
Offensive Women: Women in Combat in the Red Army in the Second World War¹



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Abstract

This article revisits the topic of Soviet women in the ground forces in the Second World War. The focus is on the nature and variety of women's combat experiences. Although most women were noncombatants, many did participate in activities normally associated with combat, and some women participated in virtually every combat role of the time. The available evidence indicates that women in the Red Army performed, overall, as well as men in combat situations.

Introduction

A typical view of the historical role of women in combat was expressed by John Keegan in his 1994 book, *A History of Warfare*: "Warfare is . . . the one human activity from which women, with the most insignificant exceptions, have always and everywhere stood apart . . . Women . . . do not fight . . . and they never,

1. The following article is an update and revision of a 1995 conference presentation given by the author at the University of Edinburgh, under the mentorship of John Erickson. The conference, "The Soldier's Experience of War in the West 1939-1945," featured such speakers as John Keegan, Hew Strachan, and Brian Bond. The conference proceedings were subsequently

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in any military sense, fight men.”² It has often been said that one of the first casualties of war is truth—and that seems to be the case here. More than 1 million women served with the Soviet armed forces, militias, and partisan groups in the twentieth century, most during the Second World War.

In its use of large numbers of women in combat, the Soviet Union was unique in world history. During both world wars and the Russian Civil War, women fought on the front lines.³ Soviet women engaged in combat in all branches of service in addition to their mass employment in support services.⁴ Soviet women were unique in being the only women soldiers who fought outside the borders of their own country in the Second World War. If historians have failed to note the evidence that women have served in combat, it is at best the result of tunnel vision, and at worst, a case of deliberate oversight. Keegan derides the habitual reluctance of military historians “to call a spade a spade,” but it seems that Keegan himself, among others, exhibits precisely this reluctance regarding the military history of women.⁵ In the words of D’Ann Campbell, women continue to be the “invisible combatants” of military history in general, and of the Second World War in particular.⁶

In this article I take an intentionally traditional military history approach, the kind that is sometimes denigrated by cultural and intellectual historians as “mere gap-filling.” I do not impose an overarching theory to explain the experience of Soviet women in combat. Historians still need to systematically collect and document the events and experiences of this group of combatants in order to provide a better foundation for analysis.

The basic historical work of sifting through archives, comparing archival and anecdotal materials, and interpreting the evidence, has barely begun. There are two main reasons for this problem. First, Soviet archives became accessible only quite recently, and there are still many difficulties in working there. The general lack of centralized tracking of women in the Red Army as a separate category, combined with the lack of finding aids, means that fully documenting and verifying women’s participation will require years of painstaking effort by many historians. The second reason for the lack of scholarly research is the dearth of historians who possess the

published; Reina Pennington, “Offensive Women: Women in Combat in the Red Army,” in *Time to Kill: The Soldier’s Experience of War in the West 1939–1945*, ed. Paul Addison and Angus Calder (London: Pimlico Press, 1997). Since that time few scholarly studies have been published in English about Soviet women in ground combat in the Second World War, and *Time to Kill* quickly went out of print.

2. John Keegan, *A History of Warfare* (New York: Knopf, 1993), 76.

3. Anne Eliot Griesse and Richard Stites, “Russia: Revolution and War,” *Female Soldiers—Combatants or Noncombatants?: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Nancy Loring Goldman (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1982), 67.

4. Nancy Loring Goldman, introduction to *Female Soldiers*, 7.

5. John Keegan, *The Face of Battle* (New York: Penguin, 1978), 30.

6. D’Ann Campbell, “Women in Combat: the World War II Experience in the United States, Great Britain, Germany, and the Soviet Union,” *Journal of Military History* 57, no. 2 (1993): 301.

will, the language skills, and the means to do this work. Until that work is done, the imposition of theoretical explanations will rest on a shaky foundation.

During the Cold War, some Western historians dismissed information about Soviet women in combat as mere propaganda.⁷ A better analysis was provided by historians like Anne Griesse, Richard Stites, Jean Cottam, and John Erickson, in the West, and Valentina Galagan, Yulia Ivanova, and Vera Murmantseva in the former Soviet Union. In the 1980s and 1990s, they called attention to the experience of Soviet women in combat. The author has also published three book chapters on Soviet women in the ground forces since 1995.⁸

Social and cultural historians have recently begun to examine the question of women's combat experiences. Anna Krylova has produced an article and a book analyzing Soviet women's combat experiences from a cultural history perspective.⁹ Krylova provides the best examination of Soviet institutional history to date, carefully tracing the often contradictory policies of the Soviet government toward women in the military. Historian Roger Reese devotes two chapters to women in his forthcoming book, *Frontoviki: Perspectives on the Soviet Soldier in World War II*.¹⁰ One chapter is devoted to motivation; the second focuses on mobilization procedures and relationships between women and men. Reese's and Krylova's excellent works focus on social, cultural, and institutional aspects of women's military service, but devote less attention to what women actually did.

7. George H. Quester, "Women in Combat," *International Security* 1 (Spring 1977), 81; Jeff M. Tuten, "The Argument Against Female Combatants," in Goldman, *Female Soldiers*, 243. Tuten makes the interesting claim that "early in the war, the Germans had captured well over 100,000 Russian female soldiers who held full combatant status" and implies that this is the basis for the Germans' scorn for women soldiers (p. 55); this assertion seems implausible, since Soviet women were not mobilized until 1942, and then only for air defense and support services. This myth of the mass capture of women soldiers has unfortunately been picked up in other works; see Shelley Saywell, *Women in War* (Markham, Ont.: Viking, 1985), 149. It must be remembered that the Germans were often contemptuous of the performance of *all* Soviet troops, not just the women. Many of these criticisms lack substance. Many people remain unaware that Germans frequently praised Soviet skill. See for example Generalleutnant D. W. Schwabedissen, *The Russian Air Force in the Eyes of German Commanders*, prepared by the USAF Historical Division (New York: Arno Press, 1968), 48.

8. Reina Pennington, "Offensive Women" (see note 1); "Women and the Battle of Stalin-grad," in *Russia: War, Peace and Diplomacy—Essays in Honour of John Erickson*, ed. Mark Erickson and Ljubica Erickson (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2005); and "Our Women Know the Price of War and Peace," in *The Soviet Union at War, 1941–1945*, ed. David R. Stone (Barnsley, U.K.: Pen & Sword Publishers, forthcoming in 2010).

9. Anna Krylova, "Stalinist Identity from the Viewpoint of Gender: Rearing a Generation of Professionally Violent Women-Fighters in 1930s Stalinist Russia," *Gender & History* 16, no. 3 (2004); and Krylova, *Soviet Women in Combat: A History of Violence on the Eastern Front* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

10. Roger R. Reese, manuscript, "Frontoviki: Perspectives on the Soviet Soldier in World War II" (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, expected publication in 2011). Reese was kind enough to share these chapters with the author.

Although Krylova's analysis is sophisticated and thought-provoking, as Roger Reese has noted, it lacks historical context. Reese attempts to provide that context, but only within Soviet and Russian history. A better theoretical framework might be the one developed by Mady Wechsler Segal in her 1995 article, "Women's Military Roles Cross-Nationally." Segal suggests that "the degree and nature of women's participation in the armed forces throughout history and across nations" expands and contracts, based on three factors: military (including national security situations, military technology, military accession policies), social (demographic patterns and economic factors), and cultural (values and public discourse regarding gender).¹¹ All of these theories function at the strategic level of examining social and cultural patterns. More has been written about why women served, the state's role in their service, gender discourse about their service, and reactions to and perceptions of their service, than about the actual service itself. From a military historian's perspective, this is a serious omission. At a time when there is still wide debate about whether women *can* serve in combat and what they *might* do if allowed to serve, we are still surprisingly ignorant about what women actually *have done* in wartime combat situations.

The history of Soviet women in combat is still a neglected topic. In particular, general histories of the Second World War and the Great Patriotic War say very little about women's participation. John Erickson described it as "a saga which has yet to be told in all its astonishing variety and harrowing individual detail" and said that the lack of attention this "extraordinary dimension of the Soviet war effort" has received from both Soviet and Western historians is "not a little reprehensible."¹² This article focuses on the variety and individual detail of women's combat experiences in order to demonstrate that some women participated in virtually every combat role of the time and that, on the whole, women in the Red Army performed as well as men in combat situations.

Precedents

The historical experience of Russian and Soviet women as combatants set the context for their roles in World War II. Some Russian women were portrayed in history and legend as being physically strong and capable of fighting. As in many other countries, a few women fought in disguise in various conflicts before the twentieth century. In the First World War, some women served in combat on a volunteer basis.¹³ After the revolution in February 1917, a number of separate women's military units were organized; historian Laurie Stoff has ably described

11. Mady Wechsler Segal, "Women's Military Roles Cross-Nationally: Past, Present, and Future," *Gender & Society* 9, no. 6 (1995): 757-75.

12. John Erickson, "Night Witches, Snipers and Laundresses," *History Today*, July 1990, 29.

13. Maria Botchkareva, *Yashka: My Life as Peasant, Officer and Exile* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1919).

those events.¹⁴ There were some 6,000 women soldiers by 1917. Most were nurses, but other frontline, regular army roles included drivers, mechanics, and laborers, as well as combat roles.

After the October 1917 revolution, between 73,000 and 80,000 women served on the Bolshevik side in the Russian Civil War (an event that still lacks scholarly attention). Volunteers were allowed in from the start, and women were also conscripted for support duties by 1920. Many were military nurses, but the Red Army, unlike its predecessors, instituted both political indoctrination and rifle training for its medical personnel. Women volunteers also served in combat roles on every front as machine gunners, demolition troops, partisans, scouts, and spies.¹⁵

Legal precedents in the Soviet Union made it possible for women to fight. Women's political and legal equality was guaranteed by the constitution of 1918, which also established universal military service for men, and voluntary military service for women. Article 122 of the 1936 constitution noted that "Women in the USSR are allowed equal rights with men in all areas of economic, state, cultural, social and political life," while Articles 132 and 133 stated that "Universal military service is law" and "The defense of the fatherland is the sacred duty of every citizen of the USSR."¹⁶ The *Vsevoluch* (Universal Military Training Administration) was also created in 1918, with the mandate that all citizens aged eighteen to forty would receive eight weeks of military training, although the training was apparently voluntary for women.¹⁷

Many historians have noted that there were contradictions in women's roles throughout the Soviet period, with practice lagging behind theory. In theory, women were equal; in practice, women were usually relegated to lower-ranking positions at work and filled many traditional women's roles at work and at home.¹⁸ Griesse and Stites note that Soviet leader Joseph Stalin's prewar policies had already set the

14. Laurie Stoff, *They Fought for the Motherland: Russia's Women Soldiers in World War I and the Revolution* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006). See also Melissa K. Stockdale, "My Death for the Motherland is Happiness": Women, Patriotism, and Soldiering in Russia's Great War, 1914–1917," *American Historical Review* 109, no. 1 (2004): 78–116; A. S. Senin, "Zhenskie batal'ony i voennye komandy v 1917 godu," *Voprosy Istorii*, no. 10 (1987); Sergei Vladimirovich Drovok, "Organizator Zhenskogo batal'ona smerti," *Voprosy Istorii*, no. 7 (1993); and Richard Abraham, "Mariia L. Bochkareva and the Russian Amazons of 1917," in *Women and Society in Russia and the Soviet Union*, ed. Linda Edmondson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

15. Stoff, *They Fought for the Motherland*, 203, citing Richard Johnson, "The Role of Women in the Russian Civil War (1917–1921)," *Conflict* 2, no. 2 (1980) 213; and Griesse and Stites, "Russia: Revolution and War," 67. See also Elizabeth Wood, *The Baba and the Comrade: Gender and Politics in Revolutionary Russia* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 56; Wood gives a figure of 50,000 to 70,000, citing Soviet sources from the 1920s.

16. The full text is available online: http://constitution.garant.ru/DOC_3858676.htm#sub_para_N_1010.

17. Wood, *The Baba and the Comrade*, 53.

18. Kenneth Slepyan, *Stalin's Guerrillas: Soviet Partisans in World War II* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006), 205.

tone for the military's attitudes toward women: "Pronatalist, sexist, and suspicious of spontaneity, Stalinism assured that the Soviet high command would have a deeply ambivalent attitude to the participation of women in the next war."¹⁹ This ambivalence would create opportunities for women to serve and fight during the war.

Mobilization

When the Germans invaded the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941, few Soviet women were in active military service—about 1,000, according to Roger Reese.²⁰ During the first weeks of the war, tens of thousands of Soviet women volunteered for active duty; most were rejected. When the war began, there was no plan in place for the large-scale military mobilization of women. Those who insisted on military service were often able to prevail, but were usually channeled into support duties.²¹ The typical first response in the Soviet Union was similar to that in the West: women were urged to replace men in industry and agriculture. Women would "man" the home front so that men could go to war.²²

But the situation was fluid near the rapidly shifting front line in 1941, where broken and disorganized military units often recruited on the spot. After surviving a German bombing attack in the first weeks of the war, Katiusha Mikhailova went directly to a military headquarters in Smolensk to volunteer for combat duty. She was rejected. Then, as the city came under attack, she found the commander of a rifle unit who desperately needed medical staff. She says he gave her a uniform and a rifle, and that was how she joined the Red Army.²³ A similar story is told by Antonina Kotliarova. As the Germans threatened Moscow in October 1941, she says "I finally made them take me into anti-aircraft artillery near Moscow." She eventually completed sniper training and went to the front as a sniper in late 1944.²⁴ These stories illustrate the way many women got to the front and even into combat roles, bypassing the usual system of mobilization. Anna Krylova has calculated that 17,000 to 27,000 women filled combat positions in 1941, but her figures are only estimates.²⁵

As the war progressed, female volunteers were increasingly accepted, and there were several mobilizations of women, particularly for the rear services, communications, and the air defense forces. The Central Committee of the

19. Griesse and Stites, "Russia: Revolution and War," 68.

20. Reese, "Frontoviki" mss.

21. K. Jean Cottam, "Soviet Women in Combat in World War II: The Rear Services, Resistance Behind Enemy Lines, and Military Political Workers," *International Journal of Women's Studies* 5, no. 4 (1982): 363. According to Cottam, "no separate army women's organizations or policies on conscription and promotion appear to have existed."

22. This was a less radical shift in the Soviet Union than in the West, since Soviet women already comprised 40 percent of the industrial labor force. Griesse and Stites, "Russia: Revolution and War," 68–69; John Erickson, "Soviet Women at War," in *World War II and the Soviet People*, ed. John Garrard, Carol Garrard, and Stephen White (New York: St. Martin's, 1993), 51.

23. Saywell, *Women in War*, 134–35.

24. Sniper Antonina Kotliarova, <http://www.iremember.ru/content/view/30/74/lang/en/>.

25. Krylova, *Soviet Women in Combat*, 168–69.

Komsomol (Communist Union of Youth) handled most of the mobilizations. It sent instructions to its district committees and *Komsomol* units in factories and educational institutions. The volunteers filled out questionnaires; they were interviewed, warned about the hardships of military service, and asked to think carefully before agreeing to volunteer for duty. One veteran described the *Komsomol* selection process as “stringent and thorough.”²⁶ Roger Reese notes that the *Komsomol* was used to mobilize women, rather than the *voenkomy* (military commissariats which functioned like local draft boards), because draft-eligible women’s names had never been registered for possible military service with the *voenkomy*. But most young women and men belonged to the *Komsomol*, which was readily able to contact young women and relieve the already-burdened *voenkomy* of this task.²⁷

There were several waves of mobilization of women. On the second day of the war, more than 40,000 women were called up for medical duties, and in August 1941, orders were issued to recruit more than 14,000 women as drivers and the *Komsomol* sent 10,000 young women to military communications units.²⁸ In March and April 1942, there were several GKO (State Defense Committee) orders to the NKO (People’s Commissariat of Defense) to bring certain numbers of women into military service, often specifically to release men from support or rear area duties. More such orders were issued in January 1943.²⁹ David Glantz notes that published documents indicate that at least 250,000 women were mobilized between March 1942 and January 1943, and that “additional unpublished orders probably added tens of thousands more women to the Red Army’s ranks.”³⁰

The *Komsomol* mobilized 100,000 young women for the Air Defense Forces, or PVO, in the spring of 1942, and another mobilization for the PVO followed in October.³¹ The *Vsevobuch* trained 222,000 women in military specialties during the war; more than 6,000 women were given training on mortars, more than 15,000 were trained with automatic weapons or submachine guns, and more than 100,000 were trained as snipers.³² The training organizations recorded women’s

26. Raisa E. Aronova, *Nochnye Ved'my* [Night Witches], rev. and exp. 2nd ed. (Moscow: Sovetskaia Rossiia, 1980), 21.

27. Reese, “Frontoviki” mss.

28. Ibid.

29. Alexander Hill, *The Great Patriotic War of the Soviet Union, 1941–45: A Documentary Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 93.

