

ELENA'S WAR: RUSSIAN WOMEN IN COMBAT

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INTRODUCTION

No historian of World War II would deny the critical contribution of the Soviet Union to victory over the Axis powers. Expanding into the Soviet Union was a fundamental part of Hitler's foreign policy. In his *Second Book*, Hitler repeats over and over his main goal: to obtain *lebensraum*, or living space, in order to accommodate the German population.¹ By merely looking at a map to see the size of the Soviet Union in the late 1930s, it becomes clear why Hitler looked to the Soviet Union in order to obtain that necessary *lebensraum*. The Red Army on the Eastern Front was fighting ninety percent of the Nazi forces at the height of German involvement in that theatre. The Soviet Union's occupation of the Nazi forces in the Eastern Theatre led to the Allied ability and opportunity to strike in the West and ultimately open up a two-front war against Nazi Germany. That two-front war, in addition to Hitler's unrealistic expectations for the army he spread too thinly, was what led to the surrender of the Nazis and the end of World War II in Europe.

Without the Soviet Union's engagement of the German forces in the Eastern Theatre, World War II could have ended in

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¹ Gerhard L. Weinberg, ed., *Hitler's Second Book: The Unpublished Sequel to Mein Kampf by Adolf Hitler* (New York: Enigma Books, 2003), 1-50.

disaster for the Allied forces and the rest of the world. The ability of the Red Army to hold off the Nazis can be attributed to a number of factors: the sheer size of the Red Army even after its purge; tenacious and brutal defense by the Soviets of their homeland; Hitler's underestimation of both the durability of Stalin's regime and the technological level of the Red Army, especially in light of the Soviet T-34 tank. However, one of the greatest factors contributing to the success of the Soviet Union in holding off the German army is one that is often overlooked: the involvement of Soviet women. While their actions and involvement have been addressed by a number of authors and researchers,² the fact that their involvement was necessary to the victory of the Red Army over the Nazi forces is not directly addressed. In fact, it would have been considerably more difficult, if not impossible, for the Red Army to hold the Nazis without the Soviet women's involvement.

² Kazimiera Cottam has spent her historical career, including *Defending Leningrad: Women Behind Enemy Lines* and *Women in Air War: The Eastern Front of World War II*, documenting Soviet women and their involvement in and achievements during World War II. In *A Dance with Death: Soviet Airwomen in World War II*, Anne Noggle focuses mainly on Soviet women's contributions in that branch. Barbara Alpern Engel's *Women in Imperial, Soviet, and Post-Soviet Russia and Women in Russia, 1700-2000* explores Soviet women's combat involvement and social significance. Melanie Ilić focuses on women in the workforce and their training in *Women in the Stalin Era*. Nearly all authors listed in the bibliography have some focus on Soviet women's involvement in the war effort.

While the discussion of women's roles in wartime is not a new subject, we tend to view women as the supporting actresses in the grand film of World War II. Most are familiar with the stories of headstrong nurses, valiant factory workers, and brave wives and mothers who made victory possible. But the stories we do not hear are those of the anti-aircraft gunners, the fighter pilots, the snipers, and the partisans who engaged in actual combat with the enemy. The stories of these women in combat may be familiar to the citizens of countries like Great Britain and the United States, but the stories about women in the Soviet Union have been altogether lost in the fray.

In a country that, to this day, "has no real politics except for that which takes place in the narrow and inscrutable space between the ears of its President,"³ it is difficult to discover Russia's past as the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union's archives have only recently become available to the rest of the world. There is a wealth of information in those archives that remains untapped. Some of the information we are now discovering raises interesting questions about the Soviet Union, its ideology, and its citizens. The topic of Soviet women in World War II raises all these questions and indeed helps to answer some of them.

The insights offered by the study of Soviet women in World War II are not merely specific to women. In trying to understand Soviet attitudes towards women and the roles they should play in the state, we begin to understand the nature of the Marxist state, and how different the ideal Marxist state was from Stalin's implementation of communism in the Soviet Union. The pure Marxist state views everyone equally, and expects an equal contribution from everyone. The Soviet Union under Stalin made progress in this direction, but it

³ David Remnick, "The Tsar's Opponent," *The New Yorker*, 1 October 2007, 65.

was ultimately not able to achieve this state because of Stalin himself. In studying Soviet women, we also study their leader, Stalin. We see how Stalin's personal views regarding women affect Soviet policies and actions. Stalin would probably never have allowed women to participate in combat without some sort of force compelling him in that direction. But Stalin ultimately had to set his bias against women aside for the good of the state and for the higher goals of real Marxism. However, Stalin's ability to separate his own goals from the goals of the Marxist state diminished after the war when, contrary to traditional Marxism, Stalin basically forced women back into specific gender roles.

