

Armed Women as *Fascinosum Tremendum*

Icons, Structures, and Transformations of Gunwomanship in Western Culture

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1. Introduction

Alfhildr Enningsdottir is undoubtedly one of the most fascinating and talented personalities in current pop culture. The Norwegian series *Beforeigners*, an HBO Europe production, follows the main character in her fast-paced professional life as part of the Oslo Criminal Investigation Department. Alfhildr is not only proficient in modern weaponry, but also familiar with the latest IT gadgets, which complements her experience and knowledge of early historical weaponry technologies and practices. Whether wielding an axe, a sword, or her bare hands, Enningsdottir is adept at all three. This is due to the fact that she is a time traveller: she was one of the chosen warriors of Tore Hund, the most important Viking chieftain of the 11th century. Although the series shows the shield-armed Viking maiden in the midst of public discourse during martial combat, debates on the television series completely ignore the aspect of Alfhildr being a female warrior herself (Metz 2021).

Euphoric reviews praised the series as original, thrilling and »inherently funny« (Udel 2020), calling it the »most socially relevant TV show« (Johnson 2022). Praise focused primarily on the culture clash sparked by the time travelers who bring »their pre-industrial ways to your once-pristine waterfront condo building« (Johnson 2022), as well as on the sophisticated way in which the series blends culture clash with time clash. Much of the fascination comes from the culture clash the Time Walkers have created, and essentially through the gender crash that they have imposed on modern liberal Norwegian society. The two shield-maidens Alfhildr and her girlfriend Urd embody battle-hardened women, proficiently trained in weaponry and always ready to fight. This martial concept of gender jarred not only with modern concepts of civilian control of violence, but even more so with bourgeois concepts of gender that portrayed women as peaceful and conciliatory since the 18th century (Hausen 1976).

Looking at interpretations of armed women, the differences between pre-modern and contemporary narratives may not be as clear-cut as they seem. This article argues that perceptions of armed women show an impressive continuity throughout the centuries and are mainly characterized by ambivalent feelings: the attraction to and fascination with armed women, and at the same time, the fear of armed women which often leads to physical and verbal abuse. To fully understand the paternalistic roots of historical weapon culture in Europe, this contribution combines grand narratives and historical facts to understand how they fuel or contradict each other.

Fictional texts, especially iconic master narratives, hold important insights about the cultural environment that can be used, especially for periods when archival sources are unavailable. Additionally, reconstructing the historical framework of these narratives is necessary to fully understand the historical structures. To fully understand the historical dimensions of female weaponry, women warriors and civilian gunwomanship, this article combines historical and fictional sources to trace the structures, constructions and interpretations of a deeply paternalistic armament culture. First, I ask, what do we know about armed women in different eras and societies? What are the overarching narratives? Second, what were the contexts and reasons for female armament? Third, what changes can be observed over time, and how were these changes justified?

Following these questions, this article will look across different centuries at key narratives of female armament as a legitimation of self-defense, and at gender concepts of the armed woman, heroines and reviled women; it will identify the keywords and iconic historic female figures who shaped the discourse on weapon-bearing women. Finally, it will argue that the structural distinction between civilian, military and (semi)military/terrorist culture is essential to understanding structures and shifts in the current popular culture representations of armed women.

I trace the state of research between different disciplines and eras. I focus on the aspects of armed women in pop culture, some exceptional woman warriors (Queens and Emperors) as well as women in the military/militia. So far these different clusters are not linked, nor is the disparate national knowledge brought together. Due to my focus I will not cover disparate national historiographies, though this article, for the first time, connects key lines of scattered knowledge about armed women and enriches them with historical research on private armament cultures and practices to provide a more detailed picture of the armed woman in the European cultural archive.

2. Contemporary Narratives of Viking Warrior Women

Common pop culture preferably construes armed women as pre-historic warrior women. The aforementioned HBO series *Beforeigners*, with two seasons released in

2019 and 2022) revolves around a female character inspired by a shield-maiden from the army of Tore Hund, who commanded the peasant army in the battle of Stiklestad in 1030. Similarly, the series *Vikings* (2013–2022, writ. Michael Hirst) focuses on Lathgertha, a powerful shield maiden who not only joins the men's raiding parties but fiercely fights for female autonomy and respect) These depictions of powerful, armed women, effortlessly wielding their swords and axes contradict the long-held image of an entirely male-dominated Viking culture. Although the vast majority of warriors may have been male, recent research reveals that women also possessed and carried weapons (Gardela 2013; Hedenstierna-Jonson et al. 2017; Homquist 2009; Jesch 1991). These images of well-fortified women correspond with Northern mythology, showing pictures of female goddesses as self-determined, powerful and usually armed women, frequently engaged in outdoors activities such as hunting and fighting.