30. David M. Glantz, *Colossus Reborn: The Red Army at War, 1941–1943* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2005), 554. Some of these orders are published in Hill, *The Great Patriotic War of the Soviet Union*, and online at <http://soldat.ru/doc/gko/>.

31. Erickson, “Soviet Women at War,” 62. Women aged from nineteen to twenty-five were drafted for service.

32. Vera Semenova Murmantseva, *Sovetskie zhenshchiny v Velikoi Otechestvennoi voine 1941–1945* (Moscow: Mysl', 1974), 128–29. Murmantseva cites military archival sources for these figures.

numbers, but on the whole, the army did not. Moreover, the sources that contain training totals do not indicate how many of the women who received the training went on to serve in the army.

By 1943, Soviet women had been integrated into all services and all military roles, ranging from traditional support roles like medical service, to primarily defensive work in antiaircraft defense, to offensive combat roles in the infantry, artillery, and armor, as well as the partisan movement. Most women in the Red Army served at the subunit, battery, and weapon crew level. They commanded companies and platoons, but rarely larger formations; only a few women reached the rank of colonel.³³

Numbers

The overall number of women who served in the Red Army has still not been definitely determined. A lack of clarity remains as to how many women were mobilized and how many conscripted into military service. These terms are often used interchangeably and indiscriminately, but mobilization is a broader term covering the organization, recruiting, and training of troops for the military, while conscription specifically denotes compulsory military service. Volunteers are mobilized, but conscripts have no choice.

The *Komsomol*, as we have seen, managed the accession of most women. It appears that during the big mobilization drives, some young women were coerced into joining up through peer pressure and *Komsomol* intimidation, and the Soviet government had the legal right to conscript women, but their accession was not handled in the same manner as men's conscription. The *Komsomol* sought volunteers, and women could generally avoid military service if they so desired.

Two other terms are also controversial: the number of women "combatants," and those who served "at the front." Both of these terms are problematic. Neither was precisely defined, and both are used loosely and with varying precision by historians, journalists, and veterans.

As David Glantz has noted, determining the number of women in the Red Army remains "one of the most obscure and controversial issues."³⁴ Krylova notes that even during the war, the Soviet government maintained an "unfailing and totalizing" silence about the numbers of women entering military service.³⁵ The Soviet government did not track women in the military separately from men, and has not produced official statistics on how many women served in which units and in which specialties at what times. The best estimates have been obtained from mobilization figures. These give estimates of women's participation, supplemented by scattered data that have appeared for certain units or schools. These provide a general picture of the scale of women's participation, but the picture is far from complete.

33. Erickson, "Soviet Women at War," 67–68.

34. Glantz, *Colossus Reborn*, 551.

35. Krylova, *Soviet Women in Combat*, 227.

Estimates of the number of women who served vary widely, from 500,000 to 2 million. Walter Dunn says that “more than two million women served in the Russian armed services by 1945, 400,000 in PVO and 1,600,000 in the army and the NKVD [People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs].”³⁶ The figure of two million seems to come from a 1945 British Intelligence study, which historian Chris Bellamy analyzed and found “fairly accurate.”³⁷

The 1985 *Encyclopedia of the Great Patriotic War* specifies that 550,000 *Komsomol* members alone became soldiers, with more than 300,000 serving in PVO (25 percent of the total PVO personnel), and “hundreds of thousands” in military-medical service, signal and road units, and other roles, and 100,000 women in the partisans and other underground organizations. In just medical roles, the *Encyclopedia* states that there were 300,000 female nurses, 300,000 female orderlies, and 500,000 medical helpers in local air defense units—a total of over a million women.³⁸

Most Soviet works state that 800,000 women served in the Red Army.³⁹ Valentina Galagan says that the *Komsomol* alone mobilized about 500,000 young women for the army, with 70 percent sent to the active army, and that 800,000 women served during the course of the war “in different branches of the service at the front” [emphasis mine].⁴⁰ The 1985 *Encyclopedia of the Great Patriotic War* uses the figure of 800,000 at the front and indicates that this does not include all women who fought.⁴¹ Griesse and Stites use the figure of 800,000 for “uniformed troops in the Red Army,” with about 500,000 serving at the front.⁴²

In the 1990s, Colonel-General G. F. Krivosheev produced a landmark statistical analysis of the Red Army, consisting of hundreds of tables breaking down numbers of troops and losses by branch of service, locations, and date, but not by gender. He says only that “a total of 490,235 women were called up.”⁴³

36. Walter S. Dunn, *Stalin’s Keys to Victory: The Rebirth of the Red Army* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger Security International, 2006), 14, 56. Dunn’s book is not footnoted, and no source is given for these numbers. Dunn also used the figure of two million in his earlier work, *Hitler’s Nemesis: The Red Army, 1930–1945* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1994), 60.

37. Chris Bellamy, *Absolute War: Soviet Russia in the Second World War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), 486, citing the U.K. National Archives at Kew, WO 33/1828A, 1829 (summary), *Order of Battle of Military Forces in USSR 1945*.

38. “Zhenshchiny SSSR,” in M. M. Kozlov, *Velikaia Otechestvennaia voina 1941–1945: Entsiklopediia* (Moskva: Sovietskaia entsiklopediia, 1985), 269–71.

39. Vera Semenova Murmantseva, *Zhenshchiny v soldatskikh shineliakh* (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1971), 120–29. See also Valentina Yakovlevna Galagan, *Ratnyi podvig zhenshchin v gody Velikoi Otechestvennoi voiny* (Kiev: Vysshiaia shkola, 1986), 29; and Griesse and Stites, “Russia: Revolution and War,” 73.

40. Galagan, *Ratnyi podvig*, 29.

41. “Zhenshchiny SSSR,” 269–71.

42. Griesse and Stites, “Russia: Revolution and War,” 73, citing *Sovetskaya voennaya entsiklopediia* (SVE), vol. 3, p. 332; and Murmantseva, *Zhenshchiny v soldatskikh shineliakh*, 120–29.

43. G. F. Krivosheev, *Soviet Casualties and Combat Losses in the Twentieth Century*, trans. Christine Barnard (London: Greenhill Books, 1997), 230.

According to Mark Edele, Krivosheev's later work provides a figure of 463,503 women in active service on 1 January 1945, with a total of 570,000 women soldiers (including 80,000 officers) who served throughout the war.⁴⁴ Evan Mawdsley says that "490,235 women served in the ranks of the Soviet armed forces, and another 500,000 in civilian support staff."⁴⁵ Roger Reese uses figures of 310,000 volunteers and 490,235 conscripts, and says the number includes both the military and the *opolchenie* (local security units similar to the British Home Army).⁴⁶ Thousands of women served in *opolchenie*.⁴⁷ It appears that women were readily taken into the *opolchenie* that were rapidly created in the first weeks of the war. More than four million people volunteered for *opolchenie*, and about half ended up fighting in the army.⁴⁸ Many *opolchenie* consisted of 20 to 30 percent female volunteers.⁴⁹

A widely cited figure is that 246,530 women were serving "at the front" by 1945. That figure appears in a table in Galagan's 1985 book, which includes only *Komsomol* members, and so omits women who had graduated to Party membership or who were not members of either the *Komsomol* or the Party.⁵⁰ Reese notes that "to that number must be added untold tens of thousands who had been killed or wounded since June 1941" and suggests that the total number of women who served at the front throughout the course of the war might have been around 300,000.⁵¹ In the last half of the war, Erickson states, there were an average of between 2,000 and 3,500 women in each army of the Red Army, and 20,000 to 22,000 women in each Front (the Soviet equivalent of a theater or army group).⁵² There were between ten and fifteen Fronts at any given time during the

44. G. F. Krivosheev, *Liudskie poteri SSSR v period Vtoroi Mirovoi voiny. Sbornik statei* (St. Petersburg: Blits, 1995), 74, 79. These figures are cited by Mark Edele, *Soviet Veterans of the Second World War: A Popular Movement in an Authoritarian Society 1941–1991* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 143; and Glantz, *Colossus Reborn*, 554.

45. Evan Mawdsley, *Thunder in the East: The Nazi-Soviet War 1941–1945* (London: Hodder Arnold, 2007), 214. Mawdsley cites Vladimir Antonovich Zolotarev, *Russkii arkhiv. Velikaia Otechestvennaia*, 3 vols. (Moskva: TERRA, 2000), 2(2): 184, 212–14; and G. F. Krivosheev, *Rossia i SSSR v voynakh XX veka: poteri vooruzhennykh sil: statisticheskoe issledovanie, Arkhiv* (Moskva: OLMA-Press, 2001), 453.

46. Reese, "Frontoviki" mss. Reese claims that most of the 310,000 volunteers actually sought to join local defense units rather than the Red Army, but provides no source to support that statement.

47. As we have seen, sources differ as to whether women in the *opolchenie* are included in the 800,000 total.

48. Krivosheev, *Soviet Casualties*, 229.

49. Galagan, *Ratnyi podvig*, 28–31; Murmantseva, *Sovetskie zhenshchiny*, 121–22.

50. Galagan, *Ratnyi podvig*, 275. She gives a total number of 322,283 female *Komsomol* members in the Red Army in 1945. The figures for 1944 were somewhat higher. These figures reflect the problem of having only *Komsomol*, but not Red Army, statistics.

51. Reese, "Frontoviki" mss.

52. Erickson, "Night Witches, Snipers and Laundresses," 33; Erickson, "Soviet Women at War," 68.

war, so Erickson's estimate would yield a total of 200,000 to 330,000 women at the Fronts.⁵³

Historian Anna Krylova concludes that a total of 520,000 women served in frontline duties throughout the war, not including women in air defense and a variety of other support roles. She breaks that figure down to about 200,000 women in support roles and 200,000 combat medics, leaving about 120,000 women in combat-related roles. When air defense and rear area personnel are included, she believes the total number of women who served exceeded 900,000.⁵⁴

Mark Edele analyzed the postwar fate of veterans of the Great Patriotic War and concluded that only two to four percent of veterans were female. His overall figures for veterans are "statistical reconstructions on the basis of the prewar censuses," other demographic data, and "a lot of computation and conjecture."⁵⁵ Edele highlights some of the problems in arriving at any statistical analysis of the Red Army, and the uncertain nature of much of the data.

It would require an examination of the personnel rosters of every Soviet military unit to conclusively determine the number of women who served by identifying women's names.⁵⁶ That tedious and exhaustive process would produce only partial data, since most personnel were listed only by last name and initials, so only women whose last names are clearly female could be positively identified as female. Most Russian and some other surnames are gendered, but other groups (Ukrainian, for example) are not, so soldiers with gender-neutral surnames can't be identified as either male or female. In addition to that problem, military personnel rosters are far from complete.

Despite recent attempts to clarify precisely how many women served, the specifics remain, in the words of Griesse and Stites in 1982, "distressingly vague."⁵⁷ It is safe to conclude that a minimum of 570,000 women served in the Red Army in the Great Patriotic War. I believe that 700,000 to 800,000 is a better estimate, for reasons mentioned above concerning the lack of detailed record-keeping and archival analysis. When militias and partisans are added, it is reasonable to estimate that about 1 million Soviet women bore arms during the war.⁵⁸

Whatever the specific numbers, it is clear that women served in the Red Army in significant numbers. As Roger Reese concludes, "no one can deny that without those 800,000 women—the equivalent of between 80-100 rifle and tank divisions—the Soviet war effort would have been seriously compromised."⁵⁹

53. David Glantz et al., *Slaughterhouse: The Handbook of the Eastern Front* (Bedford, Pa.: Aberjona Press, 2004), 300.

54. Krylova, *Soviet Women in Combat*, 168–69.

55. Edele, *Soviet Veterans of the Second World War*: on page 14 he says two to three percent; on page 143 he gives a range of two to four percent.

56. Galagan, *Ratnyi podvig*, 28.

57. Griesse and Stites, "Russia: Revolution and War," 73.

58. David Glantz comes to the same conclusion; see *Colossus Reborn*, 554.

59. Reese, "Frontoviki" mss.

Motivation

Why did so many Soviet women want to go to war? Their motivations ranged from following relatives to the front to avenging the death of a friend or relative, to simple patriotism; sniper Anna Vasil'eva says the death of her mother motivated her to fight.⁶⁰ Some were inspired by the memories of relatives who fought in the revolution or the civil war.⁶¹ Some who lost male relatives early in the war felt a need for revenge, or a duty to take their husband's or brother's place at the front.⁶² Olga Omelchenko was motivated by the death of her "blood brother."⁶³ Others who had no living relatives felt they had nothing to lose by joining the army.⁶⁴ Still others sought to follow the example of relatives who were already fighting; stories abound of husbands and wives serving together, and of wives who followed their husbands to war.⁶⁵ Some women joined their mothers or sisters in military service. Rita Pyl'cyn served as a military nurse in the same hospital as her mother, a military doctor who had served in the civil war and the Finnish war.⁶⁶ Quite a few women whose fathers had been arrested during the purge years hoped to redeem their families by serving at the front.⁶⁷

Motivation is notoriously difficult to prove. While obviously the level of motivation differs between volunteers and conscripts, it does not follow that conscripts are not also motivated to some degree by patriotism, duty, and family history. And even if were possible to statistically calculate the stated motivations of women soldiers for serving in the Red Army, true motivation may remain unstated or subconscious.

Roger Reese finds that women's motivations generally paralleled those of men but "were not completely identical." He concludes that the commonality of women's and men's motivations to serve has been overstressed, since more women were conscripted than volunteered and that in post-Soviet oral histories, "the majority of women" viewed their ability and desire to serve "on a gender basis."⁶⁸

Feminism did not feature prominently in women's memoirs or interviews, or in official rhetoric, as a motivation for women's service. In Soviet parlance, the question of women's equality had been settled constitutionally, so neither the government nor women themselves justified women's military aspirations as part of a struggle for women's rights. But many women did say that they wanted to

60. Anna Petrovna Vasil'eva, <http://www.iremember.ru/content/view/58/68/lang,en/>.

61. Svetlana Alexiyevich, *War's Unwomanly Face*, trans. Keith Hammond and Lyudmila Lezhneva (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1988), 24–25.

62. *Ibid.*, 29.

63. *Ibid.*, 106.

64. *Ibid.*, 25; Saywell, *Women in War*, 134–35.

65. Alexiyevich, *War's Unwomanly Face*, 52, 180–83.

66. *Ibid.*, 99, 111; A. V. Pyl'cyn, *Penalty Strike: The Memoirs of a Red Army Penal Company Commander, 1943–45*, trans. Bair Irincheev (Solihull, U.K.: Helion, 2006), 136.

67. Alexiyevich, *War's Unwomanly Face*, 30, 82–84.

68. Reese, "Frontoviki" mss. As we have seen, there is some dispute regarding conscription.

prove they could fight as well as men. This is certainly gendered language, and compares to male motivations to prove themselves as men.

Both genders used the terms familiar to them, but this does not prove that women and men had primarily gender-based motivations for serving. It is important to remember that the Soviet Union had been invaded by a powerful enemy; for many Soviet citizens, the situation was life or death. In fact, responding to enemy occupation may be a far more powerful motivation to military service than cultural gender roles. Most historical examples of women in combat occurred during invasions, in occupied countries, or in civil wars (Vietnam, Yugoslavia, and Israel, for example), in a variety of cultures. Patriotism, self-preservation, and defense of home and family are certainly powerful and primary motivations in such circumstances.

