

Uniformity and Individuality

Traditional Costume, Nurse's Dress, Uniform – The Clothing of Red Cross Nurses in the First World War as Presented in the Autobiographical Texts of Adrienne Thomas and Helene Mierisch (1930/34)*

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Since their establishment and professionalization in the 19th century, nurses working for the Red Cross have been recognizable by their clothing: a white cap, a white apron, a red cross brooch, and a white armband with a prominently displayed red cross. To this day, the uniform is known by various names: it has been called a nurse's dress (*Schwesterkleid*), a traditional costume (*Tracht*), and a uniform. Red Cross nurses were trained in times of peace to care for the sick and the wounded in the case of war.

In this essay, I would like to ask: what importance does this clothing have for the self-understanding of nurses, and to what extent has Red Cross traditional costume/the nurse's dress/the Red Cross uniform shaped and changed these women's self-perception?

Since the meaning of clothing is culturally specific, I would like to focus on a very particular phase in the history of Red Cross nurses. In the last years of the Weimar Republic, Germans reflected deeply upon the events of World War I. This reflection and public debate was shaped in large part by the memoirs, often written as novels, of those who had taken part in the war, as well as by academic publications treating politics, medicine, and society. In the debates regarding the role of Red Cross nurses in the war, clothing took on an important role.

In this essay, I would like to examine two autobiographical novels written by women working for the Red Cross during the World War I. The two women differed greatly both in their political orientation and in the way they dealt with their experiences in the war.

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The first book consists of the fictionalized memoirs¹ of Adrienne Thomas, and was published in 1930 under the title *Die Katrin wird Soldat* (Katrin becomes a soldier).² Adrienne Thomas (1897–1980, real name Hertha Strauch) grew up in Metz/Alsace-Lorraine in a bourgeois Jewish business family. At the outbreak of the war, the seventeen-year old Thomas became a Red Cross volunteer/assistant nurse. Adrienne Thomas kept a diary during this period. The original manuscript from the years 1915/16 has been preserved, and served as the basis for the author's later novel, *Die Katrin wird Soldat*.³

Adrienne Thomas began her education as a nurse in 1916 in Berlin. She treated her experiences in the war as a Red Cross volunteer and nurse in her autobiographical diaristic novel *Die Katrin wird Soldat* (1930). This pacifist work quickly became a bestseller and was dubbed “the female counterpart of Remarque.”⁴ Not only was the book published in multiple editions in German⁵, it was also translated in the 1930s into other languages with great success.⁶ The book was banned

¹ Adrienne Thomas chose to record her memories of the war in the form of a novel, written as a personal diary and featuring *Katrin* as the main character. Nevertheless, Thomas often emphasized the autobiographical content of her novel *Die Katrin wird Soldat*, basing much of it on her own diary of the period. Cf. my essay, “Ich glaube nicht, daß ich es für mich behalten darf” – Die autobiographischen Veröffentlichungen von Krankenschwestern zum Ersten Weltkrieg,” in *Selbstzeugnis und Person – Transkulturelle Perspektiven*, ed. Claudia Ulbrich, Hans Medick, and Angelika Schaser (Cologne; Weimar; Vienna: Böhlau, 2012), 155–171.

² The first English translation was published in 1931 with the title *Katrin Becomes a Soldier*. For the novel *Die Katrin wird Soldat* see: Herman Moens, “Die Katrin wird Soldat: A Fictionalized Diary of the First World War,” in *German Women Writers 1900–1933. Twelve Essays*, ed. Brian Keith-Smith (Lewiston et al: Mellen, 1993), 145–163; Brian Murdoch, “Hinter die Kulissen des Krieges Sehen: Adrienne Thomas, Evadne Price – and E.M. Remarque,” in *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 28 (1992/1), 56–74; Helga Schreckenberger, “‘Über Erwarten grauenhaft’. Der I. Weltkrieg aus weiblicher Sicht. Adrienne Thomas: *Die Katrin wird Soldat* (1930),” in *Von Richthofen bis Remarque: Deutschsprachige Prosa zum I. Weltkrieg*, ed. Thomas F. Schneider and Hans Wagener (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2003), 387–398. In print again since the end of 2008, with extra appendices and an updated afterword: *Adrienne Thomas, Die Katrin wird Soldat und Anderes aus Lothringen. Mit einem Nachwort von Günter Scholdt* (St. Ingbert: Röhrig, 2008). For her other books written in exile see: Brigetta Marie Abel, *Identities in flux: The exile Novels of Adrienne Thomas, Irmgard Keun, and Anna Seghers* (Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International, 2000).

³ *Adrienne Thomas: Aufzeichnungen aus dem Ersten Weltkrieg. Ein Tagebuch*, ed. Günter Scholdt (Cologne; Weimar; Vienna: Böhlau, 2004).

⁴ Cf. for example Dr. Wera Basse's letter to the editor regarding *Katrin wird Soldat* in the *Vossischen Zeitung* of September 28, 1930. She remarks, “Thank you for this female version of *All Quiet on the Western Front*!” See also Moens, *A Fictionalized Diary*, 157 and the appendices in *Katrin wird Soldat-Ausgabe von 2008*, 379f. Erich Maria Remarque's *Im Westen Nichts Neues* (Berlin: Propyläen, 1929) was the most successful and well-known anti-war novel of the period. The book was published in English in 1929 as *All Quiet on the Western Front*, trans. Arthur W. Wheen (London: Putnam, 1929).

⁵ Cf. Scholdt, *Afterward*, 459: 15,000 copies were sold within two weeks, 100,000 after five months. By 1932 sales had again doubled.