The importance of women's—particularly Soviet women's—involvement in World War II is not disputed. The U.S. Ambassador to London, John G. Winant, claimed that World War II, "more than any other war in history, is a woman's war."⁴ He was, without doubt, correct. But in the Soviet Union—as was the case in all the countries involved—women were typically underrepresented politically; very few women were represented in significant government positions. In addition, women were kept on a lower economic level in these countries as well; paying women less than men for the same work was the norm in all of those countries.⁵ But in terms of their involvement in World War II, women were treated surprisingly differently by these major powers.

Historian Michael C.C. Adams notes that America alone refused altogether to put women into battle zones.⁶ Many women

⁴ I.C.B. Dear and M.R.D. Foot, eds., *The Oxford Companion to World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 1275.

⁵ Jill Stephenson, *Women in Nazi Germany* (Great Britain: Pearson Education Limited, 2001), 136.

⁶ Michael C.C. Adams, *The Best War Ever: America and World War II* (Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins University Press, 1994), 85.

were encouraged instead to work in factories to help the war effort. Some women were accepted into the armed forces, but they tended to be assigned to stereotypical low-level jobs like typing and sometimes cleaning.⁷ Moreover, women who joined the military forfeited their dependency allowance, a stipend given to POWs and their families if the POW was found thirty percent or more disabled,⁸ thus discouraging their combat participation. In addition, pregnant soldiers were discharged along with “menopausal personnel” (because this natural life change, according to male soldiers, would render women “permanently incapacitated”).⁹ In a country that at that time was already considered the freest in the world, women were actively discouraged from even rear-echelon slots, which would otherwise have been given to men to keep them from the front lines; women were very hesitant to join the war effort when “doing so might send a man to die.”¹⁰

Great Britain stood on the opposite end of the spectrum. In 1941, the United Kingdom became the very first country to conscript women.¹¹ British women actively defended the nation against Hitler’s *Luftwaffe* (often in anti-aircraft or non-combat roles), and there were even female officers in command of male soldiers.¹² While Great Britain’s conscription of women had a slow start, nowhere was the mobilization of women more effective than in the UK and the Soviet Union.¹³ Why not, then, study British women in World War II?

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Department of Veterans Affairs, “Former Prisoners of War,” available from <http://hss.co.san-bernardino.ca.us/VA/12-FormerPrisonersOfWar.htm>; Internet; accessed 9 October 2007.

⁹ Adams, *The Best War Ever*, 85.

¹⁰ Ibid., 86.

¹¹ Dear, *The Oxford Companion*, 1276.

¹² Adams, *The Best War Ever*, 86.

¹³ Dear, *The Oxford Companion*, 1277.

What makes the Soviet Union’s situation so unique has more to do with Soviet ideology. In freer nations like Great Britain, women’s participation in war was expected because British women had the freedom to otherwise contribute to their state. When one explores the history of Soviet and communist ideologies, one can begin to understand the novelty of allowing women to participate in war, not merely out of desperation for troops, but more importantly out of principle. The Soviet Union tends to be understood as a nation that suppressed its people. But when this same country was the first in World War II to use women in combat with regular armed forces¹⁴, more research and understanding is called for.

THE HISTORY OF SOVIET IDEOLOGY: A STUDY IN TOTALITARIANISM

*Who broke the chains that bound our
feet, now dancing,
Who opened lips that sing a joyous
song,
Who made the mourners change
their tears for laughter,
Brought back the dead to life’s
rejoicing throng.
Who is in heart, in every thought and
action.
Most loving, true and wise of Lenin’s
sons—
Such is the great Stalin.*¹⁵

An understanding of the history of the Soviet Union and its ideology can only

¹⁴ Ibid., 1276.