I agree with Reese that women's military service in the Great Patriotic War cannot be explained solely in terms of Stalinist gender discourse, as Krylova seems to suggest. The historical precedents for women's military service that were set in the imperial Russian army and during the civil war, and the promotion of the general idea of women's equality in early socialism, are clearly important factors.

Perhaps Sergeant Klara Tikhonovich, an antiaircraft gunner, best expressed a common impulse that sent women to war. She writes, "A young person recently told me that going off to fight was a masculine urge. No, it was a human urge . . . That was how we were brought up, to take part in everything. A war had begun and that meant that we must help in some way."⁶⁹ This statement reflects the contradictions in Soviet society. Tikhonovich was aware that her education included the principle of equality for women in building socialism and even defending the country, but she also describes it as an innate "human urge," common to both women and men.

Not every woman wanted to serve in the military; neither did every man. Most women were able to avoid military service if they chose. Many women who did seek military service undoubtedly preferred "traditional" women's roles to combat-related duties. This does not mean that they sought to avoid risking their lives. Any kind of duty in the Red Army in World War II was grueling and dangerous. As we shall see below, even nurses and telephonists worked in arduous conditions, risked their lives, and sometimes also fought, even though they did not serve in combatant roles.

Frontline Roles

Soviet women filled a variety of roles. The most common noncombat roles included *razvedka* (scout, intelligence staff, or observer); *sanitarka* (medical orderly/medic); *saninstruktor* (medical instructor/noncommissioned officer [NCO]); *sviazistka* (signaler/communications personnel); *telephonistka* (telephone operator); *zenitchitsa* (antiaircraft personnel). English language materials are sometimes confusing in their translations of these terms; for example, female

69. Alexiyevich, *War's Unwomanly Face*, 156.

medical personnel are often simply lumped together as “nurses” while a *razvedka* in antiaircraft artillery (AAA) had very different duties than one in the infantry. Most of the Red Army’s women served in positions that were considered noncombatant, but nearly all were trained to handle weapons. Even military drivers trained with rifles and bayonets.⁷⁰

Reese argues that:

The vast majority of women who ended up in uniform served in non-combat and stereotypically traditional female roles such as cooks, laundresses, medical personnel etc. Even those in combat organizations nearly always were in support jobs like radio operators, drivers, clerks, etc. . . . So, although some 310,000 women did find themselves in the army willingly, they sought to serve, not so much as the equals of men, but either as women doing women’s work, or in non-lethal jobs previously reserved for men.⁷¹

I believe that this is an overstatement. There are still no conclusive numbers on how many women filled various military roles. The Red Army did not specifically label roles as “combatant” or “noncombatant.” Most cooks and laundresses seem to have been civilians contracted into army service and lacked military rank. Although it is true that a majority (not necessarily vast) of women served in roles that were primarily support roles, most were armed (in contrast to most noncombatants in Western armies) and trained to use their weapons. In my reading of large numbers of memoirs and oral histories, and my own interviews with female veterans, most stressed that they did want to serve as the equals of men, and many who were relegated to support roles wanted to become combatants.

The following sections examine the frontline experience of women in both combatant and noncombatant roles in the Red Army.

Medical Personnel

More than 40 percent of all Red Army doctors, surgeons, paramedics, and medical orderlies, and 100 percent of nurses, were women.⁷² Female medical orderlies and nurses served in the Red Army down to the company level.⁷³ Many were quite young and had minimal training, but as one veteran noted, “When a young boy . . . has his arm or leg cut off before your very eyes, childishness quickly gets wiped out of your mind.”⁷⁴ Senior Sergeant Sofia Dubniakova, a medical orderly, told an interviewer: “There are films about the war in which one sees a nurse at the front line. There she goes, so neat and clean, wearing a skirt, not

70. Ibid., 47.

71. Reese, “Frontoviki” mss.

72. Griesse and Stites, “Russia: Revolution and War,” 70–71; Erickson, “Soviet Women at War,” 61.

73. Z. M. Smirnova-Medvedeva, *On the Road to Stalingrad: Memoirs of a Woman Machine Gunner*, trans. Kazimiera J. Cottam (Nepean, Ont.: New Military Publishing, 1997), 14–15.

74. Alexiyevich, *War’s Unwomanly Face*, 97.

padded trousers, and with a side-cap perched on top of an attractive hairdo. It is just not true. Could we have hauled a wounded man dressed like that?"⁷⁵

Many women served as frontline medics (*sanitarki*), whose duties included rescuing the wounded under enemy fire, and whenever possible, retrieving their weapons as well. These women served in the very front lines of battle.⁷⁶ One of the war monuments at Stalingrad shows a female medic carrying a wounded soldier on her back.⁷⁷ Medic A. M. Strelkova describes what was required:

I don't know how to explain this. We carried men who were twice or three times our own weight. On top of that, we carried their weapons, and the men themselves were wearing greatcoats and boots. We would hoist a man weighing 80 kilograms on our backs and carry him. Then we would throw the man off and go to get another one . . . And we did this five or six times during an attack.⁷⁸

Dragging the wounded from where they had fallen was no easy feat. Rescuing the wounded from the battlefield was much easier during operations with an advancing army than during a retreat. When forces were advancing, the wounded could simply be bandaged and left in place for the field medical units to pick up. During retreats or static fighting, they had to be dragged back to safety, often under fire.⁷⁹ Medics rolled the wounded soldier onto a cape or coat and dragged him that way; sometimes they used a belt or strap to pull him. This work was extremely hazardous; frontline medics had a casualty rate second only to the active infantry.⁸⁰

Marshal Vasily Chuikov, commander of the 62nd Army at Stalingrad, described the techniques used by medics to evacuate wounded men, even under fire:

In Batiuk's division there was an orderly, Tamara Shmakova. I knew her personally . . . Her evacuation method consisted of this: she would lie alongside the wounded man and, like an ant, dragged off her living cargo on her back, often one and a half times or twice her own weight. When it was impossible to lift a wounded man, Tamara spread out a groundsheet, rolled the wounded man onto it, and again on all fours, would drag behind her, like a tugboat, the groundsheet with the wounded man. Tamara Shmakova saved many lives.⁸¹

75. Ibid., 53.

76. Ibid., 64.

77. Vladimir Ivanovich Atopov, Ivan Grigor'evich Paderin, V. I. Chuikov, and R. E. Beniaminson, *Volgograd* (Moscow: Sovetskaia Rossiia, 1985), photograph.

78. Alexiyevich, *War's Unwomanly Face*, 56 (80 kilograms=175 pounds).

79. Saywell, *Women in War*, 154.

80. Erickson, "Soviet Women at War," 62; Alexiyevich, *War's Unwomanly Face*, 96–97.

81. V. I. Chuikov and Ivan Grigorevich Paderin, *Nachalo puti, Voennye memuary* (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1959), 261. See also V. I. Chuikov, "Razdum'ia o samykh tiazhelykh dnyakh Stalingrada," in *Stalingradskaia epopeia*, ed. M. V. Zakharov, Aleksandr Mikhailovich Samsonov, and Vitold Kazimirovich Pechorkin (Moscow: Nauka, 1968), 239; Murmantseva, *Sovetskie zhenshchiny*, 178.

Medical orderlies dragged incredible numbers of wounded soldiers from the field of battle. Maria Smirnova of the 56th Army rescued a total of 481 wounded from under fire during the war.⁸² A medic on the Don Front is credited with carrying 421 men from the field of battle—277 with their weapons.⁸³ Soviet sources document some women medics who rescued 20 wounded soldiers, with their weapons, in a single day, and others who carried the wounded as much as fourteen kilometers from where they fell to a medical station.⁸⁴

Olga Omelchenko tells a terrible tale of her experience as a frontline medic with the 1st Company of the 118th Rifle Regiment, 37th Guards Division. After a heavy battle in 1943, she says: “I crawled up to the last man, whose arm was completely smashed. The arm had to be amputated immediately and bandaged . . . But I didn’t have a knife or scissors . . . What was I to do? I gnawed at the flesh with my teeth, gnawed it through and began to bandage the arm.”⁸⁵

Many women, especially medical personnel, died or were injured while trying to shield the wounded.⁸⁶ Valeriia Osipovna Gnarovskaia was killed on 23 September 1943 in a famous exploit; to protect a medical aid post from an advancing German tank, she threw herself under the tank and set off a string of grenades. She was credited with saving seventy wounded soldiers and was posthumously awarded the Hero of the Soviet Union (HSU).⁸⁷

Soviet medical personnel were not, strictly speaking, noncombatants. Many medics, nurses, and doctors took up weapons in battle.⁸⁸ There were differences between combat medics, field nurses (*druzhinniki*), and hospital nurses. Kyra Petrovskaya Wayne described how the “tough” field nurses, armed with submachine guns, talked about fighting off enemy attacks.⁸⁹ Katiusha Mikhailova, a medic with a naval infantry battalion, completed the same training course as the men in her battalion, and carried grenades, antitank grenades, and a submachine gun, in addition to her medical bag. She was expected to be fighting whenever she was not

82. Alexiyevich, *War's Unwomanly Face*, 55–56.

83. Galagan, *Ratny podvig zbenshchin*, 169.

84. *Geroi i Podvigi: Sovetskie listovki Velikoi Otechestvennoi voiny 1941–1945 gg.* [Heroes and Victories: Soviet leaflets of the Great Patriotic War 1941–1945] (Moscow: Politizdat, 1958), 71–72. Leaflet from the Political Directorate of the Black Sea Front, summer 1942.

85. Alexiyevich, *War's Unwomanly Face*, 108–9.

86. *Ibid.*, 73.

87. Kazimiera J. Cottam, *Women in War and Resistance: Selected Biographies of Soviet Women Soldiers* (Nepean, Ont.: New Military Publishing, 1998), 231–33.

88. See A. Barmin, “Kavaler ordena Slavy,” in *Docheri Rossii*, ed. I. Cherniaeva (Moscow: Sovetskaia Rossiia, 1975), 65–70, translated as A. Barmin, “A Bearer of the Order of Glory,” in *The Golden-Tressed Soldier*, ed. and trans. K. J. Cottam (Manhattan, Kans.: Military Affairs/Aerospace Historian, 1983), 99–107; and V. Kaverin, “Partizanskii vrach,” in *Docheri Rossii*, ed. I. Cherniaeva (Moscow: Sovetskaia Rossiia, 1975), 93–96, translated as Venyamin Kaverin, “The Story of a Partisan Doctor,” in Cottam, *The Golden-Tressed Soldier*, 85–91.

89. Kyra Petrovskaya Wayne, *Shurik: A Story of the Siege of Leningrad* (New York: Lyons & Burford, 1992), 14.

tending the wounded.⁹⁰ Zinaida Korzh and her sister served as medics with the 4th Cossack Cavalry Corps. During one battle Zinaida was leading a wounded man from the field when two Germans climbed out of a disabled tank. She shot them; as she says, “another second more and if I had not fired a burst at them they would have shot the wounded man and me.”⁹¹ Medic Gnarovskaia served at Stalingrad with the 62nd Army. The unit was surrounded during the retreat toward Stalingrad but broke out; Gnarovskaia was credited with killing twenty-eight enemy soldiers with a submachine gun and grenades. Mariia Sergeevna Borovichenko is another example of a woman classified as a medic but who often acted as a scout and combatant. In 1941, at age sixteen, she joined the 5th Airborne Brigade, commanded by Aleksandr Il’ich Rodimtsev. On at least two occasions she took German soldiers prisoner, and loved to brandish her trophy German pistols.⁹²

There were also times when medical personnel took temporary command of small groups in battle. Elena Kovalchuk and Sophia Kuntsevich are just two medics who led attacks.⁹³ Some took arms for another reason, like Olga Omelchenko, who served on a firing squad that executed two soldiers who had panicked during an attack. She says, “There could be no forgiveness. Because of them brave boys had been killed.”⁹⁴

Many women who started as nurses ended as soldiers. Some had applied for combat and been forced into nursing against their will, but later managed transfers.⁹⁵ Others discovered a taste for combat as the war progressed. Sergeant-Major Elena Yákovleva volunteered for combat during the first days of the war, but was told she could only join the army as a nurse. She was sent to a hospital in the rear area in August 1941; in February 1942, she deserted to the front to join a medical train headed for frontline duty.⁹⁶ Lieutenant General T. K. Kolomiets, former commander of the Independent Maritime Army, wrote in his memoirs that after the death of a well-known woman machine gunner in his unit, “a great many of the nurses who served in the Division kept asking to be transferred to machine gun duty . . . during the relatively quiet periods at the front we organized training in machine-gun firing for a group of nurses, and we made an exception for those who were especially proficient by transferring them to machine gun duty.”⁹⁷

90. Saywell, *Women in War*, 147–48; Cottam, *The Golden-Tressed Soldier*, 243.

91. Alexiyevich, *War’s Unwomanly Face*, 115.

92. Aleksandr Il’ich Rodimtsev and Petr Severov, *Mashen’ka iz Myshelovki* (Kiev: Izd. detskoi literatury “Veselka,” 1966), 46, 56–58, 80, 90.

93. Griesse and Stites, “Russia: Revolution and War,” 71; Saywell, *Women in War*, 151.

94. Alexiyevich, *War’s Unwomanly Face*, 104–10.

95. See A. Barmin, “Kavalier ordena Slavy.”

96. Alexiyevich, *War’s Unwomanly Face*, 27–28.

97. Smirnova-Medvedeva, *On the Road to Stalingrad*, 2, citing T. K. Kolomiets, “Chapaevtsy stoiali na smert,” *U chernomorskikh tverdyn* (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1967), 216–17. See also Tamara Aleksandrovna Sycheva, *Po zovu serdtsa* (Kiev: Dnipro, 1968) for the story of a medic who became an antitank gunner.

One last point on medical personnel: nearly every Soviet woman who served in the Red Army, whatever her assigned position, was expected to fill in as a medic simply because she was a woman. For example, Zoya Medvedeva, with the famous 25th Chapaev Rifle Division, was trained and assigned as a machine gunner, but was expected to fill in as medic.⁹⁸ Sniper Klavdia Kalugina talks about carrying out wounded soldiers during attacks.⁹⁹ Tens of thousands of women pulled this sort of double duty, and often they are categorized as medics rather than combatants.¹⁰⁰ We do not yet have a truly clear picture of how many medics were involved in combat or how often, or how many combatants served as medics.

Communications

Women also served as communications operators throughout the Soviet armed forces, constituting about 12 percent of the total.¹⁰¹ One of the first conscriptions of women was for communications work; in August 1941, 10,000 women were drafted for frontline duty with the signals troops.¹⁰² In 1942, another 50,000 were trained.¹⁰³ By 1943, some communications regiments at the front were 80 percent female.¹⁰⁴ In addition, more than 1,200 female radio-operators were trained for parachute drops behind the lines. N. M. Zaitseva, for example, made nineteen parachute drops behind enemy lines during her career. This work was extremely dangerous; a number of women were forced to kill themselves with hand grenades to avoid imminent capture and to destroy their equipment.¹⁰⁵

Many women in communications served right on the front lines of battle. Journalist Konstantin Simonov commented on meeting telegraph operators in a bunker at Stalingrad who were “pale through lack of sleep, work[ing] the keys of their apparatus, tapping out dots and dashes.”¹⁰⁶ One signaller recalled that they built their own dugouts, and were often even buried in them.¹⁰⁷ There are many tales of girls who, trapped at communications posts during a German advance, called in fire on their own positions.¹⁰⁸ Liubov Kozlova, a telephone operator with

98. Smirnova-Medvedeva, *On the Road to Stalingrad*, 1.

99. Klavdia Kalugina, <http://www.iremember.ru/content/view/31/68/lang,en/>

100. See, for example, Mariya Grudistova, “Na zashchite neba stolitsy,” *Ikh slavit Rodina*, ed. T. Lil’in (Moscow: Politizdat, 1959), 129–38, translated as Mariya Grudistova, “Defending the Skies of Moscow,” in Cottam, *The Golden-Tressed Soldier*, 125–35.