⁶ The work has been translated into English, French, Italian, Dutch, Czech, and Hebrew, among others. Cf. Moens, *A Fictionalized Diary*, 156.

in 1933 and fell victim to Nazi book burnings. Adrienne Thomas emigrated first to Austria, then to France. She was detained in 1940 in Gurs, but fled the internment camp to New York with the help of friends.⁷ In 1947 she returned to Vienna.⁸

In the anti-war book *Die Katrin wird Soldat*, Adrienne Thomas uses the development of the protagonist Katrin to express the futility of war. The text is divided into three parts, beginning with the pre-war period. The second part treats the outbreak of World War I; the third and longest portion treats Katrin's experiences in the war until her death in December of 1916. Like the author, Katrin comes from a Jewish business family in Metz⁹ and volunteers for the Red Cross service at the beginning of World War I. Just like Thomas, Katrin found herself in close proximity to the front – that is in Metz and its surroundings – during her time “in the service of her country.” She served first in the train station service of the Red Cross and in a military hospital, and later in various hospital wards. The novel describes the way in which Katrin's experiences in the war turned a spirited and musically highly talented girl into a disillusioned, hopeless young woman. This transformation occurs not only in the protagonist, but in a number of other people of her generation as well, especially in Lucien, with whom Katrin falls in love. Neither of the two survives the war: Lucien dies of his war injuries, Katrin of a serious infection.

The second book I will examine is Helene Mierisch's 1934 novel, published in the form of a diary, entitled *Kamerad Schwester*¹⁰ (Comrade, Sister).¹¹ It was published in Nazi Germany in a number of different editions.¹² Helene Elisabeth Mierisch, née Augustin (1896–1988), was born in Einsidel/Saxony (Germany). There is little biographical information on Mierisch that does not come from her

⁷ In New York, Adrienne Thomas wrote, among other things, for the *Free World Magazine* and published several other books with the exile publishing house *Allert de Lange*, including the 1938 *Katrin! Die Welt brennt!* and the 1944 novel *Reisen Sie ab, Mademoiselle!* For information on Thomas' life and oeuvre, see Karin Sinhuber, *Adrienne Thomas. Eine Monographie* (Vienna: University, Diss., 1990); Erika E. Theobald, “Adrienne Thomas,” in *Deutschsprachige Exilliteratur seit 1933*, ed. John M. Spalek and Joseph Strelka, vol. 2 (Bern: Francke, 1989), 905–913.

⁸ By that time, Adrienne Thomas was writing mostly children's books and essays for various daily newspapers. Some were published in the collection *Da und Dort* (Vienna: Danubia-Verlag, 1950), while her earlier books were published in new editions. Thomas' literary activities went beyond writing, though, and in 1948 she became a member of the Austrian PEN-Club. On June 26, 1973, she received the professor title from the Austrian Ministry of Education.

⁹ Metz is a city in Alsace-Lorraine and is located on the German-French border. In 1871 Alsace-Lorraine became a part of Germany, but was returned to France following World War I.

¹⁰ Helene Mierisch, *Kamerad Schwester*. 1914–1918 (Leipzig: Koehler und Amelang, 1934).

¹¹ Helene Mierisch later published other autobiographical works, including *Ein Griff ins Leben. Aus meiner Schwesternarbeit* (Biberach: Koehlers Verlagsgesellschaft, 1953) and *Ärzte, Schwestern und Soldaten. Erlebtes aus zwei Weltkriegen* (Biberach: Koehlers Verlagsgesellschaft, 1957). For Mierisch's life and oeuvre, see Birgit Panke-Kochinke, *Unterwegs und doch daheim. (Über-) Lebensstrategien von Kriegskrankenschwestern im Ersten Weltkrieg in der Etappe* (Frankfurt am Main: Mabuse, 2004).

¹² Following the first edition of 1934, a second edition was printed during the first year of the war in 1939; the third, entailing 27,000 copies, was printed in 1940.

own autobiographical works. She, too, treated the sick and the wounded as a Red Cross nurse in World War I, although her position and the places where she served are not known. After the war, she apparently continued caring for those injured in battle. After getting married at the end of 1921, Mierisch ceased working as a nurse until the outbreak of World War II. She also had two children. During the World War II, Mierisch again served as a Red Cross nurse.

Kamerad Schwester is divided into four parts. The outbreak of World War I comes after only six pages. The protagonist Elisabeth, who is seventeen years old, is actually still too young to serve as a Red Cross nurse. However, by changing the birth date on her identity card, she is able to enter the Red Cross service anyway. She first works in the epidemiology ward of a military hospital on the German-French border, and is later moved to various military hospitals on the Eastern front (parts two and three). The fourth part includes her activities in a field hospital on the Eastern front, the revolution, and her return home, which is described as sad and without glory. The entries end a few weeks after the end of World War I, in December 1918. Appended to the text is a three-page afterword, which describes “a reunion of the old military war hospital” during Pentecost 1934. Looking forward, Mierisch emphasizes her willingness to support the personnel of the hospital in the case of the outbreak of another war. The text is an expression of early Nazi militarism.

Both Adrienne Thomas and Helene Mierisch use their books, published 1930 and 1934 respectively, to describe their duties as Red Cross nurses at the beginning of World War I. Both were almost the same age during their service. Their respective texts treat not only the past, but reflect upon and position themselves within the political context of the end of the Weimar Republic and the first years of National Socialism: the first (*Die Katrin wird Soldat*) is pacifist, and takes a cautionary tone, while the second (*Kamerad Schwester*) acts almost as a handbook for wars to come, motivating women to enter military service.

In my analysis of the two novels, I would like to draw upon the cultural studies discourses of the interwar period as they related to the Red Cross nurses who served in World War I. This discourse was precipitated by the *Sittengeschichte des Weltkrieges* (History of the Customs of the World War), published by Magnus Hirschfeld in 1930.