¹⁵ John M. Thompson, *Russia and the Soviet Union: An Historical Introduction from the Kievan State to the Present, 5th Edition* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2004), 217.

come through an appreciation of its leaders and their beliefs. Perhaps Hitler put it best: “Brilliant leadership can, of course, make a people focus on major goals, distracting it more from material things in order to serve grand spiritual ideals.”¹⁶ The Soviet way of governing is difficult to place into any one category. The Stalinist system alone can perhaps “best be summed up as a blend of Bolshevism (one-party rule), industrialization (mobilization and total control), and Stalinism (paranoia and the use of terror).”¹⁷ The most important factor in the Soviet regime, however, is the leader or head of the state.

Many aspects of human activity for Russians had historically been either administered or regulated by the state.¹⁸ This began arguably since the reign of Peter the Great, but definitely since the 19th Century. The state held a powerful sway over intellectual life, including influence over the Russian Orthodox Church, the Academy of Sciences, all of higher education and most of primary and secondary education, and censorship in all these areas.¹⁹ Before their emancipation, no less than two-fifths of the 40 million peasants in European Russia were directly administered by the state.²⁰ The state told peasants which days they had to work for others, which days (if any) they were allowed to work their own lands, and how much of what they grew they were able to keep. Hence the tight control of the populace was not an idea specific to the Soviet regime. Throughout its history, Russia’s state has held immense control of every aspect of its operation.

In totalitarian regimes, it is necessary to exercise absolute control over both the state itself and over the people who are subject to it. In order to achieve this goal, leaders of totalitarian states often employ the use of violence. Violence, however, is not used so much to frighten the people as “to realize constantly [the state’s] ideological doctrines.”²¹ In Soviet Russia, opposition to the leaders or the state was in no way tolerated; there were no exceptions. If Russia was going to save itself from German fascism, “the strictest order and iron discipline” were absolutely necessary.²² This was especially the case during war. Part of the code of conduct for Soviet soldiers calls for members of any given division to “shoot on the spot cowards and those who panic” in order to fulfill their duty to the Motherland.²³

The reason such control and such violence is necessary in the minds of totalitarian leaders is because of the need to create the perfect citizen. The totalitarian ideal is a society whose members all think and act in exactly the same manner. Stalin’s predecessor and idol, V.I. Lenin, stated that “Any cook should be able to run this country.”²⁴ What he meant was that all people had an equally important role in government. He believed every person should be such a committed participant in the regime that he or she could serve in a leadership position. Lenin often emphasized that he was merely one of the people, and he set the example of a good, true citizen. In other words, both men and women must be dedicated to a higher cause than themselves

¹⁶ Weinberg, *Hitler’s Second Book*, 16.

¹⁷ Thompson, *Russia and the Soviet Union*, 223.

¹⁸ Thomas Riha, ed., “The Nature of Imperial Russian Society” in *Readings in Russian Civilization, Vol. II: Imperial Russia, 1700-1917* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1969), 480.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 481.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers, 1979), 341.

²² Evan Mawdsley, *The Stalin Years: The Soviet Union 1929-1953* (Great Britain: Manchester University Press, 2003), 135.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Julius I. Löwenstein, *Marx Against Marxism* (London: Routledge, Kegan & Paul, 1980), 199.

and their personal survival. This higher cause was the success and good of their regime. In Lenin's (and later Stalin's) eyes, Marxism was the new way of the future; all countries would eventually become communist regimes. Since Soviet leaders knew what the best life would eventually be for *all* people, they had to ensure that their citizens would work to achieve that end.

While many of these ideas originated during Lenin's term as ruler, Stalin perpetuated and, in many cases, made this approach even more extreme. Stalin was a much more paranoid and intense character who never seemed fully satisfied with the commitment of the Soviet citizenry. He intensified and seemed to perfect the indoctrination suggested by his predecessor. World War II came as a shock to both the people and to the government. The army was completely unprepared: their arms were inadequate, morale was low, the purges had already destroyed some of the country's best military minds, and the Five Year Plans were not living up to the state's expectations.²⁵ Stalin encouraged a revival of Russian nationalism. He depicted war not merely as a struggle against fascism, but rather as a new phase of a historical struggle with the Germans: "Our aim is clear and honorable. We want to free our Soviet land from the German-fascist scoundrels."²⁶