101. K. J. Cottam, “Soviet Women in Combat in World War II: The Ground Forces and the Navy,” *International Journal of Women’s Studies* 3, no. 4 (1980): 352.

102. Erickson, “Soviet Women at War,” 61; Cottam, “Soviet Women in Combat in World War II: The Ground Forces and the Navy,” 352.

103. Murmantseva, *Sovetskie zhenshchiny*, 128–29.

104. Alexiyevich, *War’s Unwomanly Face*, 30. See also K. J. Cottam, “Soviet Women in Combat in World War II: The Ground/Air Defense Forces,” in *Women in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union*, ed. Tova Yedlin (New York: Praeger, 1980), 115.

105. Erickson, “Soviet Women at War,” 52.

106. Konstantin Simonov, *Always a Journalist* (Moscow: Progress, 1989), 29.

107. Chuikov and Paderin, *Nachalo puti*, 256–60.

108. Elena Kononenko, “Ty snami, devchonka v shineli!” *Rabotnitsa*, no. 5 (1965).

a mortar platoon, died still holding the two ends of the telephone cable she was trying to splice; there are many stories of similar brave deaths.¹⁰⁹

Women in communications were also expected to fight. Elena Stempkovskaia received the Hero of the Soviet Union after she died defending her command post from attack; she reportedly killed some twenty enemy soldiers with a machine gun.¹¹⁰ Tatiana Baramzina had been a sniper but transferred to communications when her vision deteriorated; she was still a good enough shot to kill a number of Germans in July 1944 when her battalion was sent behind enemy lines. She had to alternate between shooting the enemy and filling in as a medic, in addition to her communications duties. She was captured and then executed with an antitank rifle.¹¹¹

PVO

More than a quarter of a million women served in the Air Defense Forces during the war. The National Air Defense Forces, or PVO, were created in November 1941. By the end of the war, PVO numbered 640,000 soldiers in five armies and boasted 17,000 guns and 5,000 fighter aircraft.¹¹² In addition to the national PVO, there were local air defense units and organic units in the various branches of service.

Stalin was personally involved in the integration of women into the PVO. Colonel General of Artillery Daniil Zhuravlev, who served as Commander of Air Defense on the Moscow Front and Western Front, says that early in 1942, the head of the political department of the Red Army asked him, "How would you look on it if we sent you women to serve in your forces? Realize that we are talking not about individual volunteers, but about thousands of people." The Central Committee had approved the idea because it would free many men to go to the front, and address the requests of the thousands of women volunteers who had asked to serve in the armed forces. After women began serving in the PVO, Zhuravlev was called to Stalin's office in the Kremlin to report personally on the situation. He says that Stalin wanted to know how they were perceiving the arrival of female personnel, and how the girls felt in the new situation; he told him that the women very quickly learned new skills and that the men treated them with respect.¹¹³

In 1942 there were two mobilizations to bring women into air defense. Specific goals were established: women were to replace eight out of ten men in instrument sections, six out of ten men in machine-gun crews, five out of six men in air warning posts, three out of eleven men in searchlight crews, and all male

109. Cottam, "Soviet Women in Combat in World War II: The Ground Forces and the Navy," 352.

110. Murmantseva, *Zhenshchiny v soldatskikh shineliakh*, 180; Galagan, *Ratny podvig zhenshchin*, 191. See also Cottam, *Women in War and Resistance*, 172–74.

111. Murmantseva, *Zhenshchiny v soldatskikh shineliakh*, 68–73.

112. Cottam, "Soviet Women in Combat in World War II: The Ground/Air Defense Forces," 117.

113. D. A. Zhuravlev, *Ognevoi Shchit Moskvy* (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1972), 125.

privates and NCOs in the PVO rear services. Women aged between eighteen and twenty-seven were eligible.¹¹⁴ There were many women officers, and women served in every position on gun crews. By the end of the war, more than 121,000 women served on gun crews, and about 80,000 in PVO aviation or in searchlight and observation posts.¹¹⁵

Most men report that once they got used to women soldiers, there were few problems with unit cohesion. Ivan Levitsky, who was 5th Battalion Commander of the 784th PVO Artillery Regiment, notes that when he took command in 1942, he was full of misgivings since half his soldiers were women. He was disturbed when some women forgot an order or cried after getting a letter from home. "But soon my doubts were dispelled," he says. "The girls made fine soldiers, even more precise and meticulous than men."¹¹⁶ Zhuravlev claims that a captured German ace was quoted in the British press as saying "It was ten times safer to fly over Tobruk than within the range of fire of the Russian antiaircraft batteries manned by girl soldiers."¹¹⁷

Duty on gun crews was not easy, especially for those assigned to frontline positions. One battalion commander pointed out that "the tankmen have armor, the infantry trenches, but the anti-aircraft gunners have nothing . . . they dig no slit trenches, nor make trench shelters, nor do they leave their guns even when a plane dives at their battery."¹¹⁸ Many AAA batteries suddenly found themselves on the front lines of battle during German advances in 1942. When PVO units were overrun by the enemy, as occurred at Stalingrad, the gun crews (mostly female) switched to firing at tanks.¹¹⁹ One panzer division reported that "right until the late afternoon we had to fight, shot for shot, against thirty-seven enemy anti-aircraft positions, manned by tenacious fighting women, until they were all destroyed."¹²⁰ Marshal Andrei Eremenko praised the dedication of the women working under the most dangerous conditions in the PVO.¹²¹ Marshal Chuikov noted that "in the Stalingrad PVO Corps the majority of the combat crews were women, whether at AAA guns or at the instruments of searchlight installations," and pointed out that the combat effectiveness of those crews was equal to other AAA units he had observed.¹²² A Soviet historian describes the actions of one such unit at Stalingrad:

114. Cottam, "Soviet Women in Combat in World War II: The Ground/Air Defense Forces," 117, citing T. Klopina, "Khronika, fakty, nakhodki," *Voenna-istoricheskii zhurnal* 3 (1976): 126, and N. A. Kirsanov and V. F. Cheremisov, "Zhenshchiny v voishakh protivovozdushnoi oborony v gody Velikoi Otechestvennoi voiny," *Istoriia SSSR* 3 (1975): 66.

115. Erickson, "Soviet Women at War," 62.

116. Alexiyevich, *War's Unwomanly Face*, 93.

117. Zhuravlev, *Ognevoi Shchit Moskvy*, 122.

118. Alexiyevich, *War's Unwomanly Face*, 93–94.

119. L. P. Ovchinnikova, *Zhenshchiny v soldatskikh shineliakh* (Volgograd: Nizhne-Volzhskoe, 1987), 158.

120. Antony Beevor, *Stalingrad, The Fateful Siege: 1942–1943*, 1st American ed. (New York: Viking, 1998), 108.

121. Galagan, *Ratny podvig zhenshchin*, 176–77.

122. Chuikov and Paderin, *Nachalo puti*, 250–51.

Lieutenant Skakun's AAA battery will never be forgotten. Having lost contact with AAA regimental command it independently fought against enemy air and land forces for over 24 hours. Dive-bombers attacked it from the air and heavy tanks from the ground. . . The battery was manned by AAA gunners, instrument operators, stereoscopic range finders and scouts, all women . . . On the evening of the following day four unharmed soldiers and their wounded commander got through and described how the girls had not taken cover for a moment although there had been moments when it was near madness not to take cover.¹²³

Sergeant Valentina Chudaeva began the war as a signaller in an antiaircraft unit command post. When her father was killed in action, she decided to apply for combat duty. When her regimental commander turned down her transfer request, she appealed to the division commander. He agreed to interview her, and she reported with a submachine gun and belt of seventy-one cartridges hanging around her neck. She was sent for three months' training as a gun-crew commander, and was posted to PVO Regiment 1357. Chudaeva recalls that at first the percussion from the guns caused her nose and ears to bleed. Later in the war, she was badly wounded and spent six months in the hospital. After she recovered, Chudaeva returned to her unit and ended the war in East Prussia.¹²⁴

Klavdia Konovalova served with the 784th Antiaircraft Artillery Regiment. She was initially assigned as a gunlayer, but sought to be a loader. She says that being a loader "was considered purely masculine work, since you had to be able to handle 16-kilogram shells easily and maintain intensive fire at the rate of a salvo every five seconds." Since she had worked as a blacksmith's striker before the war, she was more than capable of handling that role. She served as a loader for a year, then was appointed commander over a gun crew of two women and four men.¹²⁵

There are many useful sources that provide a baseline for the further study of women in air defense. One fruitful area of research might be a comparison of women's air defense experiences in the Soviet Union and Great Britain.¹²⁶

Partisans

Women also played a role in the partisan movement. By 1944 there were a minimum of 280,000 active partisans; women filled 25 percent of the total, and 9.3 percent of operational roles, or approximately 26,000 active women partisans.¹²⁷

123. V. I. Levkin, "Young Communists Became Men," in *Two Hundred Days of Fire: Accounts by Participants and Witnesses of the Battle of Stalingrad* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1970), 243–44.

124. Alexiyevich, *War's Unwomanly Face*, 82–88.

125. Erickson, "Soviet Women at War," 52; Alexiyevich, *War's Unwomanly Face*, 161–62; Cottam, *The Golden-Tressed Soldier*, 125.

126. Gerard DeGroot, "I Love the Scent of Cordite in Your Hair: Gender Dynamics in Mixed Anti-Aircraft Batteries During the Second World War," *History* 265 (1997).

127. Erickson, "Soviet Women at War," 52; Murmantseva, *Zhenshchiny v soldatskikh shine-liakh*, 217; Griesse and Stites, "Russia: Revolution and War," 71; Slepyan, *Stalin's Guerrillas*, 195.

First-hand accounts indicate that there was wide regional variation in the extent to which women were permitted to fight.¹²⁸ We know that most partisan women were armed, and many were directly involved in combat and sabotage.¹²⁹ While there were no female detachment or brigade commanders in the partisans, some women did command companies and platoons, both all-female and mixed units.¹³⁰

Kenneth Slepyan shows that women partisans made significant contributions in both support and combat roles.¹³¹ But most partisan groups had an uneasy and contradictory relationship with their female members. Although the central authorities tried to encourage women's participation, many male partisans clearly discriminated against women, relegating them to "female" chores like cooking and washing. Although some women were content with those roles, others chafed at the restrictions and begged to be allowed to fight. Even in units where women were allowed to fight, they were often expected to perform domestic chores as well. After a mission the men would settle down to rest while the women had to prepare meals and tend the wounded. Many male partisans were particularly concerned about their own image, and believed that the presence of women in fighting roles somehow detracted from the military credibility of their group. Some partisan commanders refused to allow women to join their groups, even when the women faced deportation by the Germans. Eventually some all-female partisan units were created, but according to Slepyan, "the fact that the women's platoons often outperformed the men in combat further offended masculine egos." All in all, Slepyan concludes that women were "treated as second-class citizens in the movement that was supposed to welcome them."¹³²

Galina Dubovik fought with the 12th Stalin Cavalry Partisan Brigade. She remembers, "I carried a submachine gun. I never said that it was heavy—how could I be number two in the unit then? If a soldier is not up to this, he has to be replaced. I would have been sent off to the kitchens and that would have been shameful." When an interviewer asked her whether women were sent out on missions on an equal basis with men, Dubovik responded, "They tried not to send us. You had to request to be sent or earn the right, distinguish yourself in some way."¹³³

The duties of partisans were arduous. Partisan Raisa Khasenevich, who served with the V. T. Voronyansky People's Avengers Brigade, was sent to take a precious German typewriter to another partisan group. She was then trapped for two months with the group in the swamps near Borisov. She remembers that while the men in the group carried nothing more than a rifle, she carried a rifle, the typewriter, and her two-year-old daughter. Sometimes, she says, the men would

128. Cottam, "Soviet Women in Combat in World War II: The Rear Services," 368.

129. Griesse and Stites, "Russia: Revolution and War," 711.

130. Kenneth D. Slepyan, "Partisans, Soviet women as," in *Amazons to Fighter Pilots: A Biographical Dictionary of Military Women*, ed. Reina Pennington (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2003).

131. Slepyan, *Stalin's Guerrillas: Soviet Partisans in World War II*, 194–206.

132. *Ibid.*, 201–6.

133. Alexiyevich, *War's Unwomanly Face*, 163.

offer to carry her child, but she couldn't bear the thought that her daughter might be killed in someone else's arms.¹³⁴

Partisan work was extremely dangerous. Fekla Strui, a deputy of the Supreme Soviet turned partisan, was wounded in both legs during a battle. Her unit was encircled by Germans, preventing her evacuation. She recalls, "My legs were taken off right there in the forest. The operation took place in the most primitive conditions. I was put on a table to be operated on, there wasn't even any iodine and my legs were sawn off with an ordinary saw, both legs . . . the operation was performed without anesthetic, without anything."¹³⁵

Few Westerners had the chance to observe Soviet partisan activity, but some Allies had first-hand experience in Yugoslavia. Lieutenant Colonel Henry Peoples, a pilot with the Army Air Forces' 332nd Fighter Group and recipient of the Distinguished Flying Cross, offers the following observation: "I was shot down over Yugoslavia and spent two months with Tito and his partisans. I went on a couple of their raids and they were exciting, to put it mildly. They were fine people and their women, such women! You talk about amazons; those Yugoslavian female partisans, I swear they could outfight their men. They were strictly f. and f.: fearless and ferocious."¹³⁶

But when the Red Army reoccupied Belorus and Ukraine, male partisans were recruited into the army, while women had to surrender their weapons and return to civilian life. One *partizanka* recalled, "We could not somehow understand why we had to hand in arms while the war was still going on."¹³⁷

Infantry

No comprehensive statistics are available for women who served in combat positions in the infantry.¹³⁸ Women were not categorized simply as soldiers; women who served with infantry units are generally designated as medics, snipers, scouts, or members of gun crews. This has led some historians to mistakenly conclude that there were no women in infantry units. But as Anna Krylova notes, "to be a sniper meant to be a fulltime infantry soldier in addition to all the attendant individual responsibilities that came with the sniper rifle."¹³⁹ The same could be said for other military specialties that women filled, including machine gunners.

Only one scholarly work so far focuses exclusively on women in traditional infantry roles, and it studied a rear-area unit. In February 1942, the First Independent Women's Reserve Rifle Regiment, an infantry training unit, was formed; this group eventually graduated nearly 10,000 women (3,900 privates,

134. *Ibid.*, 216–17.

135. *Ibid.*, 208–9.

136. Mary Penich Motley, ed., *The Invisible Soldier: The Experience of the Black Soldier, World War II* (Detroit, Mich.: Wayne State University Press, 1975), 234.

137. Slepian, *Stalin's Guerrillas*, 204.

138. Cottam, "Soviet Women in Combat in World War II: The Ground/Air Defense Forces," 348; Murmantseva, *Zhenshchiny v soldatskikh shineliakh*, 110.