Magnus Hirschfeld (1868–1935) was a doctor and a sexologist. As a doctor he was, among other things, employed in a military hospital during World War I, but it was through his later work as a sexologist that he became famous. In 1919 he founded the Institute for the Science of Sexuality (Institut für Sexualwissenschaften) in Berlin, which was destroyed by the Nazis in 1933. Hirschfeld had already emigrated at that point. In 1930, he published the two-volume work called *Sittengeschichte des Weltkrieges*.¹³ This history of manners and customs was one of the

¹³ Magnus Hirschfeld, (ed), *Sittengeschichte des Weltkrieges*, 2 vol. (Vienna: Verlag für Sexualwissenschaften Schneider & Co., 1930), especially the fifth chapter, “Erotik in der Krankenpflege,” 137–168.

most well-known microhistories of World War I. Its success, which has lasted until this day, is probably not unrelated to the many photographs and drawings included in the work, some erotic, others pornographic. A project of the Institute for the Science of Sexuality under the auspices of Dr. Andreas Caspar, the book consists of the contributions of ten authors whose names are listed only on the cover. Unfortunately, it is virtually impossible to know who composed which chapter. The book has twenty-two chapters, as well as a foreword, afterword, appendix, and bibliography. Of interest here is the fifth chapter, listed under the heading "Women"¹⁴ and with the title "Eroticism in Nursing." Preceding this chapter is the following heading, which do not however correspond to any sections in the text: "Sexual curiosity, Scopophilia, Coprolagnia and the Sadism of the Caregiver – Service in the Military Hospital as a Means to an End – The Bad Reputation of the Female Caretaker – Female Visits in the Trenches."¹⁵ It is not clear who wrote this text. I will follow the secondary literature in starting with the editor of the collection, Magnus Hirschfeld.¹⁶

Before I begin my textual analysis, I would like to treat the history of Red Cross nurses with special attention to their clothing. I would then like to assess the degree to which clothing regulations signal the caring for the sick and the injured, one of the most important duties of Red Cross nurses.

1. *Traditional Costume, Nurse's Dress, Uniform – The Historical Formation of the Red Cross Nurse Uniform in Germany*

The Red Cross was founded and funded in several countries beginning in the mid-19th century in order to care for the sick and the wounded, especially in times of war. Red Cross nurses were trained to provide medical services in war. In this way their clothing became not only a political, but a military issue.

In the mid-19th century, the Red Cross began training nurses. The Patriotic Women's Leagues (*Vaterländische Frauenvereine*), which were incorporated institutionally into the Red Cross, were responsible for the clothing, education, and procuring of nurses.¹⁷ The activities and the structure of the Patriotic Women's

¹⁴ This heading featured three chapters, and included, in addition to the one treated here, chapter 3: "Die Dame in der Loge" (The Lady in the Loge), 51–80; and chapter 4: "Die Kriegerfrau auf dem Leidensweg" (The Warrior Woman's Life of Suffering), 87–136.

¹⁵ Hirschfeld, *Sittengeschichte*, 137.

¹⁶ Cf. for example Klaus Theweleit, *Männerphantasien*, vol. 1: "Frauen, Fluten, Körper, Geschichten" (Frankfurt am Main: Rowohlt, 1977).

¹⁷ For early Patriotic Women's Leagues in the time of the Wars of Liberation (Napoleonic Wars, 1813–1815), (a selection), see Dirk Alexander Reder, *Frauenbewegung und Nation. Patriotische Frauenvereine in Deutschland im frühen 19. Jahrhundert (1813–1830)* (Cologne: SH-Verlag, 1998); Karen Hagemann, "Deutsche Heldinnen. Patriotisch-nationales Frauenhandeln in der Zeit der antinapoleonischen Kriege," in *Nation, Politik und Geschlecht: Frauenbewegungen und Na-*

Leagues, who were the carriers of the sisterhoods, offered a sort of “feminine alternative” to the male-dominated military.¹⁸ At the same time, the leagues aligned themselves with military ideals, which in turn influenced nursing practices. As Andrea Süchting-Hänger has shown, the Patriotic Women’s Leagues compared their duties to the mandatory military service of men,¹⁹ and saw their work caring for the sick and the injured as the female contribution to national defense.²⁰ They described the “traditional costume of Red Cross women as corresponding to the soldier’s uniform, as a ‘royal skirt’ or ‘robe of honor.’”²¹ Not only clothing, but other military symbols like decorative medals were adopted.²² An examination of clothing demonstrates that the Red Cross nurses corps was involved in the politicization of women from the very beginning.

Educational treatises from the first years of the 20th century pay special attention to the clothing of Red Cross nurses. A treatise of 1911, for example, explains that the nurse’s dress is “not a mere superficial detail”²³ but “a nurse’s jewelry and dress of honor.”²⁴ It demands that nurses “protect the honor and the sanctity of the dress and the nurse’s profession.”²⁵ The dress is the “symbol of merciful, eager beneficence.”²⁶ The meaning of the clothing was to be communicated to the future nurses already during their training. The 1913 *Catechism for Red Cross Volunteers*,²⁷ organized as 444 *Questions and Answers Regarding the Treatment of the Sick and Healthcare* stated:

tionalismus in der Moderne, ed. Ute Planert (Frankfurt am Main; New York: Campus, 2000), 86–112.

For the Patriotic Women’s Leagues in the mid-19th century, see, Dieter Riesenberger, *Das Deutsche Rote Kreuz: eine Geschichte 1864–1990* (Paderborn; Munich: Schöningh, 2002); Herbert Grundhewer: “Von der freiwilligen Kriegskrankenpflege bis zur Einbindung des Roten Kreuzes in das Heeressanitätswesen,” in *Medizin und Krieg: Vom Dilemma der Heilberufe, 1865–1985*, ed. Johanna Bleker (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1987), 29–44; Jakob Vogel, “Samariter und Schwestern: Geschlechterbilder und -beziehungen im ‘Deutschen Roten Kreuz’ vor dem Ersten Weltkrieg,” in *Landsknechte, Soldatenfrauen und Nationalkrieger: Militär, Krieg und Geschlechterordnung im historischen Wandel*, ed. Karen Hagemann (Frankfurt am Main; New York: Campus, 1998), 322–344.

¹⁸ Andrea Süchting-Hänger, “‘Gleichgroße mut’ge Helferinnen’ in der weiblichen Gegenwart. Der Vaterländische Frauenverein und die Politisierung konservativer Frauen 1890–1914,” in *Nation, Politik und Geschlecht: Frauenbewegungen und Nationalismus in der Moderne*, ed. Ute Planert (Frankfurt am Main; New York: Campus, 2000), 131–146.