3. God Sagas: Pre-Modern Armed Women and Women Warriors

Freya the Goddess of love, fertility, war, and battle, combines an autonomous, sometimes aggressive sexuality with a lust for the battle (Price 2020: 41–42). Freya was the leader of the army of Valkyries, violent and militant women warriors. Sources from the 9th to the 13th centuries knew fifty-two Valkyries by name and described many more unnamed Valkyries as armed with sword and shield, sometimes helmet, as terrible, and as »the essence of violence« (ibid.: 52–55).

Roman and Greek Mythology also passed down tales of armed goddesses: The most prominent woman warrior was Minerva, goddess of wisdom and guardian of knowledge, as well as goddess of wisely planned war. Although Minerva is often shown with a dagger, her main weapon of war is wisdom, usually represented by the owl that accompanies her. Diana, the goddess of the hunt, is often depicted with bow and arrow, sometimes with a spear, but always with a small deer with which she can speak and communicate. We find the topos of armed Diana in close communication and harmony with wild animals throughout the centuries: on ancient coins and statues, on 19th-century paintings and even on more modern images. Interestingly, these two ancient goddesses actually represent the main areas in which armed men and women used weapons in their historical daily lives: in war, in hunting, and in armed self-defense – incarnating the principles of morality and justice. So this is an interesting example of how fictional sources and narratives can be very helpful in giving us clues to the structure of society when historical sources are lacking, and in giving us clues as to where to look for sources on the sparsely covered topic of armed women.

Besides these well-known goddesses, the most famous tales about armed women were the myths about the Amazons. Roman and Greek historians – from

Herodotus to Strabo to Pliny and Orosius – described the Amazons in vivid terms and understood them as fierce warrior women (Mayor 2014: 10–11; 249–304). In ancient culture, there are numerous allusions to warrior women (Mayor 2014: 3–10; 210–232; Fornasier 2018: 81). Ancient narratives about warrior women were complex and changed over the centuries, but the sagas were linked by some common topoi: Warrior women elicited mixed feelings: they were dangerous, frightening, and scary, but at the same time desirable and incredibly beautiful (Fornasier 2018: 76–81). This ambivalent stereotyping also found its way into contemporary popular culture narratives. It is this contradictory image of the armed women in the male gaze, the simultaneous feelings of fear and sexual desire she evokes – that forms the basis for the enduring fascination with ladies in arms through the centuries.

Concerning the narrative connection between sagas and historical armed women, it is important to keep in mind that sagas cannot be equated with empirical facts. Stories about ancient and foreign cultures of armed women, as well as images and sculptures of warrior women, should not be taken as historical evidence for the existence of the armed woman. Following this important distinction between fact and fiction, modern scholars have viewed ancient myths about weapon-bearing women as merely a product of vivid imagination, rather than evidence of historical reality (Mayor 2014: 11; Fornasier 2018; Städele 1996). Even while maintaining this important distinction between fact and fiction, sagas and myths as well as imagery and art, offer important resources for discovering hidden historical practices. The narrative structure, imagery, and topoi presented in sagas point to the places and contexts in which historical research might be found. The narrative of fiction, literary scholar Stephen Greenblatt argues, represents the deep structure of culture (Greenblatt 2001) and is therefore helpful for deciphering deep cultural arrangements. As for how and where women carried weapons, the myths and sagas refer not only to women warriors and war, but also to contexts of self-defense, sports, gaming and hunting, as well as to moral notions of autonomy, justice and (gender) identity.

The issue is more complex, however, as recent studies indicate that ancient stories about armed women are at least partially based on fact (Mayor 2014: 12–13; 17–33; 63–83). Particularly archeological and DNA investigations of tombs have revealed that some of the famous warrior tombs were actually those of powerful women warriors (Gardela 2013; Hedenstierna-Jonson et al. 2017; Mayor 2014: 63 ff.). These recent discoveries prove that armed women were indeed part of social and political life, and raise the question of where else in history a more nuanced view might more urgently discover armed female practices. To answer this question, I will map what is known so far about the armament of women in ancient times (i.e. 800 BC–500 AC).

