

Save Our Sons: Women, Dissent and Conscription during the Vietnam War

Emma Carson
University of Adelaide

Save Our Sons: Women, Dissent and Conscription during the Vietnam War

Carolyn Collins

(Melbourne: Monash University Publishing, 2021, 360pp. AU\$35)

ISBN: 9781925835960

Carolyn Collins's monograph is a fascinating and, at times, incredibly touching history of Australian women's opposition to the Vietnam War. Based on her award-winning doctoral thesis, it chronicles the development, activities and eventual demise of the 'Save Our Sons' (SOS) movement that was founded in Sydney in May 1965 and soon expanded to an almost-national scale. Her research contributes to the historiography of Vietnam War opposition and offers much-needed attention to the SOS movement, which, while it had a major presence in anti-conscription demonstrations across Australia, is often overlooked in favour of research on the more vocal student movements.

The ambitious aim of this study is to expand on the scant literature about this organisation by providing the first national history of the SOS. In her fourth chapter especially, Collins provides a detailed summary of all the SOS groups that formed after the first one in Sydney. She emphasises that, unlike in previous studies that assess SOS as a single entity, these separate groups were autonomous and varied in terms of their core characteristics. In all other chapters, Collins ensures that she does not just focus on the founding Sydney SOS group, but also uses key events in the other states as evidence, especially those in Victoria and Queensland. There is some privileging of the eastern states, owing to the larger quantity of surviving sources documenting their activities, but South Australian

and Western Australian enthusiasts should rest assured that Collins offers a fair coverage of their regional groups and is faithful to her aim of writing a national history.

In the first part of the monograph, Collins challenges previous conceptions of the SOS in popular media and historical studies by emphasising that the 'respectable', middle-class image that the SOS presented was intentionally exaggerated by the organisation to reduce suspicion from ASIO about its communist affiliations. Instead, she demonstrates that there was no 'typical' SOS supporter, instead offering concise biographies that showcase the diversity of women (and men) who contributed to the movement, including their ages, socio-economic backgrounds, political and religious affiliations, vocations and nationalities. Collins demonstrates that, while SOS was not strictly a women's movement, its factions successfully weaponised traditional notions of femininity, especially the 'maternalist rhetoric' that was a common trope in twentieth-century women's activism. Collins argues that SOS's appropriation of maternalist rhetoric ultimately made the Vietnam protest movement more appealing and accessible to a wider range of people, including apolitical, middle-class women, and made it easier for their opponents to sympathise with their position.

In the second half of the book, Collins charts how the SOS campaigns radicalised over time, especially after the 1966 federal election. She argues that, by the end of the 1960s, SOS transitioned from law-abiding, traditional means of protest, to engaging in lawbreaking behaviour, by disrupting parliamentary proceedings with 'sit ins' and inciting young men to defy the National Services Act. In her final chapter, Collins offers a nuanced assessment of SOS's impact on the Australian government's response to the Vietnam War and reflects on the tangible ways that they affected the political climate. She asserts that one of the least publicised, but most vital, contributions of the SOS to the anti-war movement was their involvement in 'underground' networks that hid draft resisters, offering counselling to men who opposed the national services, and raising funds to pay the legal costs, fines and bail of fellow protestors. She also evaluates the impact of SOS involvement on the women themselves and suggests that it inspired many, some of whom were new to activism, to join other prominent movements in the period, including women's liberation, multiculturalism and environmentalism.

Collins's assertions are supported by a solid methodology, drawing on a wide range of primary sources, including official records from SOS groups, personal correspondence, autobiographies, police and intelligence reports, newspaper articles and oral histories. In addition to repurposing material from other studies, such as oral histories that were conducted by Pauline Armstrong for her research on the Victorian SOS, Collins delves into previously uncharted material, including 30 interviews that she conducted with former SOS women and their families and ASIO files on SOS members.

Collins's prose is clear and lacks needless jargon. She opens each chapter with a quote from someone involved with the SOS movement and a narrative that summarises a significant event from a former member's perspective. This effectively draws the reader into each section of the book and humanises the movement and its activists. While some knowledge of the Vietnam War and twentieth-century Australia is assumed, you do not need to be an expert in either of these fields to follow the chapters and understand the author's arguments. It is an accessible book that is of public interest and is a great introductory text for undergraduate students and feminist historians on women's activism in Vietnam-era Australia.

This text is taken from *Lilith: A Feminist History Journal: Number 28*,
published 2022 by ANU Press, The Australian National University,
Canberra, Australia.