

[Swift on Ailes, 'Courage and Grief: Women and Sweden's Thirty Years' War'](#)

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The following book review from H-War may be of interest to some H-Women list members.

Author:

Mary Elizabeth Ailes

Reviewer:

Lauren Swift

Mary Elizabeth Ailes. *Courage and Grief: Women and Sweden's Thirty Years' War*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017. 234 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4962-0086-0.

Reviewed by Lauren Swift (Rutgers) **Published on** H-War (February, 2019) **Commissioned by** Margaret Sankey (Air War College)

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Mary Elizabeth Ailes examines the scope and scale of women's contributions to Sweden's rise as a European military powerhouse in the decades surrounding the Thirty Years' War (1620-60). Ailes argues that women from across social, economic, and geographic spectrums navigated the triumphs and hardships of extended conflict in ways that not only buttressed Sweden's war effort, but also had profound repercussions across Swedish society. Ailes's consideration of these women's diverse experiences of war enriches our understanding of a pivotal period in Swedish history. By illuminating the centrality of the home and household to the Swedish war effort, Ailes offers an important alternative to the traditional narratives of early modern warfare.

Each chapter of *Courage and Grief* mobilizes richly textured vignettes about women's experiences of war to demonstrate how the Thirty Years' War saturated Swedish life. The chapters' thematic organization emphasizes Ailes's argument that at every level of society, and in every corner of Sweden's expanding territories, women "[exerted] influence that helped shape the kingdom's policies and decisions during the war" (p. 168). Chapter 1 expands upon existing research about the presence of women in campaign camps by focusing on the social, economic, and personal opportunities—and misfortunes—that life on campaign brought to the wives of officers. Women on campaign retooled their peacetime roles to fit their shifting situations, and elite women formed important economic and diplomatic links between the Swedish army and local communities. Chapter 2 highlights the detrimental effects that periods of heavy conscription (1627-41) had on Swedish peasant families and argues that women, especially in Swedish colonial territories where conscription quotas were higher, developed strategies to mitigate the fragmentation of their communities. Mobilizing informal and socially expected forms of influence to protect their families' well-being, women hired substitutes to fill quotas when they could afford to and petitioned royal officials for compensation for the service of

their husbands and sons. Chapter 3 reveals that officers' wives on the "home front" also preserved their families' affairs and advocated for their families' futures while their husbands were absent abroad. Acting to maintain their families' social, political, and economic influence, widowed women exercised considerable power of their own as they secured their children's inheritances, brokered protective alliances, and promoted their husbands' legacies. Chapter 4 concentrates on two aspects of Queen Christina's performance as a wartime monarch (regency, 1632-44; rule, 1644-54) and addresses the fraught interplay between women and warfare as the professionalization of militaries increasingly excluded women from the battlefield. Like all of the women in *Courage and Grief*, Queen Christina's actions were informed by societal expectations that revolved around the household. But in the period of the Thirty Years' War, women on the Swedish "home front," faced with uncertain futures, found ways to navigate around social constraints and played crucial roles in Sweden's ascendance as a military powerhouse.

To weave together a military history that situates women's contributions and experiences at its core, Ailes calls upon a diverse cast of characters. Specialists in the field will be unsurprised to encounter Agneta Horn's autobiography and the archives of other well-documented elite women. Available private correspondences illustrate how elite women drew on social and familial networks to negotiate wartime pressures, while petitions to local and royal officials, notes from the Swedish Council of State, and official resolutions offer brief glimpses into the lives of peasant women. *Courage and Grief* synthesizes a rich body of Swedish-language secondary scholarship, with which Ailes engages to both include women's experiences in Sweden's Finnish and Livonian territories and to reinforce, for Anglophone readers in particular, the tremendous impact that warfare had on Swedish society during the seventeenth century. The inclusion of regional and local maps would have helped unfamiliar readers visualize the considerable distances that these women traversed.

Implicit in *Courage and Grief* is Ailes's turn toward the space and institution of the household as a tool for interrogating the ongoing separation of women's history and military history. The "home front"—even the Swedish home front, which was uniquely sheltered from much of the destruction surrounding the country's overseas front lines—is centrally constitutive to Ailes's argument that women regardless of social, economic, or geographic difference attended directly to the opportunities and hardships of warfare. Ailes contends that, in order to "create a more complete picture of how the war was fought and its impact on the people involved," historians need to take seriously women's contributions (p. 170). However, the significance of the *space* in which these contributions were carried out is mostly tacitly regarded here, and a more overt discussion about the "home front" as a methodological tool would increase the portability of Ailes's project to other early modern contexts. The home front as a framework offers an exciting way that historians of early modern warfare can craft more comprehensive histories that treat women's contributions attentively. Historians should overtly discuss the advantages and limitations that the home front, as a concept that is grounded in twentieth-century wartime propaganda, poses to early modern contexts.

Courage and Grief cogently surveys women's significant contributions to the Swedish war effort during the Thirty Years' War. Specialists and nonspecialists alike will appreciate how Ailes weaves together a textured account of the impact warfare had across seventeenth-century Swedish society and the central role that women played. Crucially, by highlighting the "home front," *Courage and Grief* charts a potential path forward for historians to reexamine the impact of early modern warfare on society that relies centrally on women's experiences.

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