4. Women Fighters in Antiquity: In the Arena and in War

Although sources are few, one of the most exciting references to armed women is a relief from Halicarnassus, probably from the 2nd century AD, on display in the British Museum. Classicist Kathleen Coleman claims the relief depicts two female gladiators. Clearly, there were very few female gladiators, and the fact that fights between armed women were for entertainment underscores the fact that armed women were considered extraordinary spectacles (Coleman 2000). Like their male counterparts, female gladiators, the *gladiatrix*, were often captured foreign warriors forced to entertain the Roman public. Accounts about these fighting women even found their way into Roman historiography: the historian Florus reported on the Battle of Cimbria (101 BC): »There was quite as severe a struggle with the womenfolk of the barbarians as with the men; for they had formed a barricade of their waggons and carts and, mounting on the top of it, fought with axes and pikes« (Florus 1995: 1, XXXVIII,16). About 300 years later Cassius Dio reports about the war of Marcus Aurelius against Celtic and Germanic tribes in northern Italy (ca. 172 BC): »Among the fallen barbarians were found the bodies of armed women«. (Cassius/Cary/Foster 1914: LXXI, 3,2). All references refer to the *topoi* of female warriors and emphasize the principle of (military) self-defense.¹

While modern gun cultures are characterized by the distinction between public and private (collective and individual) arms cultures, there is usually no clear separation between military and individual armament practices in the pre-modern era. Moreover, armed violence often took place in the context of self-defense. One of the most famous stories is told in the biblical Book of Judith of the Old Testament: Holofernes, an Assyrian commander, besieged the Jewish city of Bethulia and was on the verge of victory. Just as the Jews were about to surrender, Judith sneaks into Holofernes' camp, gets him drunk and beheads him. This story is about female self-defense, armed (military) liberation and (once again) the ambivalent combination of fear threat and seduction ascribed onto the armed woman. Judith's act against Holofernes has been revisited over the centuries, for example by Renaissance painters Botticelli, Lucas Cranach, Caravaggio, and female painter Artemisia Gentileschi for the Sistine Chapel. Contexts of female self-defense can be seen as practices of weaponry widely accepted in different cultures and times. After all, Holofernes' murder was justified since it ensured the Jewish communities survival and enabled Christianity to flourish. It was an act of self-defense rather than military practice that is key for the Christian origin story.²

1 For references and discussions on ancient armed women, I thank Martin Jehne and Christoph Lundgreen.

2 For the complex history of different lines of narratives of female heroism, its intermingling and transformation during Middle Age and Renaissance, see Reinle (2000).

5. Fascinating and Terrifying: the Valkyries

Many antique sources, as well as their medieval and pre-modern reinterpretations, refer to Norse/Germanic women, possibly based on Viking myths and arming practices. Norse myths are populated by powerful, armed women. The oldest sources on these armed gods and warriors are two Icelandic prose collections – the Poetic *Edda* (Dodds 2014) and the 13th century Prose *Edda* (Snorri/Faulkes 1987). Most famous are the Valkyries, who are armed with spear, sword and shield, and serve Odin's military rule (Price 2020: 52, 55). It remains an open question how these fictions link to historical social practices, especially since Viking culture has been portrayed as a cruel and paternalistic (Jesch 2009). The discovery of women warrior's graves suggests that Viking women had complex social roles and included participating in Viking expenditure, travel, and warfare movements (Jesch 1991: 204–208). Chronicler Saxo, in his *History of the Danes*, wrote around 1200:

Once Alvild had been prevailed upon to despise the young Dane, she changed into man's clothing and from being a highly virtuous maiden began to lead the life of a savage pirate. Many girls of the same persuasion had enrolled in her company by the time she chanced to arrive at a spot where a band of pirates were mourning the loss of their leader, who had been killed fighting. Because of her beauty she was elected the pirate chief and performed feats beyond a woman's courage. (Saxo/Davidson/Fisher 2002: book 7, 211)

Since Saxo was a Christian monk, his description must be read as a commentary on both cultures. Particularly his portrait of fighting women may be a critique of his own 12th-century culture, which he perceived as lazy and decadent. The story of the Danes mixes the medieval view of armed women (Jesch 1991: 176–180). From Saxo's point of view, the warrior women were brave, but in the end they lost the war. More importantly, although they looked like women, he described them as masculine in heart and spirit: »Among these was Lathgertha, a skilled female fighter, who bore a man's temper in a girl's body« (Saxo/Davidson/Fisher 2002: book 8, 238).