139. Krylova, *Soviet Women in Combat*, 161.

2,500 NCOs, and 3,500 officers).¹⁴⁰ There was also a plan in 1943 to form fifty women's volunteer rifle brigades, which were not slated for frontline duty, but to guard important facilities in the rear areas. Only one brigade was formed, but it suffered from serious problems. The women volunteers were apparently told they would be going to the front; some even left frontline positions in order to serve in the all-female unit. When they learned the truth, they felt misled; many deserted to the front. The officers assigned were mostly male, and apparently were poor leaders who created an atmosphere of harassment. The unit became operational in January 1944 as part of the NKVD, and was abruptly disbanded in July. Apparently the other forty-nine brigades were never created.¹⁴¹

The Voroshilov Infantry School in Ryazan included three women's battalions and sent nearly 1,400 women platoon commanders to the field in 1943; 704 took over rifle sections, 382 machine-gun sections, and 302 mortar crews.¹⁴² Can these women be regarded as infantry soldiers? A man who commanded a rifle platoon would be called a soldier; there is no reason why women who did the same thing should not. Yet very little information has come to light on these women commanders.¹⁴³

Combat Engineers

Women also served in combat engineering, and were regarded as noncombatants. Many women served in military construction; Zoya Verzhbitskaia was a section commander in a construction battalion which built railways, pontoon bridges, and dugouts near the front, cutting down trees for raw material.¹⁴⁴ Others worked as mechanics in field armor repair shops which worked twenty-four hours a day. Maria Arestova, who in 1931 became the first woman in the Soviet Union to qualify as locomotive engine-driver, served together with her husband during the war running special trains to the front.¹⁴⁵

140. Erickson, "Soviet Women at War," 63; V. S. Murmantseva, "Ratny i trudovoi podvig sovetskikh zhenshchin" [Military and Labor Feats of Soviet Women], *Voенно-istoricheskii zhurnal* 5 (1985): 76. L. F. Toropov, ed., *Geroini: Oчерki o zhenshchinakh-Geroiakh Sovetskogo Soiuzа* [Heroines: Biographical Sketches of Women Heroes of the Soviet Union] (Moscow: Politizdat, 1969), says 5,200 women soldiers were produced (p. 69). Murmantseva and Erickson cite 3,892 privates, 986 NCOs and 2,987 officers, plus a further 514 officers and 1,504 NCOs in 1943; 500 of the 1943 group became frontline veterans.

141. Euridice Charon Cardona and Roger D. Markwick, "Our brigade will not be sent to the front': Soviet Women under Arms in the Great Fatherland War, 1941-45," *Russian Review* 68 (2009). This article is an excellent example of the kind of work that can be accomplished in archives.

142. Erickson, "Soviet Women at War," 63; Murmantseva, "Ratny i trudovoi podvig sovetskikh zhenshchin," 76.

143. Inna Semenovna Mudretsova was commander of a rifle/sniper company of the 702nd Rifle Regiment of the 213th Novoukrainsk Rifle Division; see Yu. E. Dmitrienko, "Tip velichavoi slavianki . . ." [Character of a great Slav . . .], *Voенно-istoricheskii zhurnal* 3 (1995): 89-93.

144. Alexiyevich, *War's Unwomanly Face*, 129.

145. *Ibid.*, 228-29.

Women served as sappers. Their number is uncertain, but at least seventy-five women were trained as sapper platoon commanders in 1942 alone. One of them, Lieutenant Stanislava Volkova, described the training as tightly disciplined and demanding. They were told that the average life expectancy of a sapper platoon commander was two months.¹⁴⁶ Another, Junior Lieutenant Appolina Litskevich-Bairak, reported that when she first took command of a field platoon of sappers, some of them pretended not to see her. She described the work of sappers in the Red Army:

In the course of the war hundreds of tons of soil were turned over by the sapper's spade. During the night the soldiers would dig a two-man foxhole in no-man's land and before dawn one of the section commanders and I would crawl out to this small trench and the men would camouflage us. We would lie like that the whole day, afraid to stir . . . all day we kept everything that happened under close observation and drew a map of the front line . . . we would guess [where the] German sappers had laid mine fields . . . At night, this time with the sappers, you crawled up to the front line. We would clear a passage through our own mine field and crawl towards the German defences. . . All work at the front line was done on your belly.¹⁴⁷

Nikolai Borisovich, who commanded an engineering battalion, told an interviewer, "When some idiot . . . sent me two girls as platoon commanders, I immediately told them to go back, although they were terribly offended. They wanted to go to the front line as engineering platoon commanders and clear minefields." He said he sent them back because he considered it unnecessary for women to go to the front line, and because he "knew their presence would cause no end of trouble with my men who had their hands full as it was."¹⁴⁸

Other women sappers refused to take no for an answer. Lieutenant Stanislava Volkova, who commanded a field engineering platoon, said that when she arrived at the front with another woman, they were told they would have to stay at the headquarters of the military engineers, rather going into the field. They had orders to be assigned as sapper platoon commanders, and they would accept nothing less. When they set off to speak directly to Marshal Rodion Malinovsky, the Front commander, they were finally sent to the 5th Strike Army. There, they again met resistance from a captain who tried to keep them at army headquarters, but in a few days they were allowed to fill their assigned positions. Volkova says that the reactions of her new subordinates ranged from maliciousness to mockery, and one man even spat when she was introduced. "But a year later," she says, "when I was awarded the Order of the Red Star, the same lads, those of them who were still alive, carried me shoulder-high to my dugout. That shows how I had won their respect."¹⁴⁹

146. Erickson, "Night Witches, Snipers and Laundresses," 34; Alexiyevich, *War's Unwomanly Face*, 149–50, 166.

147. Alexiyevich, *War's Unwomanly Face*, 169–70.

148. *Ibid.*, 63. Borisovich also noted how courageous the girls were to volunteer for combat duty.

149. Alexiyevich, *War's Unwomanly Face*, 166–67.

Sapper commander Litskevich-Bairak told a story about an incident when she and her platoon walked past an artillery emplacement. One of the artillerymen made an obscene comment about her; this started a general free-for-all between her crew and the artillerymen which she finally ended by shooting her pistol in the air.¹⁵⁰ The same soldiers who rejected her in the beginning were now fiercely defensive of their commander.

The work of the sappers did not end with the war; Litskevich-Bairak noted that her platoon continued clearing mines for an entire year after peace was declared.¹⁵¹ Unfortunately little is known so far of the work of Soviet women in combat engineering.¹⁵²

Armor

Although comparatively few women served in Soviet armor, those who did filled a variety of roles, including medic, radio operator, turret gunner, driver-mechanic, tank commander, and platoon commander.¹⁵³ Women served in armor support and armor test units; for example, Polina Volodina commanded an all-woman crew that tested the T-40 floating tank and later served as Head of Tank Salvage and Repair Service on the Southern Front.¹⁵⁴ Women were also assigned to field armor repair shops. One recalls, "It was one's duty as a soldier to assemble an engine in a day. Work did not cease even during bombing raids."¹⁵⁵

Nina Vishnevskaiia, who worked as a medic in a tank battalion, reports that they were reluctant to take women in tank units, even as medics. Vishnevskaiia, who fought at the Battle of Kursk, was the only survivor of five women medics who had enlisted together. She recalls:

Very soon we were . . . wearing rags, because we did not sit in tanks, but had to crawl on the ground. Tanks often caught fire and the tankmen, if they remained alive, were all covered with burns. And we also got burns, because to get hold of the burning men, we had to rush right into the flames. It's very difficult to drag out a man, especially a turret gunner, from the hatch . . . In tank units medical orderlies didn't last long. There was no place in a tank for us. We

150. Ibid., 171–72.

151. Ibid., 176.

152. See N. Borchenko, "Ee boevoy shchet," *Voenniiia znaniia* 3 (1966): 16–17; V. Sokolov, "V zhelzhykh nochakh Leningrada," *Devushki v pogonach: sbornik*, ed. A. Nesterskii (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1964), 159–66, translated as "The Score of Yadviga Urbanovich," in Cottam, *The Golden-Tressed Soldier*, 153–63; and Andrei Viatskii, "Kommandir s pushistymi resnitsami," *Sovetskii voin* 19 (1976): 30–31, translated as Andrei Viatskii, "The Commander with Thick Eyelashes," Cottam, *The Golden-Tressed Soldier*, 164–72.

153. Erickson, "Soviet Women at War," 65–66.

154. Cottam, "Soviet Women in Combat in World War II: The Ground Forces and the Navy," 350; Murmantseva, *Zhenshchiny v soldatskikh shinel'akh*, 120–21, 130.

155. Alexiyevich, *War's Unwomanly Face*, 145.

clung to the armor and thought about one thing only: how to keep our feet clear of the caterpillars so we wouldn't get dragged in.¹⁵⁶

A number of women served on tank crews in combat positions. Elizaveta Kodenets served as a tank gunner and was killed in action during the Battle of Berlin. Valentina Gribaleva started the war as a truck driver, then drove the T-60 and later the T-34; she fought with the 220th Separate Gatchina Tank Brigade all the way to Berlin.¹⁵⁷ Irina Levchenko started the war in 1941 as a medic, and served with a tank battalion in the Crimea. After recovering for the second time from battle wounds, she applied to the Commander of the Armored Troops, General Iakov Fedorenko, to send her for combat training in armor. She was allowed to attend the Stalingrad Tank School, and thereafter drove a T-34. She ended the war with the rank of lieutenant colonel and a Hero of the Soviet Union medal.¹⁵⁸

Ekaterina Petliuk was a tankerman who fought at Stalingrad, Kursk, and Kiev. She completed training as a tank driver-mechanic in the fall of 1942 and was sent to Stalingrad in a T-60 light tank. T-60s could not withstand German fire, and were often used for transporting fuel and evacuating wounded from the field of battle. Typical missions included driving up to disabled friendly tanks to rescue survivors. Petliuk talked about how sometimes her ears and nose would bleed from the shock waves on the battlefield. The T-60 had a crew of two, a commander and a driver. Petliuk's first commander was wounded and sent to the rear, while the second died of battlefield injuries. She herself was seriously injured later in the war and medically retired from service.¹⁵⁹

Marina Lagunova was a driver-mechanic who saw combat at Kursk and on the drive to the Dnieper River. In September 1943 her tank was destroyed and she lost both her legs. She recovered from her wounds and went on to become an instructor with a tank training brigade.¹⁶⁰ E. S. Kostrikova commanded a tank detachment.¹⁶¹ Probably the most famous woman to serve in armor was Maria Oktiabrskaja. After her husband was killed, she donated her life savings to buy her own T-34. At the age of thirty-eight, she entered combat in October 1943 with the 26th Guards Tank Brigade, and fought until she was killed in battle near Vitebsk in 1944 while making a repair to her tank track.¹⁶²

156. *Ibid.*, 67–72.

157. Cottam, *The Golden-Tressed Soldier*, 273–74; Cottam, "Soviet Women in Combat in World War II: The Ground Forces and the Navy," 350.

158. Cottam, *The Golden-Tressed Soldier*, 273–74; Erickson, "Soviet Women at War," 6.

159. Ovchinnikova, *Zhenshchiny v soldatskikh shineliakh*, 97–108. For more on Petliuk, see Pennington, "Women and the Battle of Stalingrad."

160. Erickson, "Soviet Women at War," 66.

161. Galagan, *Ratnyi podvig*, 185. Kostrikova was the daughter of Sergei Kirov, the Politburo member whose assassination was a catalyst for political purges in the 1930s.

162. Griesse and Stites, "Russia: Revolution and War," 70; Murmantseva, *Zhenshchiny v soldatskikh shineliakh*, 126–27; "Tank 'boevaia podrug,'" *Voенно-istoricheskii zhurnal* 6 (1972): 118–19; I. F. Verevkin and V. Ya. Karlin, eds., *Byla ty otvazhnyim boitsom: ocherki o podvigakh sibirichesk na frontax Velikoi Otechestvennoi voiny* [You were a Brave Soldier] (Novosibirsk: Zapadno-sibirskoe knowzhnoe izdatel'stvo, 1982), 17–31.

A number of women also served in the IS-2 heavy tank. Ola Parshonok first drove the T-34, then the IS-2; she went all the way to Berlin with the 231st Tank Regiment. Only one woman is known to have served as a commander of a heavy tank: Junior Lieutenant Aleksandra Boiko. She and her husband volunteered for duty and donated 50,000 rubles to build a tank, on the condition that they be crewed together. They graduated from the Cheliabinsk Tank Technical School in 1943. Aleksandra commanded the four-person crew; her husband was driver-mechanic. They fought in the Baltic States and into Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Germany, and both survived the war.¹⁶³

An American soldier, Joe Beyrle, describes his service in a Red Army armored unit commanded by a woman. Beyrle was captured by the Germans in 1944, escaped from a prisoner-of-war camp near Poland, and was picked up by a Soviet tank battalion. The battalion commander was a woman he called “Major” since he found her name unpronounceable. He praised the leadership abilities of “Major,” noting that “She always attacked; there was never a question of whether, only where.”¹⁶⁴ When Beyrle was wounded and sent to Moscow, he tried to find others who knew “Major,” he said, “the answer was shrugs—there were so many women commanders toward the end of the war.”¹⁶⁵ If one American prisoner happened to land in a Red Army tank battalion commanded by a woman, we can only speculate how many other women like “Major” served, unheralded, during the war.

Scouts and Interrogators

Both civilian and military women served as reconnaissance scouts in the partisans, the army, and the navy. These *razvedchiki* operated behind enemy lines, gaining intelligence information and sometimes searching for “tongues”—enemy soldiers who would be captured and interrogated.

For example, Maria Baida, a scout with the 514th Naval Infantry regiment, killed enemy soldiers with a machine-pistol—not only by shooting them, but also by clubbing some to death. She later became a Hero of the Soviet Union.¹⁶⁶ Senior Sergeant Albina Gantimurova enlisted in a medical battalion in order to get to the front, but dreamed only of being a scout. She managed to obtain a transfer, and ended up with two Orders of the Red Star, two Orders of Glory, and two medals for Valor.¹⁶⁷

163. Erickson, “Night Witches, Snipers and Laundresses,” 33; Erickson, “Soviet Women at War,” 65; Alexiyevich, *War’s Unwomanly Face*, 92–93.

164. Thomas Taylor, *The Simple Sounds of Freedom: The True Story of the Only Soldier to Fight for both America and the Soviet Union in World War II*, 1st ed. (New York: Random House, 2002), 262. Beyrle also praised other women in the battalion as more skilled mechanically than the men.

165. Taylor, *The Simple Sounds of Freedom*, 298. His son, John Beyrle, is currently the U.S. Ambassador to Russia.

166. Erickson, “Soviet Women at War,” 61; *Geroi i Podvigi: Sovetskie listovki Velikoi Otechestvennoi voiny 1941–1945 gg.* (Moscow: Politizdat, 1958), 71–72. Leaflet from the Political Directorate of the Black Sea Front, summer 1942.

167. Alexiyevich, *War’s Unwomanly Face*, 36.

Nurses also sometimes acted as scouts.¹⁶⁸ Snipers worked closely with scouts, and sometimes went on scouting missions.¹⁶⁹

Civilian women and children were also used as scouts. L. P. Ovchinnikova relates the remarkable story of twelve-year-old Liusia Rodyna, who had been orphaned and evacuated from Leningrad to Stalingrad, where she was adopted as a “daughter of the regiment” by an unspecified unit. She completed seven scouting missions behind German lines at Stalingrad.¹⁷⁰

Women also served as interpreters and interrogators, and earned a reputation for cold-bloodedness. In the 1999 documentary *War of the Century*, Zinaida Pytkina, an NKVD interrogator, describes how her interrogations usually involved beatings; afterwards, the prisoners were often shot. Her commander once told her to “sort out” a prisoner so she’d have one on her account. Pytkina said, “My hand didn’t even tremble when I killed him. I didn’t feel anything. I was pleased; I’d fulfilled my task. I went back inside and had a drink. I was a member of the Communist Party. Here was a man who might have killed many of my relatives. I’d have cut him up if I’d been asked.”¹⁷¹ In a similar incident, a Red Army colonel recalled that a female interpreter on his staff shot one of their own soldiers who was trying to surrender to the Germans.¹⁷²

Machine Gunners

A number of women served with the Red Army as machine gunners. The image of a woman machine gunner had been popularized in *Chapaev*, a 1934 film about the civil war. “Anka the machine gunner” was a central character, and many young women who served on machine guns in World War II were nicknamed “Anka.”

In 1942 alone the *Vsevobuch* trained 4,500 women as heavy machine gun operators, and another 7,800 on light machine guns. Women machine gunners served down to the platoon level, and many commanded platoons and companies. One of the most famous women machine gunners was Nina Onilova. During the defense of Odessa, Onilova fought with the 54th Regiment of the 25th Rifle Division; she later died of wounds received at Sevastopol in 1942.¹⁷³

Zoya Smirnova-Medvedeva served on machine gun crews throughout the war, first as a crew member, then commanding machine gun platoons with both air defense and rifle units, and later as a company commander. Medvedeva was

168. A. S. Chuianov, “Stalingradskaia partiinaia organizatsiia v dni surovykh ispytaniĭ,” in *Stalingradskaia epopeia*, ed. M. V. Zakharov, Aleksandr Mikhailovich Samsonov, and Vitol’d Kazimirovich Pechorkin (Moscow: Nauka, 1968), 372.