In order to ensure complete participation by the Soviet people in his industrialization programs (and hence the state), Stalin painted a picture of the future of the Soviet regime that was good in all its parts. The future, he promised, would be "good times" with material comfort for the people; their hard work, low pay, and difficult working conditions in the present

were all temporary.²⁷ The real repayment and result of their hard work was in a better future life for all, a common promise of socialism. Party members and government propaganda told the Soviets that "Perhaps you, but certainly your children, will enjoy prosperity and happiness in the decades ahead."²⁸ Much like his persuasive tactics, the incentives Stalin offered to his people were equally distant and oriented to the greater good. His greatest incentives were the old Marxist slogans "from each according to his work" and "to each according to his needs."²⁹ This gave the Soviet workers and army the hope that any great effort would eventually see a great reward. The coercion that Stalin resorted to reverted back to the violence discussed earlier: purges for the army, and forced labor camps for the citizens.

Under Stalin, art, sciences, education, sports, some religion, and the writing and teaching of history "were expected to orient [the peoples'] goals and activities to promote industrialization."³⁰ While the lives of his citizens were completely controlled by the state, Stalin's approach was successful and convincing enough for his people. The people even seemed satisfied with the state of affairs. When asked whether Stalin's measures were worth the costs in terms of work and life, a Soviet citizen replied "Yes, yes, it was a frightful price to pay, but it was all worth it—it made us strong and respected!"³¹ In addition, noted historian Richard Overy explains that the people who went along with the Soviet system acted not because of fear but rather "because they found their own expectations and beliefs reflected to some degree in the dictator-

²⁵ Dr. David J. Dallin, et al., *Facts On Communism Volume II: The Soviet Union, From Lenin to Khrushchev* (Washington, D.C.: US Government Printing Office, 1961), 218.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 232-233.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 224.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 225.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 218.

ships.”³² Stalin’s propaganda appealed to the citizens’ hopes and beliefs in a brighter future at the cost of sacrifice in the present. Men and women who may have been apathetic about the regime before the war could not avoid being physically and emotionally involved thanks to Stalin’s efforts.

But Marxist-Leninist ideology and propaganda was not quite sufficient to mobilize ordinary people to fight enthusiastically. Stalin simultaneously utilized and backed away from traditional Marxism to accomplish his goals with the people. In order to engage the people more fully during World War II, the communists emphasized patriotism instead of emphasizing the ultimate goal of a proletarian state. Instead of appealing to a somewhat dehumanized worker (or proletariat) motivated by economic change, Stalin appealed to the Russian peoples’ love of their homeland and hope for the future of their great nation and regime. Given that a goal of Marxism is the eradication of bourgeois property, persuading the people to think of their collective homeland and their collective country as a kind of communal property was in keeping with general Marxist ideology, but was also catered to Stalin’s need to engage the people. For example, the external controls on the collective farm, or *kolkhoz*, were much more relaxed directly before the war;³³ since most of the *kolkhoz* areas were occupied during the war, restrictions were rarely if ever enforced. The average farm worker enjoyed greater freedom, in a sense. In addition, from the mid-1930s, the Soviet state began to emphasize the necessity of strengthening the conventional family.³⁴

³² Richard Overy, *The Dictators: Hitler’s Germany, Stalin’s Russia* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2004), 306. Overy’s text explores the dictatorships of both Stalin and Hitler, and he refers to both here.

³³ Mawdsley, *The Stalin Years*, 46.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 51.

However, the Soviet state did not merely encourage the nuclear family to be strengthened; it also wished to cultivate and strengthen the idea of a national family. As Engel notes, the national community “was imagined as a brotherhood,”³⁵ creating in the minds of the Soviets a closer familial bond. Stalin’s propaganda reflected the idea of the state as family. Stalin was often depicted on posters surrounded by happy children grateful to the state; the purpose of the posters was to show that “Stalin was the biggest and best father of all.”³⁶ Thus, in Engel’s words, the state “sought to appropriate the ‘personal’ or the ‘private’ for purposes of its own.”³⁷ Stalin and the Soviet state linked the common citizen to national concerns. Instead of merely being associated with economic survival, Stalin’s efforts identified communists with “the survival of the entire nation.”³⁸

Stalinist principles can best be seen in one major body of the state: the Russian Army. Dedication to a higher cause was necessary in all aspects of Soviet life, but this was especially true of the Russian army. The Russian army had a history of strict discipline and high expectations. From Peter the Great’s overhaul of the army in the 1700s to at least the end of World War II, members were expected to be of the highest caliber; citizens were required to serve for life, and promotions could only be earned based on merit rather than privilege.³⁹ Every male citizen at that time was taught that service to the state was expected, and only real dedication would reap any reward.