Regardless of the actual extent to which women were armed on a daily basis, Valkyries remained powerful. The widespread fascination with and reception of the defensible woman began as early as in the 13th century, the sagas of the *Edda* and Norse mythologies were reinvented as the Middle High German epic poem *Song* (Krüger 2003). The poem about the warrior queen Brunhild and the heroic revenge of Kriemhild was handed down between the 13th and 16th century and tells of two powerful women who fight for their honor and their kin – in sum they correspond very much to the earlier characteristics of the Amazons. In the late 19th-century the song of the Nibelungs become deeply interwoven with nationalistic narratives, and important part of German school education as well as present in common daily

culture as shown in the advertisement for Palmin household grease (fig. 1). The ad shows Kriemhild holding up the head she cut off Gunther's body. In this 19th century version, Kriemhild is an updated version of the belligerent housewife, embroiled in the heroic, armed struggle for her revenge and survival (Reinle 2000; Bermbach 2011).



Fig. 1: Kriemhild with Gunter, advertisement for Palmin household grease, 1894

Courtesy of Badische Landesbibliothek Karlsruhe, Germany, 116 E 199 R, p. 1.

In Western European culture, war is men's business – and this seems to be true for all centuries. Although the role of women in the armed forces, in medical service or in infrastructure has increasingly come into focus (Lynn 2008; Maubach 2009; Hacker 1981), women as armed combatants have hardly played a role in theory. Even the early Middle Ages, contemporaries viewed women who aspired to take part in the militia as disreputable (Reinle 2000: 14). At the same time, impressive examples of women warriors have been documented (McLaughlin 1990: 196; Hacker 1981; Jones 1997; Wilson 1996; Pauw 1998; Nicholson 1997; Watanabe-O'Kelly 2010). Most of them were noble women who took the lead in times of crisis, but fighting women could also be found among the common troops (Füssel 2011). Joan of Arc, the most famous middle-aged woman warrior, was a peasant girl, whose masculine and armed attire evoked adoration and criticism in equal measure (Simon-Muscheid 1996).

Megan Mc Laughlin (1990) ascribes the declining acceptance of women warriors during the Middle Ages to the professionalization of warfare and its separation from the domestic sphere. This article argues that a distinction between military and civilian weapons culture, with their different norms and reference points, is instructive in understanding gendered armament practices. Importantly, structural factors are

crucial to understanding the changing integration or exclusion of women in military institutions (Goldstein 2005) as well as the perceptions of armed women. There have been periods of silence or greater tolerance of women warriors and periods of rejection (McLaughlin 1990), with women warriors provoking criticism at all times and being measured against masculine norms. Narratives of armed women persisted for centuries and continue to influence modern images of women warriors (Watanabe-O’Kelly 2014). Images of women warriors on horseback and armed in the Mongol Wars, described in medieval chronicles as particularly dangerous (Schmieder 1994: 258), are remarkably similar in structure to the ideas of armed, aggressive and dangerous shotgun women (German »Flintenweiber«) in 1920s German Freikorps-literature (Theweleit 1987–1989: 70–78; Römer 2011)³. The phantasies about dangerous gunwomen made it even into regular newspaper coverage, when the *Kölnische Zeitung* in March 1920 reported about »Spartakus broads, who rode with flyinf hair, a pistol in each hand [...] (towards) the men, who were doomed to die a Spartakus death« (Kölnische Zeitung 1920; quoted in Theweleit 2019: 99; after: Lucas 2019/Bd. II: 186; all subsequent translations from the German D.E.). These novels and memoirs by paramilitary Freikorps’ fighters show that, during the early years of the Weimar Republic, attitudes toward shotguns were omnipresent but disparaged. The misogynist attitude towards armed women displayed here followed a longstanding disdain for armed women and the conflation of masculinity and heroic combat (Fieseler 2011; Maubach et al. 2011). During the revolutionary fights at the beginning of the Weimarer Republic the hostile attitude of the right extremist corps towards armed women often turned into violence and even murder, as a letter from soldier Max Zeller reports in April 1920: »we (also) shot ten Red Cross sisters immediately [...] because each of them had a pistol. We were happy to shoot at these disgraceful women, and how they cried and prayed; but whoever is encountered with gun in hand is our enemy and has to die. We were much nobler in the field against the French«⁴ (Ernst 1921: 68; quoted in Theweleit 2019: 192). The Nazis drew on these traditions, intensifying negative emotions toward armed women fighting for foreign armies from the East and using them to justify their mass murder of female Red Arms soldiers (Römer 2011; Jahn/Aleksievič 2002). Paradoxically, the Nazi regime nurtured deadly

3 German original: »Spartakidenweiber, die auf kleinen struppigen Pferden ritten, mit fliegenden Haaren und in jeder Hand zwei Pistolen [...] (Männer), die [...] dem unabwendbaren Spartakidentode geweiht seien« (quoted in Theweleit 2019: 99).