¹⁹ Süchting-Hänger, “Vaterländische Frauenverein,” 138.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 141.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 138.

²² See, for example Thomas, *Katrin*, 285f. Cf. also Süchting-Hänger, “Vaterländische Frauenverein,” 137.

²³ Schwester Anna von Zimmermann, (Oberin), *Was heißt Schwester sein? Beiträge zur ethischen Berufserziehung* (Berlin: Verlag von Julius Springer, 1911), 5.

²⁴ Zimmermann, *Was heißt Schwester sein?*, 4.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

²⁷ *Katechismus für “Helferinnen vom Roten Kreuz.” 444 Fragen und Antworten aus dem Gebiete der Kranken-, der Gesundheitspflege und des Samariterdienstes*, compiled by health officer Dr. Eschle (Munich: Verlag der Aertzlichen Rundschau Otto Gmelin, 1913).

"What else casts doubt on the proper upbringing of a nurse?" –
 "If her clothes are wanting in cleanliness and orderliness."²⁸

Both the education and the clothing of Red Cross nurses presented Christian elements in a modern guise. Let us take, for example, Charlotte von Caemmerer's 1915 book, *Berufskampf der Krankenpflegerin in Krieg und Frieden* (The Professional Battle of the Nurse in War and in Peace).²⁹ The title, which refers to times of war and peace, suggests that the establishment of the Red Cross nurses constituted, among other things, a struggle over resources on the job market.³⁰ This struggle was reflected in the arena of clothing as well, and led to an effort to distinguish the appearance of nurses from that of nuns and deaconesses, who were considered slovenly, sluggish and out of fashion:³¹

"The Red Cross Federations have begun to recognize the hygienic functions of the nurse's uniform. The fabric of the dress is becoming lighter in color, since it is washed more frequently. The white aprons are changed daily. The heightened demands of the profession resulting from the development of medical science require unobstructed hearing. Hence the caps have gotten smaller and leave the ears uncovered."³²

Changing the white aprons daily is seen among Red Cross nurses as *the* symbol of hygiene. This points to the close relation between uniforms and conceptions of hygiene, which have mutually reinforced one another since the 19th century.³³ It is a relation that can be found in household manuals dating back to the 19th century.³⁴ For Caemmerer, notions of hygiene were related to the progressivism, the higher qualifications, and the general modernity of the Red Cross nurse.

If the terms *traditional costume* and *nurse's dress* are used in these official writings with reference to their particular characteristics, so too do they address issues related to war and to the duties of a wartime nurse, an association deeply rooted in the image of the Red Cross nurse.³⁵ This emerges in the image of the Red Cross uniform as protection.³⁶ As Anna von Zimmermann suggested in her 1911 *Beiträge zu ethischen Berufserziehung* (Contributions to an Ethical Professional Education): "The traditional uniform [*Tracht*] protects the nurse in public."³⁷

²⁸ Ibid., 10.

²⁹ Charlotte von Caemmerer, *Berufskampf der Krankenpflegerin in Krieg und Frieden* (Munich; Leipzig: Duncker und Humblot, 1915), 120.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., 120f.

³² Ibid., 120.

³³ Cf. Gabriele Mentges, "Uniform-Kostüm-Maskerade. Einführende Überlegungen," in *Uniformierungen in Bewegung. Vestimentäre Praktiken zwischen Vereinheitlichung, Kostümierung und Maskerade*, ed. Gabriele Mentges, Dagmar Neuland-Kitzerow, and Birgit Richard (Münster; New York: Waxmann, 2007), 13–27 (pp. 18–19).

³⁴ Cf. Elke Gaugele, *Schurz und Schürze. Kleidung als Medium der Geschlechterkonstruktion* (Cologne; Weimar; Vienna: Böhlau, 2002), 208–210.

³⁵ See, for example, the publication of Anna von Zimmermann, (Oberin), *Die Hilsschwester vom Roten Kreuz* (Leipzig: Verlag von Julius Springer, 1915).

³⁶ Cf. Grundhewer, "Von der freiwilligen Kriegsrankenpflege," 146–147.

³⁷ Zimmermann, *Was heißt Schwester sein?*, 5.

Although the Red Cross nurses had a close connection to the military since their founding, clothing regulations at the beginning of the 20th century rarely speak of a *uniform*, despite the fact that in the 1907 *Kriegs-Sanitätsordnung* (Regulations for the medical service in war),³⁸ two service uniform designs were specified for the case of war. This consisted of a grey dress with a white collar and white cuffs, a white apron, a white cap, and a dress to be worn outside the hospital. In 1912 this was codified into Prussian law as a “legally protected general service dress for nurses, assistant nurses, and assistants of the Red Cross.”³⁹ The professional clothing for nurses and assistant nurses consisted of a white cap with an embroidered red cross, a grey work dress and a mandatory brooch. Since the Red Cross was organized on a regional level, Germany-wide uniform clothing was not yet in place at the beginning of World War I. However, clothing across the country was very similar, featuring a brooch and a white armband with a red cross as common marker that made nurses identifiable as part of the army medical service (in addition to the Red Cross identification card). The head covering (cap) was also considered mandatory.

Although the regulations regarding Red Cross nurse uniforms are related first and foremost to the military context, this is not their only association. Rather, their meaning should be understood in the greater cultural context regarding uniforms. Recent research has suggested that uniforms gained in importance over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Jochen Ramming, for example, has examined three different types of uniforms, namely the clothing of civil servants, rabbis, and the national folk costume movement led by women’s organizations during the Wars of Liberation (Napoleonic Wars).⁴⁰ Ramming’s research demonstrates that uniforms existed not only in military contexts; other social groups, too, aspired to distinguish themselves from others through their clothing. Clothes emerged in this context “as tools used self-consciously for group formation and for the construction of a new bourgeois social order.”⁴¹ Uniform dress was perceived by the social groups examined by Ramming as “clothing of identification,”⁴² that is, an expression of a commitment to a newly forming social order. In this sense, the cultural and political meaning of uniform clothing was, accord-

³⁸ Riesenberger, *Das Deutsche Rote Kreuz*, 108-109.