³⁵ Barbara Alpern Engel, *Women in Russia 1700-2000* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 190.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 179.

³⁷ *Ibid*.

³⁸ David M. Glantz and Jonathan House, *When Titans Clashed: How the Red Army Stopped Hitler* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1995), 289-290.

³⁹ Thompson, *Russia and the Soviet Union*, 104.

This was still the mindset under Soviet control. However, violence was used more often by the Soviet regime to keep the army in line. Historians Calvocoressi and Wint observe that the Russian army had no historical inclination towards revolution; the Russian Army's "sole attempt to usurp the civil power—the Decembrist coup of 1825—had collapsed after a day."⁴⁰

By 1939, however, the Red Army was in disarray due to Stalin's purge of the Soviet leadership.⁴¹ Beginning in 1934, Stalin systematically annihilated anyone in the Soviet government whom he viewed as a competitor for power.⁴² While Stalin had "always loved the Red Army," he had many experiences during the Civil War in which he witnessed soldiers betraying the Revolution. This made him deeply suspicious of professional soldiers.⁴³ The purges of the Red Army were "secret and hasty," unlike those in the rest of the government; of the 75,000 to 80,000 officers in the Red Army, at least 30,000 were imprisoned or executed.⁴⁴ The public reason behind the purges seemed to be that there were better potential combatants who were better revolutionaries for their motherland. The state was looking for a kind of revolutionary fervor—i.e. absolute loyalty to Stalin—which was the most important quality for a soldier in the Red Army.

The idea of the perfect citizen, for Stalin, was one who was willing and able to fight for his (and eventually, her) country. This would create the perfect society. Stalin wanted society in which a cook could not only run the government, but was also more than willing to fight and possibly die

protecting it and its principles. With this insight, we can begin to explore the significance of the impact of totalitarianism on women in Soviet Russia, and why these women became so eager to join in the combat in World War II.

SOVIET IDEOLOGY APPLIED TO WOMEN

In order to understand Soviet policies regarding women, one must understand Stalin's own relationships with and personal views of women. There were only three significant women in his life: his mother, his first wife Yekaterina Svanidze, and his second wife Nadezhda Alliluyeva (Nadya). His mother and father had an abusive relationship, and both his parents hit Stalin in his youth.⁴⁵ In his adulthood, Stalin asked his mother about the beatings she gave him in his childhood, and she answered, "That's why you turned out so well"; Stalin never attended his mother's funeral.⁴⁶ Based on his parents' relationship, Stalin probably learned that women were just as harsh, just as capable of violence as men. We can see that Stalin had a fairly strained relationship with his mother, and she probably sparked Stalin's dislike for strong women.

In fact, Stalin had a strained relationship with almost all women he encountered. The only exception to this may have been his first wife, Yekaterina. They married c. 1905, but she died in 1907. Their relationship, however brief, had a profound effect on Stalin. He told a friend at her funeral, "This creature softened my stony heart. She is dead and with her have died my last warm

⁴⁰ Peter Calvocoressi and Guy Wint, *Total War: The Story of World War II* (New York: Random House, 1972), 161.

⁴¹ Glantz and House, *When Titans Clashed*, 10.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Martin Amis, *Koba the Dread: Laughter and the Twenty Million* (New York: Random House, 2002), 98.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 101.

feelings for all human beings.”⁴⁷ While she left him a son, Stalin had nothing but contempt for him; he left him in the care of Yekaterina’s aunt, and is suspected to have played a “strange part in his terrible death.”⁴⁸