4 The German original states: »wir (haben) auch zehn Rote-Kreuzschwestern sofort erschossen [...] von denen hat nämlich jede eine Pistole bei sich. Mit Freude schossen wir auf diese Schandbilder, und wie diese geweint und beten haben; aber wer mit einer Waffe betroffen wird, der ist unser Gegner und der muß dran glauben. Gegen die Franzosen waren wir im Felde viel edler« (Josef Ernst 1921, Kapptage im Industriegebiet, Hagen p. 68 quoted in Theweleit 2019: 192).

contempt for foreign women warriors in German soldiers, but at the same time instilled in them a euphoric admiration for Norse myths and their allegories of powerful, armed women and Valkyries.

6. Warrior Women as Modern National Allegories

The British national allegory Britannia, common since early modern times, was armed with a spear in 1797 and received a helmet in 1825 (Hargreaves 2015: 123). The invented traditions (Hobsbawm/Ranger 1983) of armed female warriors as national allegories fighting for freedom and nation became successful with the French Revolution. One of the most iconic depictions is the French Marianne armed with a rifle and national flag on the barricades of the 1830s Revolution in the painting by Eugène Delacroix (fig. 2). Marianne carries a Percussion Rifle with bayonet, the common armament of the French Army at this time, also used by the revolutionaries of the 1830s (Günther 1909:18–19; 23).



Fig. 2: Eugène Delacroix, *Liberty Leading the People*, 1830. Oil on Canvas.

Louvre, Paris, public domain

The Western nationalist movements of the 19th century appropriated Nordic myths of warrior women, disseminated them and instrumentalized them for political purposes. Richard Wagner's opera popularized the armed female figures from the *Song of the Nibelungs* and the *Edda* (Schulz 2011). Wagner's »Ride of the Valkyries«

politicized the image of the armed Valkyries in the 19th and 20th centuries, even spreading the theme into contemporary pop culture (Zenk 2017). It is striking that previous research on Wagnerism more or less ignores the topoi of armed women (Wegner 2017; Bermbach 2011) and hardly reflects on the wide dissemination of the topoi of the warrior woman and its relation to social and political culture.

In latter day Germany, the national allegory of Germany also became increasingly martial with the rise of the nationalist movement. In the context of the 1848 revolution, the political movement for national unification invented a Germania tradition aimed at uniting the so-called German tribes, drawing on ancient descriptions of the belligerent Germanic tribes that emphasized their martial prowess, invincibility and independent spirit (Ellerbrock 2023). Germania became their fierce and menacing embodiment, armed with sword, shield and wild blond hair, combining many of the characteristics of the ancient Amazons and Valkyries of the *Edda* poems (fig. 3). The fact that the medieval *Song of the Nibelungs* as well as Richard Wagner's opera cycle *Ring der Nibelungen* (1854–56) also drew on these narratives only made the appeal for the political movement more tangible.



Fig. 3: Friedrich August von Kaulbach, »Germania« (1914)
Deutsches Historisches Museum/Indra Desnica, Inventarnummer 1988/82.

The invention of a well-armed Germania not only indicated the adaptation of the Norse myth and its transformation in favor of the German unification movement, but also initiated a fundamental shift within the German gun culture and the rights granted to women. Revolutionaries combined a willingness to fight for national unification with the right to political participation. Military duties and suffrage suddenly merged, symbolized by swords and arms in the hands of the people fighting for both political and national rights with the revolutionary movement's motto of

»arming the people« (German »Volksbewaffnung«) (Rotteck 1816). In the revolutionary times of the 1840s, conscription was linked to the right to bear arms. Part of this fascinating transformation that made the once unloved military conscription attractive was the invention of a (new) right to arms. This concept of a »right of arms« historically never existed. Until the 19th century only the duty for military service (for noble men for example) existed. The duty to go to war had to be fulfilled at different times by different social groups: Noblemen, townspeople, mercenaries and later commoners (Frevert 2001; Tlustý 2011).