169. Anna Petrovna Vasil’eva, <http://www.iremember.ru/content/view/58/68/lang.en/>.

170. Ovchinnikova, *Zhenshchiny v soldatskikh shinelakh*, 50–56. For a more complete story, see Pennington, “Women and the Battle of Stalingrad,” 186–87.

171. “Learning to Win,” Episode Three, *War of the Century*, DVD (British Broadcasting Corporation, 1999).

172. Beevor, *Stalingrad*, 87, citing a report of 10 August 1942, TsAMO 48/453/13/pp4–10.

173. Erickson, “Soviet Women at War,” 61.

the only woman in her company when she arrived at the front during the defense of Odessa in the fall of 1941. She graphically describes the rigors of serving on a machine gun crew, of having to repeatedly lift the gun into place, remove it during artillery attacks, and move it from one location to another. In their first battle, only thirteen soldiers of her platoon survived; Medvedeva herself was wounded in the head. Ironically, she was not wounded while at her gun, but only after the battle, when she was helping bring in the wounded. Two months later, she returned to her division at Sevastopol. She was told there were no vacancies in the machine gun companies and was forced to work as a medic. Only after demonstrating her skill with a gun was she allowed to return to her assigned position. Later, she was one of only seven soldiers to survive out of the entire company. They broke out of an encirclement and then fought with a naval infantry unit, where Medvedeva took over a machine gun position. She sustained a concussion and shrapnel wounds and was evacuated. After recovering, she went to a course for machine gun platoon commanders and returned to the front as a junior lieutenant.¹⁷⁴

Snipers

Snipers occupied a unique role in the Red Army. Marksmanship training was widely offered to young women and men before the war, and many women put their training into practice. A so-called “sniper movement,” sponsored by the *Komsomol*, began in the fall of 1941 and spread rapidly. Many military units established their own sniper training programs. For example, Nina Pavlovna Petrova logged over 100 kills and also trained more than 500 snipers for the 284th Regiment.¹⁷⁵ More than 100,000 young women went through basic sniper training courses during the war.¹⁷⁶ Most of these were civilians; the number who eventually entered military service is unknown.

Women of all ages, from the first days of the war, acted as snipers. A few examples demonstrate this fact. Nina Petrova was forty-eight years old when she went into combat in 1941.¹⁷⁷ N. A. Pribludnaia became a sniper in the summer of 1941 and ended the war in Berlin.¹⁷⁸ The well-documented sniper team of Maria Polivanova and Natasha Kovshova attained a total of more than 300 kills with the 130th Rifle Division of the 1st Shock Army in the northern region of Russia. They had also been responsible for founding a “sniper movement” in their regiment and trained at least two dozen new snipers, including many women.¹⁷⁹ The famous sniper Liudmila Pavlichenko was accepted as a volunteer during the summer of

174. Smirnova-Medvedeva, *On the Road to Stalingrad*, 14–15.

175. K. J. Cottam, “Order of Glory, I Class, Women Recipients,” in Pennington, *Amazons to Fighter Pilots*.

176. Murmantseva, *Zhenshchiny v soldatskikh shineliakh*, 128–29.

177. Erickson, “Night Witches, Snipers and Laundresses,” 34; Erickson, “Soviet Women at War,” 65. Petrova died in a road crash in February 1945.

178. Galagan, *Ratny podvig zhenshchin*, 24–25.

179. Cottam, *Women in War and Resistance*, 197–99.

1941 on the basis of a marksmanship certificate she had earned before the war. She served as both a sniper and a sniper instructor.¹⁸⁰

Specialized sniper training for women was set up by the *Komsomol* beginning in November 1942. In May 1943, the Central Women's School for Sniper Training began operation under the command of N. P. Chegodaeva, a graduate of the Frunze Military Academy and veteran of the Spanish Civil War; its 1,500 graduates accounted for 11,280 enemy troops killed by the end of the war.¹⁸¹ A memoir by one of the students at the school, Iuliia Zhukova, appeared in 2006. Zhukova recalls that the students included both volunteers and girls mobilized by the *Komsomol*.¹⁸² The women's school, which was created in order to formalize the process through which many hundreds of women had already become snipers, was only one source of female snipers.¹⁸³ Some of its students, like Nina Solovei, had already fought as snipers, and were sent to the school for additional training after being wounded.¹⁸⁴ Solovei reportedly killed an entire German company in twenty-five days.¹⁸⁵

Some women snipers operated in all-female platoons. A platoon of fifty women snipers in the 3rd Shock Army, commanded by Nina Lobkovskaia, was credited with killing 3,112 German soldiers. In October 1943, the women were attached by groups to infantry subunits. They fought in the liberation of Latvia and of Warsaw; they ended the war at the Battle for Berlin.¹⁸⁶

Sniper Tania Chernova became known in the West because of her portrayal in books and misportrayal in the film *Enemy at the Gates*.¹⁸⁷ Chernova, who was interviewed by author William Craig, fought at Stalingrad with the 284th

180. Mary Allen, "Liudmila Mikhailovna Pavlichenko," in Pennington, *Amazons to Fighter Pilots*. See also Liudmila Mikhailovna Pavlichenko, *Geroicheskaia byl: oborona Sevastopolia 1941–1942 gg.* (Moscow: Politizdat, 1960), and "I was a sniper," *The Road of Battle and Glory*, ed. I. M. Danishevskii and trans. David Skvirsky (Moscow: Politizdat, 1977).

181. Griesse and Stites, "Russia: Revolution and War," 69; Erickson, "Soviet Women at War," 65; Murmantseva, "Ratny i trudovoi podvig sovetskikh zhenshchin," 76. The graduates included 1,061 snipers and 407 instructors.

182. Iu. K. Zhukova, *Devushka so snaiperskoi vintovkoi: vospominaniia vypusknitsy Tsentralnoi zhen'skoi sbkoly snaiperskoi podgotovki, 1944–1945*, Na linii fronta—pravda o voine (Moskva: Tsentrpoligraf, 2006), 66.

183. Mary Allen, "Central Women's School for Sniper Training," in Pennington, *Amazons to Fighter Pilots*.

184. Nina Sergeevna Solovei, <http://www.iremember.ru/content/view/26/68/lang/en/>

185. Griesse and Stites, "Russia: Revolution and War," 69.

186. Erickson, "Soviet Women at War," 65; Murmantseva, "Ratny i trudovoi podvig sovetskikh zhenshchin," 76. Murmantseva, *Zhenshchiny v soldatskikh shineliiakh*, 106–7, 147–48. Cottam, "Soviet Women in Combat in World War II: The Ground Forces and the Navy," 347–48.

187. The film *Enemy at the Gates* deliberately downplayed the role of women at Stalingrad; although it showed a number of women soldiers, none of them, not even the so-called snipers, ever shoots at the enemy; they were more portrayed as love interests, putting on makeup, or becoming hysterical under attack. Chernova is portrayed as a part-Jewish university student with no previous combat experience.

Division. She had previously fought as a partisan and had already killed several Germans. Chernova trained at the informal “sniper school” of the 62nd Army under Vasily Zaitsev. In three months of service at Stalingrad, Chernova achieved eighty kills before abdominal wounds invalidated her out of the service.¹⁸⁸ Zaitsev does not mention Chernova in his memoirs (although he does mention other women snipers).¹⁸⁹ However, in a 1991 interview Zaitsev acknowledged that “one of our female snipers was Tania Chernova . . . she was a fine sniper.”¹⁹⁰

Some women snipers were required to prove their skills at shooting and camouflage to their operational commanders, despite their training credentials, before they were allowed to take up their duties.¹⁹¹ A few were prevented from taking up combat duties altogether and even arrested when they protested.¹⁹² Even so, women snipers seem to have been more easily accepted than women in some other roles. Sniper S. M. Krigel remembers her arrival at the First Belorussian Front with twenty-six other women. She says “the men looked at us with admiration. ‘They’re not laundresses or telephonists, they’re girl snipers. It’s the first time we’ve seen girls like that.’”¹⁹³ Anna Vasil’eva says “my fellow comrade scouts were always real knights towards the only girl among them. . . they called me “Brave One” . . . This nickname stuck with me through the whole war.”¹⁹⁴ Nina Lobkovskaia says her fifty female snipers were readily accepted.¹⁹⁵

The job of sniper was an exacting one. Snipers needed a good eye for distance and motion, the ability to handle a rifle blind-folded, the endurance to crawl long distances to get near enemy lines, then dig in and camouflage themselves, and the patience to wait nearly motionless for long hours in all kinds of weather. Snipers usually tried to get into position in the predawn darkness, and only returned to their own lines after nightfall. They sought positions as close as 500 meters to the enemy lines, and might lie in snow, sit in a tree, or perch on a roof for twelve hours or more at a time. Many snipers worked in pairs in order to keep one another alert.¹⁹⁶ Zhukova noted differences in sniper duties; she says that kills were counted only when her unit was on the defense; when it was on the attack, she did not count.¹⁹⁷

188. William Craig, *Enemy at the Gates: The Battle for Stalingrad* (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 106–7, 121–23, 236.

189. Vasily Grigorevich Zaitsev, *Za volgoi zemli dlia nas ne bylo* (Moscow: Dosaaf, 1971); available in translation as Vassili Zaitsev, *Notes of a sniper* (Las Vegas, Nev.: 2826 Press Inc., 2002).

190. David L. Robbins, Interview with author, 2 July 2003, by telephone. Robbins interviewed Zaitsev while working on his novel *War of the Rats*. For much more on Chernova, see Pennington, “Women and the Battle of Stalingrad.”

191. Alexiyevich, *War’s Unwomanly Face*, 15.

192. Krylova, *Soviet Women in Combat*, 233–34.

193. Alexiyevich, *War’s Unwomanly Face*, 183–84.

194. Anna Petrovna Vasil’eva, <http://www.iremember.ru/content/view/58/68/lang,en/>.

195. N. A. Lobkovskaia, “Neobyknovennye soldaty,” in *Oktiabrem rozhdennyie*, ed. N. S. Gudkova (Moscow: Politizdat, 1967), 324.

196. Alexiyevich, *War’s Unwomanly Face*, 14–17.

197. Zhukova, *Devushka so snaiperskoi vintovkoi*, 125.

Many women snipers were killed in action. Tamara Kostyrina died in hand-to-hand combat in 1944 after killing 120 enemy soldiers.¹⁹⁸ Sasha Shliakova was killed in a sniper duel because she refused to stop wearing her red *Komsomol* scarf.¹⁹⁹ In August 1942, during the battles near the Demyansk encirclement, snipers Polivanova and Kovshova blew themselves up with grenades rather than be captured.²⁰⁰

The most famous woman sniper was Liudmila Pavlichenko, whose 309 kills in less than a year included 78 enemy snipers. She fought with the 25th Chapaev Rifle Division during the defense of Odessa and the siege of Sevastopol. After she recovered from serious wounds, she was made a master sniper instructor, and later toured the United States to urge the opening of a second front. She once told Soviet women that hating the enemy without knowing how to kill him was a “useless hatred.”²⁰¹

The story of women snipers deserves a book unto itself.

Frontline Issues

Having examined some of the frontline roles and experiences of women in the Red Army, we now turn to an overview of some of the issues associated with that experience.

Strength and Endurance

One area that raises many questions is whether women have the strength and endurance to perform in combat. The Soviets traditionally took the physical strength of their women as a given. “Soviet reliance on females for harsh, physically demanding labor was not at all new,” Ellen Jones notes.²⁰² The Soviets seem to have largely taken for granted what many Westerners still see as an insurmountable obstacle.²⁰³

Western observers commented on the incredible endurance of Russian women during the war. One British pilot who flew with a Royal Air Force unit near Murmansk wrote about a group of a dozen Russian girls whom he watched sawing up and loading timber. Stiff and bored after days on a transport ship, he decided to help the girls out:

The party was under the command of a girl about twenty, a qualified engineer. They worked away for three hours like absolute fury, the engineer-girl working the hardest of the lot . . . About halfway

198. Erickson, “Soviet Women at War,” 65.

199. *Ibid.*, 65; Alexiyevich, *War's Unwomanly Face*, 17.

200. Cottam, “Soviet Women in Combat in World War II: The Ground/Air Defense Forces,” 347; Murmantseva, *Zhenshchiny v soldatskikh shinelakh*, 96–97.

201. Murmantseva, *Sovetskie zhenshchiny*, 128–29.

202. Ellen Jones, *Red Army and Society* (Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1985), 101.

203. For further discussion of the physical strength issue, see Reina Pennington, *Wings, Women and War: Soviet Airwomen in World War II Combat* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2001), 4, 32, 38, 52–54, 74, 82, 99, 157.

through the loading and sawing I felt that I had strained every muscle of my body . . . but every time I sat down for a rest, there would appear another girl at the end of a log weighing half a ton . . . and back one would have to go to the treadmill of labour out of pure shame—explaining that one had been three weeks aboard ship, and one was not quite in one's natural athletic condition.²⁰⁴

Some people are surprised that women could drive a tank or load an anti-aircraft gun. Yet even serving as a cook and laundress with the Red Army required great strength. Women cooks hauled huge cauldrons that were so heavy that some of the men expressed their fears that the women would never be able to bear children. Maria Kulakova described her work as a frontline baker: "We had eight cast-iron ovens which we set up when we arrived in a ruined village or town. After that was done we needed wood, 20 or 30 buckets of water, and five sacks of flour . . . we had to drag sacks of flour weighing 70 kilograms. Two of us would grab a sack and carry it. Or 40 loaves would be piled on a stretcher—it was too heavy for me to lift. Day and night in front of the oven, day and night."²⁰⁵

Laundresses similarly handled extremely heavy physical loads for long hours each day. They were expected to cut firewood for the stoves, heat water in heavy tubs, make soap from lye and fat, and clean the heavy, woolen lice-infested clothes of the soldiers. Lieutenant Valentina Bratchikova-Borshchevskaia was political officer of a field laundry detachment; she describes the heavy work and harsh chemicals, and tells of a time when her laundresses took two wounded Germans prisoner.²⁰⁶

Women military mechanics routinely lifted heavy weights, of course. Armorers with the all-female 46th Guards Night Bomber Regiment had only a few minutes to rearm aircraft between flights; they loaded four 100 kilogram bombs by hand.²⁰⁷ One veteran recalls his company nurse as "a skilled and physically strong woman who perfectly performed her job and was held in respect by the company."²⁰⁸

Some Soviet women believe that women had greater physical endurance than men. Partisan Vera Safronovna says, "We marched for 30 or 40 kilometers; horses dropped dead, men fell, but women kept on walking and—can you imagine it?—singing."²⁰⁹ Such reports came from male soldiers too. Sergei Abaulin recalls that his unit often had to force-march fifty or sixty kilometers in a day. "Among us soldiers were many women," he says, "who also courageously transcended all the adversity as well."²¹⁰

It is clear that many Soviet women demonstrated strength and endurance that was more than adequate for frontline duties. Undoubtedly some failed this

204. Hubert Griffith, *R.A.F. in Russia* (London: Hammond, 1942), 29–30.

205. Erickson, "Soviet Women at War," 70; Alexiyevich, *War's Unwomanly Face*, 128–29.

206. Erickson, "Soviet Women at War," 70; Alexiyevich, *War's Unwomanly Face*, 130–33.

207. Alexiyevich, *War's Unwomanly Face*, 154.

208. Artem Drabkin et al., *Red Army Infantrymen Remember the Great Patriotic War: A Collection of Interviews with 16 Soviet WW-2 Veterans* (Bloomington, Ind.: AuthorHouse, 2009), 45.

209. Alexiyevich, *War's Unwomanly Face*, 57–58.

210. Sergei Abaulin interview, <http://www.iremember.ru/content/view/188/82/lang,en>.

test, but the sources indicate that on the whole, physical issues did not interfere with military performance.