³⁹ Cf. <http://www.dhm.de/sammlungen/alltag2/textilien/drk.html/> (accessed 9 January 2012); and Riesenberger, *Das Deutsche Rote Kreuz*, 101.

⁴⁰ Jochen Ramming, *Die uniformierte Gesellschaft. Zur Rolle vereinheitlichender Bekleidungsweisen am Beginn des 19. Jahrhunderts. Beamtenuniform – Rabbinertalar – Nationalkostüm* (Würzburg: Veröffentlichungen zur Volkskunde und Kulturgeschichte, 2009).

The *Wars of Liberation* (Napoleonic Wars) refers to the engagements of 1813–1815, during which Germany was liberated from French occupation. The wars were catalyzed by opposition movements in Prussia (which had begun in 1806/7) and the catastrophic French campaign in Russia in 1812.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 285.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 284.

ing to Ramming, “in no way [...] a passive and anti-individualistic manifestation of existing social structures.”⁴³ The individuals examined by Ramming used uniforms in order to integrate themselves into newly developing social structures and to associate themselves with new social ideals. Ramming therefore sees uniformity as “a tool for constructing societies”⁴⁴ and emphasizes, “in this way, it became in a deeper sense an expression of a general commitment to the new bourgeois civil society of the 19th century. Uniforms became a symbol of modernity.”⁴⁵ “Using uniforms,” however, as Gabriele Mentges writes, is “not to be understood merely as the result of modernization processes; rather, it acts from the very beginning as a model for the possible social relations of modernization and contributes to its establishment.”⁴⁶

Red Cross clothing should not simply be equated with a uniform. Rather, it is a conglomerate of various features and terms. To this day, it is referred to in the literature as “traditional costume,” “nurse’s dress,” and/or “uniform.” These appellations are the result of various historical and social designations and meanings that have been unified in the figure of the Red Cross nurse.

The traditional costume (*Tracht*) marks the social and intellectual development of the nurse’s profession from the nurses of the Catholic religious orders.⁴⁷

The nurse’s dress (*Schwesterkleid*) incorporates these religious associations within a more secular appellation. The word clearly refers to the professional clothing of a *woman*, and – more so than traditional costume – associates nursing with the female sex. Both the *traditional costume* and the *nurse’s dress* allude to the deaconesses that emerged in the mid-19th century and constituted the Protestant counterparts to Catholic nursing.⁴⁸

The word *uniform* emphasizes the military duties of a nurse. In contrast to *traditional costume* and *nurse’s dress*, the concept has male connotations.

Not only *uniform*, but also the traditional costume and the nurse’s dress can be understood in the context of the culture of uniforms. All three terms refer to both military and civil contexts. Since nurses wear their professional clothing both in times of peace and in times of war, when it comes to clothing, at least, the boundaries between war and peace become permeable. From a gender studies perspective, therefore, one must examine the meaning this clothing had both in the self-perception of nurses and in their perception by others.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 286.

⁴⁵ Ibid. See also Mentges, “Uniform-Kostüm-Maskerade,” 13-15; and Gabriele Mentges, “Die Angst vor der Uniformität,” in *Schönheit der Uniformität. Körper, Kleidung und Medien*, ed. Gabriele Mentges and Birgit Richard (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 2005), 17-42 (pp. 21-23).

⁴⁶ Mentges, “Die Angst vor der Uniformität,” 27.

⁴⁷ For traditional clothing in general, see Ramming, *Die uniformierte Gesellschaft*, 13-15.

⁴⁸ Cf. Riesenberger, *Das Deutsche Rote Kreuz*, especially 90-92.

II. *Dressed for War – Descriptions of Red Cross Clothing in Autobiographical Texts*

Clothing is a recurring theme in Adrienne Thomas' autobiographical novel, *Die Katrin wird Soldat*, marking various phases of the author's life. It symbolizes both autobiographical and historical developments in the novel.

In both chapters treating the pre-war period, the author begins with a description of clothing. Light clothing with bright colors dominate. Two descriptions are particularly striking, Katrin's beloved 'lemon yellow dress'⁴⁹ and the uniformly designed 'Kiel clothing'⁵⁰ that acts as a fashionable expression of militarized Wilhelminism.⁵¹ The novel contrasts these two items of clothing with one another.

The protagonist mentions her "yellow eolienne dress"⁵² when she goes on vacation with her parents and falls in love with one of the other hotel guests, a certain Johann. She feels that Johann treats her not as a child, but as an adult. He praises her voice and her musical talent, and asks to call her only by the name 'Maria.' She wears the lemon yellow dress to an evening reception held on the last day of her vacation, where she encounters Johann once again. Johann compliments her outward appearance. In doing so, he criticizes the German culture of uniforms, which forces "all the young girls into those awful Kiel sailor suits as soon as they can walk."⁵³ Katrin responds: "Everyone in my class wears the Kiel clothing; it is so beautiful and so comfortable, having no buttons or hooks."⁵⁴ The debate between the two ends with Katrin's words: "All the same, I now love the lemon yellow dress best, because of him, of course."⁵⁵

In the last chapter of the novel, which treats World War I, all the colorful light fabrics disappear. All that Katrin describes now is her Red Cross nurse clothing. In wartime, she puts on "the white, freshly-washed, holiday apron with sleeves, with the Red Cross armband on the left arm."⁵⁶ Using quotation marks and highlighting their function, she describes her own Red Cross nurse's clothing as a "uniform," qualifying [her] for anything."⁵⁷ At this point, Katrin is still a nurse's assistant in the service of the Red Cross. After finishing her training, Katrin reflects on her newfound position as a full-fledged Red Cross nurse, again through the lens of clothing:

⁴⁹ Thomas, *Katrin*, 41.

⁵⁰ Ibid., cf. Mentges, "Die Angst vor der Uniformität," 33-34.