The 19th century bourgeois revolutionaries created the new concept of the citizen with a masculine »right to arms« which was a new phrase for the duty to go to war, and linked it to ideas of a common (masculine) political vote. Conscription had never been very popular, not even in the revolutionary heat of the 1840s, and the rebranding of the old duty to fight in war as a new right to arms did not change male reticence, although the new link between a right to be armed and suffrage immediately gained popularity and support (Ellerbrock 2014b). It seemed instantly convincing that those men who were willing to risk their lives for king, people and fatherland should be granted the right to have a say in the fate of their community. This newly invented tradition rhetorically excluded women from gun culture and gendered the discourse on gun practices and gun legitimation.

This new right to bear arms in times of an ongoing war was a privilege available only to men. In the Frankfurt 1848 National Assembly, deputy Friedrich Wilhelm Eugen Bock polemicized against the idea of a general assembly with the remark that, if this were to happen, then »also every woman [...] would like to carry the weapons [...]« (Bock 1848: 801). His remark caused great hilarity and laughter in the first German parliament. Armed women provoked irritation and amusement and armed female citizens were politically inconceivable (Ellerbrock 2014a). In fact, this heteronormative discourse about armed women only referred to the political sphere. In private and civilian contexts, the use of guns and pistols was also an everyday practice for women. Before turning to this civilian gun culture, which represents the most important field of female gun practices, it is worth noting the contradiction that a new structured national order, with its reorganized military gun cultures based on conscription rather than paid militia, fundamentally excluded women and at the same time was represented by Germania, a heavily armed woman. The reason for this is as simple as it is unpleasant: The new national movements, which ultimately aimed to grant equal political rights to all men, had no intention of extending this to women. One effective way to deal with this was the ambivalent image of the Amazons, threatening and powerful. On the one hand the German orientalist Andreas David Mordtmann interpreted the breastless Amazons as »destroyed femininity and maternity« (Mordtmann 1862:11). Similarly, the Swiss Ancient and Legal historian Johann Jacob Bachofen described »the degeneracy contrary to nature to which female existence [in its Amazonian way of life] had fallen« (Bachofen 1861: xxii). The

armed Germania was not suitable as a role model for 19th century German women, who according to political liberal discourse aspired to »true German womanhood«, which could not be found in the »participation in our public electoral and parliamentary assemblies and in the offices of state, and in general in all male endeavors and struggles, including those of war, [the woman] would give up chastity and modesty« (Welcker 1845: 63off.). Consequently, women's suffrage was not debated in the 19th century. On the other hand, the heavily armed national allegories also invoked the intriguing aspect of the powerful and threatening image of the Amazons, who fought vigorously and victoriously for their tribe – a feat behind which any national movement would readily rally. Although the German bourgeois revolution failed, the debate over male gun rights succeeded in establishing a new structured military gun culture. The newly invented male right to be armed closely linked military gun practices, masculinity, and male political rights. The idea of an alleged male gun right was an invention that linked the imagined national community (Anderson 1983) to male privilege and justified this alloy by means of the contradictionary construction of heavily armed female national allegories; it denied political gun rights for women and tolerated private female arms practices only.

7. Civil Gun Cultures and Gunwomanship

The flip side of the new ideas of a military gun culture in Germany was a civilian gun culture that became increasingly distinct in the centuries to come. Whereas in earlier centuries military and civil arms possession and use often intermingled, the two spheres became increasingly distinct with the rise of modern nation states. In hunting, self-defense and in sports, women were long used to carrying weapons. While in the military context women were explicitly excluded from armed tasks and ideas on armed military women caused amusement, there was no gender discrimination in the civilian regulation of weapons. Overall, firearms were barely regulated before and during the 19th century, although there were a few norms that defined the use and possession of firearms: In all German states, police penal codes defined how to handle weapons and firearms. For example, in Württemberg the Police Punishment Law of October 2, 1839, regulated in Article 43: »The possession of firearms is not subject to any restriction, with the exception of dangerous rifles« (Kappler 1850; Bürgerwehrgesetz 1849:9), in Baden, »everyone was permitted to possess and carry weapons« (Schlusser 1897: 22), and in Prussia, the General Land Law for the Prussian States (Allgemeines Landrecht für die Preußischen Staaten, ALR) allowed only concealed and secretly carried weapons since 1794 (Rönne/Simon 1840: 648–650).