Fraternization

Another question that inevitably comes up is that of fraternization. Romantic and/or sexual relationships did sometimes develop, and there were a variety of attitudes about these relationships. There was no official policy against fraternization, but according to some veterans, there was an unwritten rule that if a love affair became public knowledge, one of the lovers would be transferred to another unit.²¹¹

The type of relationship that has received the most attention in memoirs and from historians is that of officers who took “front line wives” from among the female personnel. Many of these relationships were consensual, but coercion was possible because the men involved were in positions of power and often directly in the chain of command of their female partners. There were several slang terms for such women, the most common being “marching field wives” (*pokhodno-polevye zheny*). The acronym PPZh was a pun on the acronym for a submachine gun, PPSH.²¹² Puns were also made when women received the prestigious award “for military service” (*za boevye zaslugi*), which was interpreted as being “for field (sexual) service” (*za polevye zaslugi*).²¹³

Male officers were more likely to have access to private quarters and thus to “have a PPZh.” Many high-ranking commanders, from Marshal Georgii Zhukov on down, are described as “having a PPZh.”²¹⁴ These were often long-term relationships with a female subordinate. (Similar relationships have been attributed to Western military leaders such as General Dwight D. Eisenhower.) Some anecdotes describe cases where officers ignored their duties because they were allegedly distracted by their involvement with a woman.²¹⁵ Virtually any woman who engaged in a sexual relationship (or was believed to have done) was considered a PPZh.

In general, male veterans seem more likely to categorize military women as PPZhs.²¹⁶ Female veterans often distinguish between a small group of PPZhs and other women.²¹⁷ Vera Malakhova, a Red Army physician, told an interviewer, “we

211. Alexiyevich, *War's Unwomanly Face*, 184.

212. Catherine Merridale, *Ivan's War: Life and Death in the Red Army, 1939–1945*, 1st ed. (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006), 239.

213. *Ibid.*, 241.

214. Reese, “Frontoviki” mss.

215. Rodric Braithwaite, *Moscow 1941: A City and Its People at War*, 1st American ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 105.

216. Nikolai Chistiakov interview, <http://www.iremember.ru/content/view/53/75/lang,en/>; Isaak Kobylanskiy, *From Stalingrad to Pillau: A Red Army Artillery Officer Remembers the Great Patriotic War*, trans. Stuart Britton (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2008), 226–38.

217. Barbara Alpern Engel, “The Womanly Face of War: Soviet Women Remember World War II,” in *Women and War in the Twentieth Century: Enlisted with or without Consent*, ed. Nicole Ann Dombrowski (New York: Garland, 1999), 146–47, 154.

women who served at the front don't deserve to be called whores . . . there were very few PPZh and even those lived with just one man; there were a few promiscuous women, but really very, very few."²¹⁸ Women partisans made a clear distinction between camp wives (PPZhs) and *partizanki*, female partisans who were active in fighting, scouting, and sabotage.²¹⁹ Wartime journalist Vasily Grossman wrote in a notebook in 1942, "the PPZh is our great sin," but he also noted that "all around them tens of thousands of girls in military uniforms are working hard and with dignity."²²⁰ It was not only military women who were regarded as loose; "factory girls" were often described the same way.²²¹

Many women and men, especially in the military, regarded themselves as comrades, just as communist propaganda portrayed them. One veteran says "I can't remember a case of some improper behavior toward women. There were intimate relations but exclusively by mutual consent." Another claims that "our generation was chaste and shamefaced."²²² Vera Malakhova says she felt perfectly safe among the enlisted troops; it was only certain officers who tried to force their attention on her.²²³ Many women report taking formal or informal vows to have no love affairs while they were at the front.²²⁴ Others admit that it was frightening, during the war, to think of dying without ever "knowing life" or "experiencing anything." During the war, one woman remembered, "in my heart I condemned those people. I considered that it was not the time for personal matters."²²⁵ Still, while there were certainly many frontline romances, it was not easy to find the time or privacy for physical intimacy.

There are conflicting reports of what happened to women who became pregnant. No official policy has come to light; it appears that local commanders usually decided their fate. One historian reports that pregnant women generally continued to work until the seventh month; others say that women who got pregnant were simply ousted from service.²²⁶ There are isolated reports of women who committed suicide after becoming pregnant, and even one who tried to kill her child.²²⁷ In mid-1944 a new family code made divorce and abortion more

218. Engel, "The Womanly Face of War," 154, citing an interview in the Oral History Collection, 55, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford, California.

219. Slepyan, *Stalin's Guerrillas*, 196.

220. Vasilii Semenovich Grossman, *A Writer at War: Vasily Grossman with the Red Army, 1941–1945*, ed. and trans. Antony Beevor and Luba Vinogradova (New York: Pantheon Books, 2005), 120–21.

221. Gregory Malloy Smith, "The Impact of World War II on Women, Family, Life, and Mores in Moscow, 1941–1945" (Ph.D. diss., Stanford University, 1989), 269.

222. Drabkin et al., *Red Army Infantrymen Remember*, 148, 252.

223. Engel, "The Womanly Face of War," 143.

224. Alexiyevich, *War's Unwomanly Face*, 184.

225. *Ibid.*, 185.

226. Barbara Alpern Engel, *Women in Russia, 1700–2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 217; Alexiyevich, *War's Unwomanly Face*, 72; Saywell, *Women in War*, 145.

227. Edele, *Soviet Veterans of the Second World War*, 77.

difficult and reinstated legal distinctions between legitimate and illegitimate children, making it much more difficult for unwed mothers to require support or even acknowledgement from the father.²²⁸ In 1954 the famous writer Konstantin Simonov wrote a poem called “Son” about the postwar fate of a “PPZh” with an illegitimate child, living in poverty and shame.²²⁹

But not all relationships that developed between women and men in the Red Army could be characterized as transient or purely physical. Some veterans talked about platonic love affairs; others married fellow soldiers during or after the war.²³⁰ Some veterans believed that only another veteran could truly understand them.²³¹ Retired Lieutenant Colonel Taisiia Rudenko-Shevelyova, who was the first woman to become a regular naval officer, was happily married to another officer, although people told her no one would marry a “lady with a dagger.”²³² Infantry veteran Saul Podvyshensky married a woman who served with a naval unit on the Baltic; he believes that “those who got married at the front are the happiest people and the happiest couples.”²³³

Alexander Pyl’cyn, a lieutenant in a penal battalion, married a military nurse while at the front. It was an informal ceremony that became official only when they registered their marriage after the war, but he said that he did not want his partner, Rita, to be a PPZh. He described her as “my real wife, a devoted battle girlfriend, my sister-in-arms and wife for the rest of my life.”²³⁴ They were married for fifty-two years. During the war, Rita got permission to transfer from a hospital to Pyl’cyn’s battalion, even though women were not supposed to be assigned to penal units. In fact, the Front commander, Marshal Konstantin Rokossovski, allowed Rita to stay when she appealed to him on the grounds that she was pregnant. Her husband describes the mixed emotions he experienced when he saw her crawl out under fire to rescue the wounded. “I felt some sort of joy and pride at her fearlessness on the front line,” he writes, even though he feared for her safety. He describes helping her practice killing by shooting at German corpses; she said, “If I have to, I will shoot an enemy who is alive. I will not miss.”²³⁵

Pyl’cyn says that the relationships between women and men at the front “were of such a variety of destinies, meetings and chances . . . that I would not dare to make any generalisations.”²³⁶ This wise observation should guide historians as well.

228. Smith, “Impact of World War II”, 127.

229. Braithwaite, *Moscow 1941*, 105.

230. Alexiyevich, *War’s Unwomanly Face*, 19, 79, 89, 177, 186, 188, 244. Such women include sniper Maria Morozova, aircraft mechanic Irina Favorskaia, aircraft navigator Galina Dzhunkovskaia, and PVO gun-crew commander Sergeant Valentina Chudaeva. See also Kobylanskiy, *From Stalingrad to Pillau*, 235–36.

231. Edele, *Soviet Veterans of the Second World War*, 73, 74.

232. Alexiyevich, *War’s Unwomanly Face*, 161.

233. *Ibid.*, 79.

234. Pyl’cyn, *Penalty Strike*, 136.

235. *Ibid.*, 153, 160.

236. *Ibid.*, 141.

Killing

The necessity for most combatants to engage in the act of killing is another experience that is assumed to be highly gendered. Roger Reese argues that:

Every woman who found herself in the firing line in a job that required her to kill men got there by her own devices in defiance of the general intent of the armed forces hierarchy to use women in “safe” assignments, frontline medics excepted. No woman, who did not want to fight or kill, was required to do so. Only a few thousand out of the 800,000 women in uniform sought or chose to take assignments to kill men. The vast majority chose not to because they, and the men around them, did not think women should be killers.²³⁷

But there is no accumulated evidence to determine how many women participated in fighting and killing, regardless of whether they served in a designated combat or noncombat role. The interpretation that the “vast majority” of women “did not think women should be killers” is impossible to prove, and does not take into account the context of fighting in an occupied country. Regardless of whether women wanted to fight and kill, many undoubtedly found themselves in situations where it was necessary; the stories of some medics show that these “noncombatants” sometimes killed enemies to order to protect the wounded, and themselves.

In my interviews and reading of memoirs, I do not perceive a specific “woman’s” reaction to killing. Some women say they never got used to it, and it was always difficult. Others say it was a matter of self-defense.²³⁸ Still others say their anger and hatred was motivation enough. Sniper Vera Danilovsteva, who won two Orders of Glory, says, “My only desire was to go to the front with a rifle in my hands, even though I had never hurt a fly until then.”²³⁹ According to partisan Yadviga Savitskaia, “hatred overwhelmed us. It was stronger than fear.”²⁴⁰

First kills were usually the most difficult. Sniper Antonina Kotliarova recalls that she was very upset after her first couple of kills, because she saw her victims clearly as individual human beings—but, she says, “I grew somehow desensitized. I killed—it was supposed to be that way.”²⁴¹ Zhukova also said the first kill was unsettling, but that feeling passed, and “the destruction of Germans became simply a duty, a responsibility, which had to be carried out well.”²⁴²

Attitudes toward killing varied depending on the circumstances. Kotliarova recalled that when her unit had to retake a town for the second time, they were so angry at the Germans that no one was spared and apparently, no prisoners were taken: “We killed many there, very many. War is war.” But later in the war, when she ran into

237. Reese, “Frontoviki” mss.

238. Saywell, *Women in War*, 149.

239. Alexiyevich, *War’s Unwomanly Face*, 28.

240. *Ibid.*, 196.

241. Sniper Antonina Kotliarova, <http://www.iremember.ru/content/view/30/74/lang,en/>.

242. Zhukova, *Devushka so snaiperskoi vintovkoi*, 124.

a young German “boy-soldier” in the woods, she let him go. She said he reminded her of her younger brother (and was apparently no threat to her).²⁴³ The fact that she was no longer fighting on Soviet territory was probably a factor as well.

Sergeant-Major Liubov Novik, a medical orderly, says, “Whenever I recall the past now I am seized with terror, but at that time I could do anything—say, sleep next to a dead person, and I myself fired the rifle and saw blood; I remember only too well the especially strong smell of blood in the snow . . . It wasn’t that bad then and I could go through anything.”²⁴⁴ Sniper Klavdia Krokhtina recalls that she cried after shooting her first human being. Afterwards, she saw charred human bones where some Russian prisoners had been burned alive by retreating Germans. “After that,” she says, “I never felt pity whenever I killed . . . all I felt was fury and a desire to avenge.”²⁴⁵

Partisan Antonina Kondrashova points out that she once heard the cries of a child who was thrown by the Germans into a well. “After that,” she says, “when you went on a mission, your whole spirit urged you to do only one thing: to kill them as soon as possible and as many as possible, destroy them in the cruelest way.”²⁴⁶ On the other hand, one woman pilot saw killing as a military skill, and says that it should not be equated with cruelty.²⁴⁷ Women’s reactions to killing varied widely, depending on the role they filled and their personality. Men, too, had varied reactions to killing.²⁴⁸

Combat Performance

How can we evaluate the performance of women soldiers? Did women fight as well as men? Combat performance is difficult to assess. Most commonly historians rely on anecdotal information, studies of military awards, and casualty rates, to try to determine how well a soldier performs. Most Soviet-era accounts stress what was heroic and omit what was mundane or problematic. However, a far more realistic tone is evident in interviews with veterans done in recent years.²⁴⁹

The preceding sections provide an overview of the kinds of anecdotal information available in Soviet and post-Soviet accounts. Some German accounts were admiring, others contemptuous, in their assessment of women soldiers. German soldier Karl Fuchs wrote in a letter in July 1941: “When I go back I will tell you endless horror stories about Russia. Yesterday, for instance, we saw our first women soldiers . . . and these pigs fired on our decent German soldiers

243. Sniper Antonina Kotliarova, <http://www.iremember.ru/content/view/30/74/lang,en/>.

244. Alexiyevich, *War’s Unwomanly Face*, 8.

245. *Ibid.*, 16.

246. *Ibid.*, 194.

247. Saywell, *Women in War*, 149.

248. *Ibid.*, 148–49.

249. A new series from Tsentrpoligraf Publishers called “On the front line: the truth about war” has offered at least two dozen new and revised memoirs since 2006, including those of some women combatants.

from ambush positions.”²⁵⁰ At the Battle of Stalingrad a German panzer division reported that “right until the late afternoon we had to fight, shot for shot, against thirty-seven enemy anti-aircraft positions, manned by tenacious fighting women, until they were all destroyed.”²⁵¹ An officer of the 1st SS Panzer Division tells of an encounter with women Soviet soldiers at Kharkov in 1942; he says, “I thought my time had come” but he made a “lucky escape” because when his unit retook its position, they found that all those who had been left behind had been killed by the women.²⁵² In May 1942 a senior German NCO in the 6th Army reported that as his unit was advancing toward the Don River, they fought with a “bandit battalion” of women soldiers led by a red-haired woman. He said, “the fighting methods of these female beasts showed itself in treacherous and dangerous ways. They lie concealed in heaps of straw, and shoot us in the back when we pass by.”²⁵³

Griesse and Stites made the interesting observation that “women were congratulated collectively for their wartime efforts, both military and otherwise, while men received recognition as individuals.”²⁵⁴ Still, awards and decorations tell us something about the recognition of combat performance. A total of some 7 million soldiers were decorated during the war, but only 100,000 to 150,000 women. The two highest military awards were the Order of Glory and the Hero of the Soviet Union. The Order of Glory was created during the war as an award for junior enlisted and NCOs; of 2,500 recipients, four were women. These included an air gunner, a sniper, a machine gunner, and a medic.²⁵⁵ The Hero of the Soviet Union, roughly equivalent to the U.S. Medal of Honor, was given to 11,000 soldiers; at least 95 were women.²⁵⁶ More than half of the Hero of the Soviet Union medals awarded to women were given posthumously (the majority of men who received the HSU were alive), and no woman received the medal more than once (many men were second- and third-time winners).²⁵⁷ At most, half the women in the military were actually at the front, and most of those women were not technically assigned to combat duty. Since most awards were given for valor in combat, it might be that

250. Omer Bartov, *Hitler's Army: Soldiers, Nazis and War in the Third Reich* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 154, citing Karl Fuchs, *Sieg Heil! War Letters of Tank Gunner Karl Fuchs 1937–1941* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1987), 119.

251. Beevor, *Stalingrad*, 108.

252. Gordon Williamson, *Loyalty Is My Honour: Personal Accounts from the Waffen-SS* (London: Brown Packaging Ltd., 1995), 167.

253. Beevor, *Stalingrad*, 66, citing Uffz. Hans Urban, 389th I.D., Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv, Freiburg im Breisgau, RW4/v264, p89.

254. Griesse and Stites, “Russia: Revolution and War,” 78.

255. Smirnova-Medvedeva, *On the Road to Stalingrad*, 279; Murmantseva, *Sovetskie zhen-shchiny*, 270; V. Mikora, “Zhenshchiny kavalerii Ordena Slavy,” *Voenno-Istoricheskii Zhurnal*, no. 3 (1976): 51–56.