⁵¹ Cf. Mentges, "Die Angst vor der Uniformität," 19-21. Wilhelminism refers to the period of the German Empire under Wilhelm I and Wilhelm II (1871-1918).

⁵² Eolienne "is a modern, light, and soft half-silk fabric." Sonja Steiner-Welz: *Mode 1900-1920* (Mannheim: Reinhard Welz Vermittler Verlag e.K., 2007), 26.

⁵³ Thomas, *Katrin*, 41.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 234.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

"Is that really me? Cathérine Lentz? Are those my legs in the patched woolen stockings? Is that my chest under the rough woolen dress, with the coarse linen apron? The same chest that was kissed by Lucien? Am I Cathérine Lentz? No, I am *Nurse Katharina* [...]"⁵⁸

If in the pre-war period it was light, colorful clothing that defined Katrin's appearance, in times of war it was rough woolens and coarse linens. Katrin often describes herself in the text as a "half soldier."⁵⁹ In doing so she marks her transformation from a carefree young girl to an adult woman whose identity is shaped in large part by her profession: "No, I am Nurse Katharina [Schwester Katharina]."⁶⁰

In *Die Katrin wird Soldat*, clothing expresses Katrin's shifts in identity as well her entry into new fields of activity. First, the colorful, soft clothing expresses Katrin's transition to a young woman. It is through her clothing that she emerges publicly as a young woman, thus gaining access to new spheres such as parties and *soirées*.⁶¹ During World War I, Katrin takes on a new appearance, one as a Red Cross nurse. With her armband and brooch⁶², apron and cap, Katrin not only gains access to arenas closed to civilians, but also expands her personal mobility and takes on new duties and responsibilities. She acts as a woman in a male-dominated space. The idea of gender-segregated spheres is not questioned, but reinforced. Women were given their own spaces within the military context.

At the same time, changes in clothing and their coloring are reflective of political changes, and relate to historiographical processes of making meaning. The carefree pre-war years give way to the gray routine of war. The latter is expressed in the mass of *feldgrau* soldiers (field gray, referring to the color of their uniforms) that dominate public spaces: "Troops of *Feldgrauer* are constantly arriving, heading for the front"⁶³ and: "the streets are all *feldgrau*."⁶⁴

In her autobiographical publication *Kamerad Schwester*, Helene Mierisch, too, refers to her Red Cross clothing as a 'uniform' – emphasizing the word in the same way as Adrienne Thomas does: "I awake in the morning by concerned knocking on the door, lying in front of the bed, still in full 'uniform'."⁶⁵ In contrast to Adrienne Thomas' book, however, Mierisch's autobiographical works contain no references to clothing in the pre-war period. It is the Red Cross uniform alone that matters. The cap takes on particular importance. Already at the very beginning of the book, Mierisch writes that she took leave of her parents "with the now omnipresent

⁵⁸ Ibid., 319.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 199.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 319.

⁶¹ Ibid., 39-41.

⁶² Ibid., 234, 285.

⁶³ Thomas, *Katrin*, 164.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 193.

⁶⁵ Mierisch, *Kamerad Schwester*, 36.

cap.”⁶⁶ In the workplace, the cap functions as an important symbol of equality among the various nurses: “the cap, like the uniform, brings equality.”⁶⁷

There are pragmatic reasons for this particular emphasis on the cap with respect to other aspects of nurses’ clothing:

“What does outward appearance mean in such misery? I no longer wear white collars – for how should one find time for washing and ironing when even sleep is reduced to a bare minimum?”⁶⁸

The ideal hygienic standards of nurse’s clothing cannot be met in a time of war. The cap is not treated in this context, though it was certainly worn and functioned as an important hallmark of the nurses. This heightened its role as a marker of belonging. Other studies like the one of Laurie Kaplan also show the importance of the cap in the autobiographical writings of nurses. Although it is an element of clothing that is associated with femininity, its meaning has changed over the course of history⁶⁹: the cap, “as a Medieval symbol of femininity, as a Christian symbol of virginity, and as a military symbol of service has been transformed to serve the purpose at hand; it becomes a utilitarian article of clothing that caps the head.”⁷⁰ The historical development of the Red Cross cap suggests the inherent ambivalence of uniforms: “[...] their uniforms indicate an ambiguously gendered social and political status.”⁷¹

The uniform’s importance in defining Mierisch’s identity is signaled by the fact that she wore it even on her days off. Mierisch describes that her Red Cross uniform attracted great interest on the part of the public, due to the “armbands with the symbol of neutrality, indicating work ‘near the front’.”⁷² She describes a steamboat ride during which her cap was almost blown off and where she received recognition as a “flotilla of torpedo boats”⁷³ passed her by and “everyone

⁶⁶ Ibid., 13.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 144.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 34.

⁶⁹ The authors treated in Kaplan’s essay designate the headdress as a “veil” rather than a “cap.” Laurie Kaplan, “How Funny I Must Look with my Breeches Pulled Down to my Knees’: Nurses’ Memoirs and Autobiographies from The Great War,” in *Dressing Up For War: Transformations of Gender and Genre in the Discourse and Literature of War*, ed. Aránzazu Usandizaga and Andrew Monnickendam (New York: Rodopi, 2001), 1–12 (p. 11). For Red Cross nurses in Great Britain, especially those working in the Voluntary Aid Detachments (V.A.D.), which were most comparable to the German Red Cross nurses, see: Henriette Donner, “Under the cross: why V.A.D.s performed the filthiest task in the dirtiest war: Red Cross women volunteers, 1914–1918,” in *Journal of Social History* 30 (1997): 687–704.

See also: Anne Summers, *Angels and Citizens. British Women as Military Nurses 1854–1914* (London: Routledge & Paul, 1988).

⁷⁰ Kaplan, “Nurses’ Memoirs”, 11.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Mierisch, *Kamerad Schwester*, 56.