From a legal perspective, women were allowed to arm themselves just like men, and they did so in Germany and other countries. (Stange/Oyster 2000; Homshier 2001; Browder 2006; Brown 2012). Women took up arms and raised their knives to

protect themselves from harassers or to deal with their unfaithful husbands or lovers (Spierenburg 1997; Chesney-Lind/Pasko 2013; Silvestri/Crowther-Dowey 2016). This fits well with narratives that emphasized armed female self-defense. Self-protection at home or on the road was at least as relevant for women as it was for men. Travelers were advised to carry adequate weapons for self-defense, and they were often already aware about gun laws in foreign countries. In the 20th century, feminist debates that the need for female self-defense often roots in patriarchal, male-dominated structures (Carlson 2014; Carlson 2015). The debate on gunwomanship dithers between arming women as tool of self-empowerment and symbol of a repressive violent culture, were women have no choice but to arm themselves (Bassin 1997).

In addition to self-defense, hunting was an important arena of armament. Especially noblewomen handled the rifle with great virtuosity, which is documented in many hunting-related sources: In 1925, Alexander Prinz von Hohenlohe described his mother as a passionate huntress: »Hunting was perhaps the only passion of my mother; but only the so-called high hunting. [...] She was an excellent shot, especially in her younger years [...]. Her favorite was hunting chamois, but she also liked to go after deer, wild boar, and in general all the high game outdoors, she liked to go for« (Hohenlohe 1925: 183). Alexander von Bülow reported retrospectively about his fiancée: »There were many hits, since Gerda shot quite well with the light Belgian shotgun, caliber 28, with which she [...] practiced a lot on the clay pigeon stand« (Bülow 1951: 13). The wide assortment of weapons designed specifically for women's hands and tastes, and advertised by arms dealers, proves that there was a broad market and many women interested in guns, rifles and pistols that catered to current fashions. International studies, particularly for the US, estimate a female firearm ownership rate of about 20 percent from the 18th to the 20th century (Browder 2006; Homsher 2001; Kelly 2004; McCool 1997; Lindgren/Heather 2002).

After the failed bourgeois revolution in Germany, shooting clubs, the »Schützenvereine«, were stripped of their military function and held only sports competitions. Although most shooting clubs did not accept women until the 20th century, some integrated them into their festivities as early as the 19th century: an invitation to a 1845 meeting at »Whitsun in Cardemin near Blanckenburg« addressed also women shooters, »because in Pomerania even the ladies can handle a rifle« (Kürenberg 1935: 26). After World War II, more shooting sports accepted women as active members, and this trend accelerated after the 1970s, when sport shooting clubs established themselves as an alternative to more traditional shooting clubs. Civil gun culture has also been the mainstay of gunwomanship in the US: as cowgirls, farm women or horse dealers, white pioneer women who wielded their Winchesters, Colts and Brownings with great skill are ubiquitous in the U.S. cultural narrative of the frontier (Seagraves 1996; Stange/Oyster 2000). Throughout Western society, gunwomanship evolves around self-defense, sport-shooting and hunting (Dizard/Stange 2022)

In general, modern firearms became increasingly common since the second half of the 19th century. Technology had advanced, and firearms become more accurate, fast and easier to handle. This was particularly interesting to women, who often chose to carry one of these chic modern pistols in their handbags. Global consumer culture with its advertisements gives a clear indication that handguns, especially small pistols, were fashionably tailored for female buyers. The same was true for male consumers whose tastes were considered by gun manufacturers (Stukenbrok 1999; Ellerbrock 2023). We know from memoirs that women bought and carried these modern firearms, so we can detect a very well-established female gun culture in both Europe and North America in the 19th century (Browder 2006). It is noteworthy that private gunwomanship was not perceived as contradictory to the supposedly peace-loving gender stereotype that shaped the Western image of womanhood (Hausen 1976). Gunwomanship was widely tolerated, sometimes even promoted by clubs and sellers (Browder 2006), if it was limited to civilian gun culture and focused on sports and self-defense. However, at the same time, the defamation of gunwomanship continues well into the 20th century, as women set out to claim equal participation in men's domains of fighting such as the military, the police, or even terrorism.