256. K. J. Cottam, “Hero Of The Soviet Union, Women Recipients,” in Pennington, *Amazons to Fighter Pilots*.

257. Griesse and Stites, “Russia: Revolution and War,” 78.

women who had the opportunity to fight won proportionately more awards than men. This is an area that needs further study in the archives.²⁵⁸

The Soviets have not published precise figures on women's wartime casualties.²⁵⁹ In his foreword to Krivosheev's book, John Erickson notes that "losses among women were by no means negligible and clearly deserve more than the perfunctory note they have received . . . this distressing omission cannot be due to lack of records."²⁶⁰ Erickson has written that losses among women in the frontline Red Army may have been proportionately heavier than among men, even though most were not in designated combat jobs.²⁶¹ The high casualty rate for frontline medics has already been noted. Women sappers undoubtedly had a casualty rate as high or higher than that of the infantry. Until hard statistical data becomes available, only a subjective conclusion is possible: women at the front appear to have taken the same risks as men and suffered casualty rates typical for their duties.

The performance of women in aviation regiments has been analyzed using archival materials that documented the missions, results, and casualties for those units, which could then be compared to similar data for all-male units.²⁶² Similar work has not yet been performed for the ground forces. The Red Army required thorough record-keeping and independent confirmation to document kills for any position that counted kills, such as fighter pilots and snipers. Conclusive evidence on women's military performance in the army has not yet been compiled, but there is little to indicate that it was either better or worse than that of men. Reese concludes that "Women did act as courageously as men and sometimes more so," and that "women, by sheer numbers and demonstrated competence, were a *vital* part of Soviet success in the war."²⁶³

POWs

Another aspect of the experience of war is that of the prisoner of war (POW). Many Soviet women (and men) expressed their fear of being captured during the war. As one nurse recalled, "we always kept a cartridge for ourselves: we would rather die than be taken prisoner."²⁶⁴ A female sniper says, "We carried two hand grenades on our belt. One for the fascists, one for yourself, so you wouldn't be captured by the fascists."²⁶⁵

Mark Edele states that female and Jewish POWs were treated much worse than male prisoners. There are some reports that the Germans treated women like

258. *Ibid.*, 74–75.

259. John Erickson, "Soviet War Losses: Calculations and Controversies," in *Barbarossa: the Axis and the Allies*, ed. John Erickson and David Dilks (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1994), 259, 270.

260. John Erickson, preface, Krivosheev, *Soviet Casualties and Combat Losses*, xi.

261. Erickson, "Night Witches, Snipers and Laundresses," 30.

262. Pennington, *Wings, Women and War*, 161–72.

263. Reese, "Frontoviki" mss. Stress on "vital" is in the original.

264. Alexiyevich, *War's Unwomanly Face*, 103.

265. Klavdia Kalugina, <http://www.iremember.ru/content/view/31/68/lang,en/>.

commissars, meaning that many would have been summarily shot rather than sent to camps. Others were subjected to various forms of sexual violence.²⁶⁶ Though some seem to regard the possibility of rape as one of the most horrific things that might befall a woman POW, they overlook two things: women are not the only victims of rape, and there are things that happen to prisoners that are worse than rape. For example, one veteran reports, “one of our nurses was taken prisoner. About a day later we liberated the village and found her—her eyes had been put out, her breasts lopped off. She had been impaled. It was frosty and she was all very white, her hair completely grey. She was a young girl of nineteen.”²⁶⁷

One German corporal reported that female prisoners taken at Stalingrad were “soldiers in skirts whose faces are so repulsive that one can scarcely bear to look at them.”²⁶⁸ Members of the 14th Independent VNOS (air observation, warning, and communication) battalion were surrounded by German troops on 31 August 1942 outside of Stalingrad. The eighteen soldiers—thirteen women and five men—were captured and forced to dig a trench, and then lined up beside it. The Germans demanded information about the local roads. One by one, as the soldiers refused to answer, they were led to the trench and shot. Only a young woman survived; although wounded she pretended to be dead amid the bodies of her comrades until the Germans left. She then crept from the pit and began crawling toward a neighboring post. It took her five days, but she was eventually found and taken to a hospital.²⁶⁹

Scouts operating behind enemy lines were particularly vulnerable. V. I. Levkin mentions female scouts who “endured all the hardships and privations of partisan life” and were eventually captured, tortured, and executed.²⁷⁰ Scout Maria Baida was taken prisoner, but survived to return to the Soviet Union.²⁷¹ Medical orderly Emilia Nikoaeveva escaped from a POW camp and joined a partisan detachment.²⁷² Partisan Liudmila Kashichkina was captured when she was twenty-three years old. She says, “I was kicked and beaten with whips [until my skin was in ribbons]. I learned what a fascist ‘manicure’ is. Your hands are put on a table and a device of some kind pushes needles under your nails, all your nails at the same time. The pain is indescribable. You lose consciousness immediately . . . and there was some kind of machine. You heard your bones crunching and dislocating.” Kashichkina was sent to a concentration camp in Germany, then transferred in 1944 to another camp in France. She escaped together with some French prisoners and joined the *maquis*. She was later awarded the Croix de Guerre and sent home to Russia.²⁷³

266. Edele, *Soviet Veterans of the Second World War*, 115.

267. Alexiyevich, *War's Unwomanly Face*, 102–3.

268. Beevor, *Stalingrad*, 110.

269. Ovchinnikova, *Zhenshchiny v soldatskikh shineliakh*, 152–53.

270. Levkin, “Young Communists Became Men,” 247.

271. Erickson, “Soviet Women at War,” 75 note 34.

272. Alexiyevich, *War's Unwomanly Face*, 231.

273. *Ibid.*, 223–26.

Soviet citizens knew they would be considered traitors if they were captured. The fear of the recrimination they would suffer at the hands of the Soviet government if they survived or escaped from German imprisonment was an important part of the fear of capture. A large group of women were awarded the Hero of the Soviet Union medal only in the 1960s or even the 1990s, either because they were connected with victims of the purges, or else because they had been German prisoners.

There is still very little published on the experiences of Soviet prisoners of war, including those of women. This is an area that remains to be studied.

After the War

A brief look at what happened to Soviet military women when the war ended is instructive. By the fall of 1945 a decree was issued demobilizing all women from military service except for a few specialists, and thereafter very few Soviet women indeed served in the military.²⁷⁴ Many in the West have assumed that the Soviets made a “logical” decision to demobilize women based on the single criterion of military performance. The line of reasoning is that if the women had performed well, they would have been retained in service; since they were demobilized, they must have fought badly. But a deeper examination reveals that other factors overrode any consideration of wartime performance in the decision to exclude women from the postwar military; these factors include cultural ideas of gender roles, social policies of pronatalism, and psychological effects of war-weariness.²⁷⁵

Political decisions were made long before the end of the war to bar women from the postwar Soviet military. There was a deliberate policy to downplay the role of women in combat and stress traditional female roles which was implemented even before the end of the war. An article in *Pravda* in March 1945, on International Women’s Day, stated, “in the Red Army . . . women very energetically proved themselves as pilots, snipers, submachine gunners [etc.] . . . But they don’t forget about their *primary duty* to nation and state, that of *motherhood*.”²⁷⁶

In July 1945, President M. I. Kalinin spoke to a gathering of recently demobilized women soldiers. He told them:

Equality for women has existed in our country since the very first day of the October Revolution. But you have won equality for women in yet another sphere: in the defense of your country arms

274. Griesse and Stites, “Russia: Revolution and War,” 78.

275. These issues are discussed in detail in Reina Pennington, “Do Not Speak of the Services You Rendered”: Women Veterans of Aviation in the Soviet Union,” *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 9, no. 1 (1996): 120–51.

276. Olga Mishakova, “Sovetskaia zhenshchina velikaia sila,” *Pravda*, 8 March 1945, 3. This was a distinct change in tone from some of her earlier works; see *Sovetskaia zhenshchina v Velikoi Otechestnoi voine* [Soviet Woman in the Great Patriotic War] (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1943), where she extolls only the bravery and combat skill of the women; or *Sovetskie devushki v Otechestnoi voine* [Soviet Girls in the Great Patriotic War] (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1944).

in hand. You have won equal rights for women in a field in which they hitherto have not taken such a direct part. But allow me, as one grown wise with years, to say to you: do not give yourself airs in your future practical work. Do not talk about the services you rendered, let others do it for you. That will be better."²⁷⁷

The slanders suffered by female veterans is further proof of the lack of acceptance of military women, of their failure to change ingrained ideas about gender roles. Many Soviet women have reported the stigma they faced as women at the front, both during and after the war. For example, one woman recalled her postwar reception: "I went [home] as a heroine, never thinking that a girl from the front line could be received the way I was . . . I came to know insults, I heard offensive words." She then recounted the reaction of her new in-laws to their son's frontline marriage: "Who have you got married to? An army girl. Why, you have two younger sisters. Who will marry them now?"²⁷⁸ An ex-PVO gun crew commander reported that she and her friends felt they had to hide their soldiers' papers and medals after the war; "we kept mum and didn't tell anybody that we had been at the front," she said.²⁷⁹ One female physician said that once when she wore her medals in public after the war, a stranger said, "Ah ha! There goes a frontline whore!"²⁸⁰ Barbara Alpern Engel discusses how the "postwar popular discourse transformed [women's] feats into sexual transgression," and observes that "No historian of Soviet women and World War II has discussed this transformation, in part, I think, to avoid detracting from women's achievements and perpetuating slander best forgotten."²⁸¹

A culture of discrimination against women was pervasive. As Catherine Merridale puts it, "the front line, though not quite a club exclusively for males, was pungent with misogyny" and "women would always find the culture punitive."²⁸² In her study of sexual equality in modern Soviet policy, Gail Lapidus found that despite legal and political equalities, there was no evidence that the Soviet government systematically sought to change the social status of women.

277. M. I. Kalinin, *On Communist Education: Selected Speeches and Articles* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1953), 428. It would seem unlikely that similar advice was ever given to male veterans, but Mark Edele finds that "independent of gender, veterans were admonished to be modest." He cites another speech made by Kalinin in July 1945, in which veterans were encouraged to behave with "dignity but without arrogance" or "unnecessary vanity." See Edele, *Soviet Veterans of the Second World War*, 36.

278. Alexiyevich, *War's Unwomanly Face*, 244. This book offers many other examples of the bad reputation and unfair postwar treatment that Soviet women war veterans believe they received; see also 79, 89.

279. Alexiyevich, *War's Unwomanly Face*, 89.

280. Engel, "The Womanly Face of War," 150.

281. *Ibid.*, 150. This phenomenon was mentioned in Reina Pennington, "Do not speak of the services you rendered': Women Veterans of Aviation in the Soviet Union," *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 9, no. 1 (1996), reprinted in *A Soldier and A Woman*, ed. Gerard J. DeGroot and Corinna Peniston-Bird (New York: Longman, 2000).

282. Merridale, *Ivan's War*, 239, 248.

Historian Anna Krylova believes that most historians do not recognize the “diverse and contradictory dimensions” of Stalinist gender notions, or the fact that they were complex. This leads historians to see the regime as favouring traditional roles for women and to discredit the real changes that many women experienced. She suggests that by the late 1930s, an “alternative femininity” had developed, primarily for the younger generation, that encompassed seemingly incompatible qualities; “maternal love and military violence” could coexist in the new Soviet woman. The system was not monolithic, she notes, and the new image resulted from the “collective and uncoordinated effort” of journalists, prominent women, and military and political leaders.²⁸³ But this view does not explain the retrenchment of the postwar years.

Whatever the reasons for allowing women to fight, the Soviets did not see wartime integration of women into the military as a catalyst for fostering long-range changes in gender roles in society. The legacies of the war—massive population loss, economic hardship, and war weariness—all led to a postwar retrenchment that narrowed women’s military roles dramatically.

According to Tatyana Mamonova, former editor of the *samizdat* (underground) publication *Woman and Russia*, “the heroism of Soviet women in World War II, when they distinguished themselves as snipers, fliers, and parachutists, is forgotten.”²⁸⁴ Far from being glorified in Soviet history, the women who fought have been hidden from history. When Svetlana Alexiyevich began interviewing hundreds of women veterans in the 1980s, many expressed surprise and relief that anyone was interested in them. An army driver told her, “I am so glad that I can tell somebody about it and that our time has also come”; a woman partisan said, “it occurred to me sometimes that I would carry it all into my grave and that nobody would ever learn about it.”²⁸⁵

Conclusion

Women were never received as part of the Soviet military elite. The Soviets regarded the use of women in combat as a temporary measure; even while women were at the front, the Soviets instituted gender segregation in the educational system and the exclusion of women from the newly created Suvorov cadet schools. In 1943, the groundwork was already laid for the exclusion of women from the postwar military. It seems apparent that no matter how well women performed in nontraditional combat roles, they could not change ingrained societal ideas of gender roles. Performance was irrelevant to Soviet decision making about whether to allow women to remain in military service, and there is strong evidence that during the postwar period, the Soviet government deliberately obscured women’s wartime achievements.

283. Krylova, “Stalinist Identity from the Viewpoint of Gender,” 628.

284. Anne Eliot Griesse, “Soviet Women and World War II: Mobilization and Combat Policies” (M.A. Thesis, Georgetown University, 1980), 81; Tatyana Mamonova, *Russian Women’s Studies: Essays on Sexism in Soviet Culture* (New York: Pergamon, 1989), 150.

285. Alexiyevich, *War’s Unwomanly Face*, 7.

In his 1959 book, Marshal Chuikov noted both the performance of women soldiers, and the way in which their service has been ignored:

I can't overlook one very important question which, in my opinion, is still weakly covered in military literature, and at times unjustifiably forgotten in our reports and work on the generalization of the experience of the Great Patriotic War. I have in mind the question about the role of women in war, in the rear but also at the front. Equally with men they bore all the burdens of combat life and together with us men, they went all the way to Berlin.²⁸⁶

The reason the Soviets excluded women from the postwar military is at least partly related to a wider phenomenon. The United States passed combat exclusion laws against women in 1948, despite the fact women had not been used in combat during World War II. Although the Soviets were willing to use women in combat on a much wider scale than other countries when the situation demanded, they also reverted to traditional role models and behaviors as soon as the crisis ended. A tendency to revert to old hierarchies is common throughout history.²⁸⁷

Nancy Loring Goldman describes this as “a phenomenon that was almost universal in the twentieth-century utilization of women.” She notes “the willingness of the military to use women for the most dangerous missions in the emergency of a desperate struggle and then to demobilize them after the emergency is over.” However, “even maximum participation in quantity and quality in a combat war situation does not guarantee equality in the service, in other walks of life, or in the postwar society.”²⁸⁸ This situation is evident not only in the Soviet experience, but also in Yugoslavia, Israel, and Vietnam; Jones noted that servicewomen in all countries were demobilized after the end of the war.²⁸⁹

Historians have devoted most of their attention to perceptions and discourse about women in the military. Far less study has focused on women's military achievements. We need better understanding of all these aspects of the experience of women in the Red Army in order to have a secure historical foundation. Susanne Conze and Beate Fieseler noted in a recent essay that “even fifty years after the end of the war, the critical and detailed quantitative as well as qualitative story of these women remains to be written.”²⁹⁰

The experiences described in this essay suggest a great deal about what women have done in combat, and can provide a guide for historians to conduct the serious archival and monographic work that remains to be done.

286. Chuikov and Paderin, *Nachalo puti*, 249.

287. Sharon Macdonald, “Drawing the Lines—Gender, Peace, and War: An Introduction,” in *Images of Women in Peace and War*, ed. Sharon Macdonald, Pat Holden, and Shirley Ardener (London: Macmillan, 1987), 9.

288. Goldman, introduction to *Female Soldiers*, 8–9.

289. Jones, *Red Army and Society*, 101.

290. Susanne Conze and Beate Fieseler, “Soviet Women as Comrades-in-Arms: A Blind Spot in the History of the War,” in *The People's War: Responses to World War II in the Soviet Union*, ed. Robert W. Thurston and Bernd Bonwetsch (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 213.

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