties alongside her husband and a good friend of her family, Geronimo. Dahteste was imprisoned with Geronimo and his remaining followers.

“I saw a magnificent woman on a beautiful horse—Lozen, sister of Victorio. High above her head she held her rifle. There was a glitter as her right foot lifted and struck the shoulder of her horse. He reared, then plunged into the torrent. She turned his head upstream, and he began swimming.” (source: Powerful Apache Warrior Women: Lozen & Dahteste)

It pains me to see our Native warrior women missing from a book that celebrates courageous women of history who “have been pushed into the shadows, hidden in the footnotes, or half-erased.” On the bright side, Toler does include “the girl who saved her brother” at Little Big Horn in 1876, a Cheyenne named Buffalo Calf Road Woman. Armed with a six-shooter, she rode and fired many bullets alongside her husband throughout the battle.

Toler includes China’s folk hero Mulan in this history in spite of the absence of biographical details about her. As a huge fan of Disney’s Mulan, I’m not complaining. I just wonder why Lozen and Dahteste were passed over.

From the second millennium B.C.E. to World War II's "night witches," Russian women aviators, Toler fills in a lot of historical gaps. "The main thing that struck me when I looked at women warriors across cultures rather than in isolation is how many examples there are and how lightly they sit on our collective awareness," Toler writes. That was one of many quotable quotes one could add to the Goodreads pages of author quotes.

Toler did her due diligence with research. She uncovered a wealth of information and apparently had trouble sifting through and deciding how many details to include. Every single page contains footnotes. To me that is distracting. The dates and historical details are necessary, but to me, they detracted from the spirit of the Women Warriors. I realize this book is not "Women Who Run With the Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype" by Dr. Clarissa Pinkola Estés, but that book captures the energy and mythic element I feel is missing from Toler's brief history.

Still, Toler's book fills a void in historical collections, and I recommend it to everyone, whether you think you're interested or not. You should be interested. You should care about the overlooked women who fought as valiantly as any male war hero. I can't make you care and I can't make you read the book, but I will at least make you aware of it. And that's the best I can do.

Note: I read this book as a paperback, not via my Kindle, which forced me back to the archaic world of pencil and paper and jotting down notes so I could find quotable quotes when it comes time to write a review. There is a lot of good stuff in this book - my scribbled notes do not even come close to showing how many.

Jill Meyer says

Do you look at the military in the United States and think about how many women are within the ranks? The fighters who patrol the areas at war and that new Seal Team recruit? Are women fighting a new thing in our armed forces a new thing? "Not so", says historian Pamela Toler. Toler, whose new book, "Women Warriors: An Unexpected History", is a look at women through history who have fought for their countries, both under-cover and in the open. Women have actually fought in battles at the sides of their husbands and sons and in defense of their cities under siege.

Pamela Toler's book does not have to read all in one sitting. In fact, her individual chapters on women-in-history are best read on their own. She writes about women we all know about - Joan of Arc, for instance - and those lesser known women who fought in Asia and Africa. Her writing is lively, as befits someone with her own historical website can write to engage the reader. I also like the fact that the footnotes are in the text, as opposed to being at the end of the book.

Will "Women Warriors" appeal to the average reader? I think so; Toler seems to write "popular history" with a flair, making the history given an easy accessibility not often found in more scholarly works. And if you're looking for a good work of fiction about women at war, pick up Rita Mae Brown's delightful novel, "High Hearts" about a woman who disguises herself as a man to fight beside her husband in the Civil War.

Debbie says

This book is as much about how various cultures (including modern America) have viewed women warriors as it is about the warrior women themselves. Each chapter had several examples of that theme (Queens who

led troops, etc.) and each biography was about 3 pages long. The bios covered why the woman went to war, what she did during the war, and how her contemporaries viewed her. Between each bio (and even within it), the author commented on people's attitudes about the female warriors. It was an interesting, brief overview of the fact that women have been going to war from ancient to modern times and in cultures all over the world.

I received an ADC review copy of this book from the publisher through Amazon Vine.