8. The German Red Army Fraction's Female Terrorists

After harsh denigration of gunwomen and women in military service in the early 20th century, the discourse on female terrorists became downright hysterical in the 1970s. These armed women were denied any female identity, as armed female terrorist attacks were seen, in a polemic in the German news magazine *Der Spiegel* as an »emancipation excess« (*Der Spiegel* from August 7, 1977). In 1977, *Der Spiegel* lamented the female militancy that could be observed worldwide: It mentioned Fusako Shigenobu of the Japanese Red Army, Palestinian terrorist Leila Chalid Irish IRA leader Maire Drumm and others. That female terrorists were not only professional with guns, but – even worse – that »often shooting girls commandeered armed men« (ibid.) seemed particularly threatening; the article followed sociologist Erwin Scheuch's argument these women »produced themselves as female supermen« (ibid.). The gun hidden in the beauty case became iconic – according to West German sociology, these practices marked the final »break with rejected femininity« (ibid.) On the other hand, public discourse disempowered female terrorists by labelling them as »terror girls« (Bandhauer-Schöffmann 2009: 72). Oscillating between superwomen and terror girls, modern discourse on gunwomanship is still caught in a fundamental ambivalence with denies armed women feminine identity (Grisard 2011). For armed women, too, the point of reference is still masculinity and the armed man. This placed femininity in a binary opposition to any kind of

military weaponry practice, an opposition that even armed women soldiers could not overcome.

The harsh denigration of armed women in terror discourse transformed parts of the struggle against female terrorism into an argument against women's emancipation (Bandhauer-Schöffmann 2009; Paczensky 1978). Among female intellectuals, too, the presence of armed terrorists sparked debates about the relationship between terrorism and gender (Paczensky 1978). To feminist scholars it was obvious that carrying a gun was not a miraculous path to emancipation, since women in the context of terrorism were often reduced to practices of extreme self-denial and domination and exposed to toxic, violent masculinity (Fabricius-Brand 1978). Today, whether *gunwomanship* contributes to women's empowerment remains highly controversial (Kelley 2022; Stange 2000) while most feminists consider guns to be problematic for emancipation (Friedman 2017) and women tend to support restrictive gun laws (Goss 2017). *Gunwomanship* – in itself – does not seem to be a suitable means to creating an emancipated society with equal rights. Nevertheless, *gunwomanship* can be seen as an interesting indicator of equality, as seen in debates around women soldiers as potential challenges to military culture.

Only recently did women become part of the regular armed military forces and police forces (Carreiras 2006); at the beginning of the 20th century only the Russian Army included female combat troops, Israel stated conscripting women in the 1940ies, whereas Western democracies only since the 21 century included women soldiers in their combat forces. Though women warriors have always been part of military history they remain exceptions. The de-feminization of armed women within military contexts proved how the rigidity of traditional gender orders. Even female gun practices did not have the power to blow up this gender hierarchy, at least not as an offensive tool to overcome the patriarchy. The recent integration of women into the armed forces of all Western societies can be seen, on the one hand, as an expression of political emancipation that ended women's exclusion, and, on the other hand, as an instrument to normalize gunwomanship. In this respect the gender-neutral restructuring of military gun culture can be seen as a transformation of a culture which is becoming more egalitarian.

9. Conclusion

Women carrying weapons have always been a part of European history; within many different settings, in civilian as well as in military contexts. Armed women have been much more diverse and active in different roles than historical research has presumed. Basic valuations of gunwomanship partly changed, especially at the turn from the 20th to the 21st century, but some narratives toward armed women remain surprisingly stable. This included the ambivalent idea of the fascinating-

terrible character of Amazons, warrior women, and Valkyries, which created the mixed feelings that shaped the basic perception of armed women for centuries and still structures their image in popular culture. To fully understand gunwomanship, it is essential to recognize the difference between military and civilian gun culture. While female warriors elicited degradation in the context of civilian arms practices, i.e., hunting, sport and self-defense, gunwomanship barely received criticism or was even supported.

More recently, we see the reappearance of the fierce, wild, and armed Norse or Viking warrior woman in popular culture. We encounter the ambivalence of the wild, uncivilized women who are simultaneously perceived as powerful and fighting for superior moral principles. These narratives have entered all niches of popular culture, and render armed women a presence in many aspects of daily life, in civilian and military contexts alike. The most profound change can be observed in military weapons culture, where the integration of women into military services meant a departure from older notions of misogyny. Although some gender discrimination persists in modern military and police institutions as well, the fundamental integration of women as actors capable and authorized to bear arms represents an elemental reorganization of the culture of gunwomanship.

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