⁷³ Ibid., 111.

stood up and saluted her [...] I gladly accepted the honor, although it was bestowed not on my own person, but upon the symbol on my arm and the cause that I served.”⁷⁴

It is here that Mierisch's attempts to give the uniform a single, clear meaning, free from all ambivalence and danger, becomes visible. Her femininity disappears behind the uniform, and Mierisch can forge a self-image that transcends the sexualization and the dangers facing nurses in times of war. Nevertheless, her cap, which she values greatly, remains an enduring marker of femininity.

III. Nurses in Uniform – Outside Perspectives

The sexualization and danger associated with the nursing profession figure prominently in the 1930 *Sittengeschichte des Ersten Weltkriegs*. Not only does the chapter *Eroticism in Nursing* contain countless images and descriptions of Red Cross nurses in flirty, erotic, and sometimes even pornographic pictures and poses, Hirschfeld's work also treats the rumour that prostitutes dressed up as a Red Cross nurses. Apparently, it was in this disguise that many entered the front during the World War I: “the great number of prostitutes dressed as nurses was well-known.”⁷⁵ However, Hirschfeld takes things even further when he argues that female nursing has as its very essence something “erotic”⁷⁶ or “libidinous.”⁷⁷ In doing so, he opens up a space for sexual fantasy behind the anonymity of the nurse's dress. Stripping the figure of the Red Cross nurse of its seriousness and credibility, Hirschfeld reproduces a photographic collage of actresses (themselves vulnerable by virtue of their profession to accusations of prostitution) in Red Cross uniforms.⁷⁸ The image is cynically captioned: “charity is extremely becoming.” In this way, the Red Cross nurse's uniform becomes a threat to military culture and women wearing Red Cross uniforms are demonized. This claim is made not only in the text of the treatise, but through countless images and their captions, formulated by Hirschfeld himself. Hirschfeld also included more innocuous drawings, like the one found on page 140 of the *Sittengeschichte*, which depicts doctors in the operating room assisted by a Red Cross nurse. It would be a nondescript image, were it not for the caption: “the female sadist likes seeing blood and is an excellent surgical nurse.” (see fig. 2) Though this issue will not be treated in detail in the present essay, it is worth highlighting the way in which the figure of the Red Cross nurse comes to represent a possible threat.⁷⁹ Inherent

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Hirschfeld, *Sittengeschichte des Weltkrieges*, 152.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 153.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 140.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 139 (see fig. 1).

⁷⁹ Ibid., 140-141.

Pariser Schauspielerinnen als Krankenschwestern



Mlle. Colibri
vom Théâtre des Capucines



Madame Simone Damary
von der Comédie Française



Mlle. Phryne
von der Comédie Royale



Mlle. Paulette Delbaye
von der Olympia



Madame Villeroy-Got
vom Théâtre de l'Odéon



Madame Mars Pearl
von der Olympia

Die Wohltätigkeit ist überaus kleidsam

Photos: Manuel und Félix

Fig. 1: This collage, which is not dated, was printed in the *Sittengeschichte des Weltkrieges* published by Magnus Hirschfeld. It is titled, "Parisian Actresses Dressed Up as Nurses." The image bears the cynical caption, "charity is extremely becoming."

in the activities of the Red Cross nurse, so Hirschfeld, is "her abuse of her power over the patient."⁸⁰ This perspective was already widespread during World War I. Rumours circulated on all sides that the Red Cross nurses of the enemy would

⁸⁰ Ibid., 148.



Die Sadistin sieht gerne Blut und ist eine ausgezeichnete
Operationsschwester
Zeichnung von L. Gedö

Fig. 2: This drawing by L. Gedö (not dated) was included on page 140 of the *Sittengeschichte des Weltkrieges* published by Magnus Hirschfeld in 1930, in a chapter entitled “Eroticism in Nursing.” The titles of the pictures were for the most part written by the author himself. In this case it reads: “the female sadist likes seeing blood and is an excellent surgical nurse.”

poison the wounded or those taken hostage.⁸¹ These examples demonstrate how successfully anti-feminist stereotypes were employed in the discourse on nursing in order to question and cast moral doubt upon a new sphere of female activity.

In Hirschfeld’s treatise, clothing aids in the presentation of Red Cross nurses as a threat, allowing female access to a masculine, military realm. The discourse on prostitution treats not only the wartime duties of Red Cross nurses, but the threat presented by the possibility that prostitutes may use their clothing as a disguise to gain access to the army. This discourse is strengthened by the countless images in Hirschfeld’s chapter – it is the Red Cross uniform that the reader repeatedly encounters. Here the uniforms are employed in the discrediting of the nurses.

There are no indications of sexual assault in the novels of Adrienne Thomas and Helene Mierisch. Neither does either of them suggest that their nurse’s dress may have provided them protection. In his *Sittengeschichte*, Hirschfeld, too, speaks only of the threat presented by the uniform – and thus by the Red Cross

⁸¹ Elisabeth Domansky, “Der Erste Weltkrieg,” in *Bürgerliche Gesellschaft in Deutschland. Historische Einblicke, Fragen, Perspektiven*, ed. Lutz Niethammer et al (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1990), 285–319 (p. 317); and Regina Schulte, “Die Schwester des kranken Kriegers: Krankenpflege im Ersten Weltkrieg als Forschungsproblem,” *Bios* 7 (1994/1): 83–100 (p. 84).

nurses themselves – and never of the threat that military service may have presented to the young women. Only Henriette Riemann's book *Schwester der Vierten Armee* (Nurse of the Fourth Army) (1930) addresses this issue. Although Riemann, like the other two authors treated here, portrays the Red Cross nurse protagonist as upright and virtuous, sexual assaults by soldiers and doctors in the military hospital do receive attention in her book:

"Behind the lines, the honeymoon is in full bloom. Those with minor ailments, rheumatism, or psychological problems court young women as far as their strength permits [...] All the men are going crazy. First the medic has a bout of lust, then the doctors, and then the patients; this evening even the kitchen sergeant paid us a visit, which devolved into a shameless attack. I grabbed him by the collar and forced him out the door with a strong push. [...] I go home. [...] Higher-ups treat us like maids, and every sexually starved man seems to think that we are just sex objects!"⁸²

This excerpt shows that the authors were familiar both with wartime rumours and the treatises of the interwar period. It also suggests that the cooperation between the male-dominated military and the Red Cross nurses was not without tension.

