

Chronicles of Collaborationist Concubines

by [Miguel Nunes Silva](#) (June 2025)



Women accused of Collaborating with the Germans, Rennes (Lee Miller, 1944)

With the return of conventional warfare to the European continent, western values have had to deal with the threat of armed conflict since the end of the Cold War. One generation removed from 1989, the society that lived through #MeToo and wokeism is now confronted with the reality of war. One of the first glaring contradictions of societies supporting the Kyiv liberal democracy was the exclusive conscription of males; especially given that young women were not only allowed to leave Ukraine but were also often found partying it up in the

capital's nightclubs while their generational brethren died in the front. This was a far cry from the mass mobilisation of women into the war economy, during the world wars.

Other than the homefront, another aspect of the peculiar female experience of war is what to do upon defeat and occupation.

The biopic of American photographer Lee Miller premiered in cinemas this year. It is very much a passion project of Kate Winslet's and depicts the career of the Vogue photographer, with a particular focus on the extraordinary work she was able to do during the Second World War. Lee was one of the pioneers of modern war photography and one of the first to go into the then recently liberated concentration camps—even more of a noteworthy feat, considering Lady Penrose's difficulties of access as a woman on the battlefield. So groundbreaking was her work that much of it was summarily censored by the military authorities.

Annalisa Zox-Weaver, for one, regards Lee as an “answer” to Leni Riefenstahl—a symmetrical opposite of a modernist female visual artist, with Miller dismantling the myth that Riefenstahl had helped construct.

Part of Lee's secret was not so much a technical expertise in the use of cameras but rather, precisely, her feminine aesthetic sensibility. It was perhaps this instinct that drove Lee to immortalise the episode of the *tondues rennaises* (shaven women of Rennes), one of the many cases of French women humiliated as collaborators of the Nazi occupation forces—the movie sees Lee interceding on behalf of the *tondues* and her iconic photos are portrayed as empathetic.

It is not surprising that a woman would be more attuned to the dilemmas of other women. Men have few choices in times of war: they are either forced to fight or they can flee if able to provide for their families. Women, on the other hand,

cannot rely on soldier pay and often still have families that rely on them, all the while civilians face shortages as resources are prioritised for the frontlines. Indeed, female emancipation was a direct consequence of women having replaced men in domestic production during conscription times. Others, such as the *femmes tondues* of liberated France, had to make due or were perhaps able to socially compete, thanks to their feminine wiles. Wars are not exclusively a fertile ground for male carpetbaggers, profiteers like Oskar Schindler or romantic adventurers like Casablanca's Rick Blaine. Women too can be opportunistic.

The further back one goes in History, the more precarious the position of women in war times. Prior to the 20th century, there was no welfare state nor humanitarian treaties. Perhaps the most famous and infamous of collaborationist concubines is Maria Łączyńska, Countess Walewska.

Upon the death of her father, the family patriarch, teenager Maria was married off to the elderly Count Colonna-Walewski as a way to avoid the bankruptcy of her family. It was this aristocratic access that caused her happenstance encounter with Napoleon, on the road in his campaign against Prussia—between the battles of Jena and Friedland. The Emperor of the French took a liking to the young noblewoman and the entire Polish society incentivised the affair as a means of securing Polish independence—an unexpected miraculous hope after the final Austro-Russo-Prussian partition of Poland, a decade prior.

Maria's charm would play an important diplomatic role in the establishment of the Duchy of Warsaw, although Bonaparte almost certainly planned on doing it regardless. He had similarly played with the borders in Italy and Germany, so as to serve France's policy of leaving behind friendly revolutionary statelets in the wake of the Grande Armée.

For Maria, her self instrumentalisation to the benefit of her

community, was not exactly an innovation and for Poland, nationalist utility trumped religious morality. Later moving to Wallonia and interacting with Parisian social circles, Maria never had to face much public shaming for her adultery.

Coincidentally, 2024 was the anniversary of yet another alleged treasonous adulterer: it marks 160 years since the death of Juliana de Almeida e Oyenhausen, Countess of Ega. Juliana was the daughter of a very prestigious couple in Portuguese high society: her father was a german-portuguese nobleman who rose to several ministerial positions while her mother was the famous Marquise of Alorna, a patron of the arts and hostess of the most influential intellectual salon of 19th century Portugal.

Juliana was married off to the Count of Ega, a Portuguese diplomat who would be appointed ambassador to bonapartist Spain. It was in Madrid that Juliana would make acquaintances that would come to impact the rest of her life. One was with French Napoleonic envoys who would influence her thinking and social circles, and the other was with the Russian ambassador Count Stroganov with whom she would stay in touch...

The Portuguese court had been split between francophile and anglophile factions throughout much of its history but particularly since the reign of King Joseph I, an enthusiast of the Enlightenment. The government of his daughter and successor Mary I, therefore dithered in its response to revolutionary France, first allying with Spain in the Roussillon campaign against the French republicans but, upon defeat, trying to compromise between Paris's harsh demands and the loyalty to its erstwhile ally Britain. When Portugal refused to join Napoleon's continental blockade of Britain, Napoleon sent an army.

The royal court and much of the aristocracy famously relocated to Rio de Janeiro but the ones left behind faced the dilemma of whether to resist without funding or collaborate with the

invaders in exchange for leniency; after all, someone had to rule. As General Junot entered Lisbon, those best positioned to collaborate were the ones closest to the Francophile faction amongst whom were the counts of Ega. As Juliana had enjoyed an excellent education, was fluent in French and was acquainted with many in the French diplomatic corps, she would become one of the habitual guests of Junot's soirées in Lisbon. Recent historiography disproves any liaison between her and the general but as she featured prominently in the occupation circles at a time when the hoisting of the French tricolore sparked riots, her reputation was forever tainted.

Following Wellington's intervention and the expulsion of the French, the Egas moved to France. It was in exile there that she reconnected with the helpful Count Stroganov, as the Egas had been stripped of their properties and assets in Portugal. Her correspondence indicates that the relationship was close even before the death of her husband. She would eventually marry the Russian diplomat and move permanently to Saint Petersburg. Tragically, her example of collaboration is defamatory and, unlike Countess Walewska, very much inglorious.

What collaborationist concubines show us is that the risks for women are fundamentally reputational. Whereas men pay the price of violence, women stand to pay the price of shame. Even in the peak of female empowerment, a modern war in a post-modern continent still led to differentiated consequences according to sex.

The difference in the 21st century is that women now enjoy full political agency and their conduct in war will also bring full responsibility. How will a post-war society deal with shared authority but separate consequences?

The fortunes of European women in war is a subject worthy of further exploration and the arts will have no trouble finding further inspiration in them.

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