Here again, gender is of key importance: the author describes herself as firm and strong, as a survivor, as someone who could hold her own against male aggression.

A number of contemporary sources testify to the extent of the dangers to which nurses were exposed: the research of Bianca Schönberger, for example, mentions an order of the Head of Army General Staff from the year 1917. This order demanded that officers no longer go on car rides around the military camps with 'ladies' (that is, nurses). The explanation for this order was that the rampant gossip could hurt the reputation of the camp.⁸³

The texts of Adrienne Thomas and Helene Mierisch are silent about the potential threat associated with the figure of the Red Cross nurse, instead offering – through clothing, among other things – a positive image of the activities of nurses during the war. Both go farther than this, though: their protagonists are presented as heroines, acting honorably and respectably in the company of men. Katrin is referred to first as 'Maria' and later as 'Schwester Katharina,' and dies as a virginal heroine. In portraying Katrin in this way, the author engages the well-known literary trope of a woman in war (e.g., Schiller's *Jungfrau von Orléans*). Mierisch's memoirs, too, embed the image of the heroine in the Red Cross nurse. This is true not only in her faultless behavior, but in her activities, as well, as when she saves the lives of soldiers or exposes traitors.⁸⁴

⁸² Henriette Riemann, *Schwester der vierten Armee. Ein Kriegstagebuch* (Berlin: Karl Voegels Verlag, 1930), 215.

⁸³ Bianca Schönberger, "Mütterliche Heldinnen und abenteuerlustige Mädchen: Rotkreuz-Schwesterinnen und Etappenhelferinnen im Ersten Weltkrieg," in *Heimat-Front: Militär und Geschlechterverhältnisse im Zeitalter der Weltkriege*, ed. Karen Hagemann (Frankfurt am Main; New York: Campus, 2002), 108–127 (p. 114 and note 48).

⁸⁴ E.g. Mierisch, *Kamerad Schwester*, 87–88.



Fig. 3: Reproduced above is a postcard that was in circulation from the beginning of WW I. The postcard could be obtained in return for a small donation, and was intended for the correspondence between soldiers and their families. It is titled: “Red Cross Collection 1914, benefitting nursing volunteers in the war.”

Clothing is key in building up this heroic metaphor, especially the *white* of the aprons and caps. White became an expression of the purity, cleanliness and virginity of the nurses⁸⁵, a sort of “symbolic representation of the body.”⁸⁶ In this case, “white symbolizes purity, cleanliness, and stainlessness, not only in a hygienic sense, but in a moral and sexual sense as well. Drawing from the religious representations of the *Madonna Immaculata*, the white aprons became a secular symbol of virginal innocence.”⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Cf. Grundhewer, “Von der freiwilligen Kriegskrankenpflege,” 146-148; Gaugele, *Kleidung als Medium der Geschlechterkonstruktion*, 208; and: Theweleit, *Männerphantasien*, vol. 1, for example, 142-143.

⁸⁶ Gaugele, *Kleidung als Medium der Geschlechterkonstruktion*, 208.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 208. See fig. 3.

The two writers draw consciously upon these religious conceptions, keeping the sexuality of the Red Cross nurse at bay. However, they do not go as far as English and American Red Cross nurses have been described as having gone:

“In ‘dressing up for war,’ that is, in adopting the official nursing uniforms, women challenged the traditional notions of separate spheres, Yet, the uniform itself – the quasi-Medieval veils and tippets, the little capes, the starched cuffs and white aprons – seems an absurd costume in which to begin a modern enterprise [...]. But the new clothes liberated the young women to assert their right to cross lines – to cross the Channel, in fact, to cut off their hair, and to wear trousers, boots, and breeches.”⁸⁸

Laurie Kaplan notes with respect to the self-narratives of nurses in the Anglo-American context: “...for the self-writing of these two women⁸⁹ dramatizes the ways a change of clothes can transform ideas.”⁹⁰ The authors of my sources, on the other hand, preserve the feminine and religious connotations of their clothing, even as they refer to them as ‘uniforms’ and understand themselves as *Kamerad-Schwester* (comrade and sister) or ‘half-soldiers.’ In the end, even in times of war, they preserved the model of gender-segregated spaces and propagated it in their novels. Their uniforms were significant not for their ability to provide access to a male-dominated space, but much more as an expression of belonging and as a claim to a right to participate in the war effort. Both claims are made with the help of the uniform. In doing so, the authors seek to overwrite the danger associated with the image and the activities of the Red Cross nurses. Rather, the novels present a different ambivalence contained within the figure of the Red Cross nurse: she worked outside of the home, in a male, military environment – but nonetheless emerged an innocent, virginal heroine. The novels signal this through clothing (white caps and aprons): though designated as a uniform – hence referencing a form usually reserved for men – dress served just as much to express the Red Cross nurse’s feminine, religious character traits.

Conclusion

Red Cross uniforms have been given a variety of meanings, both by outsiders and by nurses themselves, and have often been used to express personal orientations and identification. Clothing helps to create new identities and reflects a process of making meaning.

The ambivalent meanings of Red Cross nurses in World War I as they were remembered in the 1930’s was expressed to a great extent through clothing.

⁸⁸ Kaplan, “Nurses’ Memoirs,” 6.

⁸⁹ This refers to Kaplan’s two main sources, the Baroness de T’Serclaes (*Flanders and Other Fields: Memoirs of the Baroness de T’Serclaes* (London: Harrap, 1964)) and Florence Farmborough’s unpublished compendium, written as a diary (located in the Imperial War Museum).

⁹⁰ Kaplan, “Nurses’ Memoirs,” 3.

These various and often pointed representations made the Red Cross nurse more and more central to a debate about inclusion and exclusion, the sexualization of women, and the figure of the female heroine. More and more, the figure of the Red Cross nurse reflected gender-specific patterns of behavior, but also desires and dangers. Clothing was *the* key aspect of this debate.

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