His relationship with his second wife, Nadya, was much different. Stalin met Nadya when she was an infant, and he married her before she turned twenty. According to historian Martin Amis, “there’s no question that she idealized him.”⁴⁹ However much Nadya idealized Stalin, she was not afraid to challenge him. For example, Nadya heard from classmates at the Industrial Academy in Moscow how horribly peasants in the Ukraine were being treated; when she challenged Stalin about his conduct there, he told Nadya that such talk was “Trotskyite gossip.” When she challenged him further on the subject, he “rebuke[d] Nadya for political indiscipline,” arrested the students who had told Nadya those things, and ordered a purge of all the colleges that had contributed manpower to collectivization.⁵⁰ Perhaps because of her strong disagreement with the political atmosphere surrounding Stalin, Nadya shot herself after a party in the Kremlin celebrating the fifteenth anniversary of the Revolution. At her funeral, Stalin is said to have made a gesture of dismissal and mutter, “She left me as an enemy.”⁵¹

It is clear from Nadya’s example that Stalin felt threatened by intelligent women, especially those who questioned his policies or stood in his way. Following his idol Lenin, Stalin felt it necessary to display and believe fully in “Great Russian chauvinism” (Lenin’s words)⁵² at all times. Stalin said that a woman with ideas is like “a herring

with ideas: skin and bones.”⁵³ In other words, a woman with ideas is merely a distraction, and her ideas have no substance or significance. He discredited, in some form or another, basically every woman he encountered. Despite his admiration for Lenin, Stalin was one of many in the party who at least partially (if not fully) believed the rumor that Lenin’s wife Krupskaya was a “syphilitic whore” responsible for Lenin’s poor health; he called Krupskaya that, among other profane names, to her face.⁵⁴ Krupskaya later noted in a letter to Boris Kamenev, fellow Bolshevik revolutionary and later leader of the Politburo, that “in the whole of thirty years, I have never heard a coarse word from a comrade” before that incident.⁵⁵

But Stalin’s coarseness was not limited to his dealings with Lenin’s wife. Milovan Djilas, a theorist and author in Yugoslavia and later critic of the Soviet system, protested that the Red Army was raping Yugoslav women; Stalin said of his soldiers, “How can such a man react normally [to the stress and violence of warfare]? And what is so awful in his having fun with a woman, after such horrors?”⁵⁶ Stalin clearly believed that women had certain duties, almost all of them revolving around subservience to men.

But his policies in the Soviet Union did not show a complete disregard for women in his regime. Despite his other personal experiences with women, Stalin seemed willing to lay his personal bias aside for the good of the regime. The Soviet system depended on everyone—woman and man alike—working for the good of the state. Soviet women were equally expected to participate in, understand, and defend the Soviet regime. Soviet ideology did not limit

⁴⁷ Ibid, 130.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 131.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 133-134.

⁵¹ Ibid, 131.

⁵² Ibid, 100.

⁵³ Ibid, 132.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 109.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 135.

women to housework and child-rearing, although that certainly was part of it. Stalin said:

The Soviet woman has the same rights as a man, but that does not free her from a great and honorable duty which nature has given her: she is a mother, she gives life. This is certainly not a private affair, but one of great social significance.⁵⁷

But Stalin saw that women could contribute much more to the state than future Soviet citizens. In a speech in 1933, Stalin said that while many citizens underestimated women, this was “a mistake, comrades, a serious mistake.”⁵⁸ Stalin followed once again in the footsteps of his idol, Lenin, who wrote that “Petty housework crushes, strangles, stultifies and degrades” a woman by keeping her confined to the kitchen and nursery instead of using her in the labor force.⁵⁹ Stalin considered women very useful to the Soviet regime, and not merely as co-producers of Soviet prosperity. Stalin also thought it important to note in a 1936 speech that the new draft of the Constitution of the U.S.S.R. clearly told women that they “are accorded equal rights with men in all spheres of economic, government, cultural, political and other public activity.”⁶⁰ Women were given these rights because they were expected to use them in the

service of the regime. The needs of the ideal Marxist regime were not concerned very much with gender. All citizens—male and female—were to participate fully in the regime because it served a greater good. Stalin makes clear that with this new constitution, there would be no passive, inactive citizens; “for [the new constitution], all citizens are active.”⁶¹

Stalin’s perspective that “personal ability and personal labor...determines the position of every citizen in society” remained fairly consistent, even with regard to women.⁶² Stalin urged women very early on to participate fully in politics. In a speech to the Women Workers’ and Peasants’ Congress in 1923, Stalin emphasized the importance of the political education of women.⁶³ While some said women’s political education was unnecessary, Stalin defended the idea, noting that educated women were necessary when “power has passed to the hands of the workers and peasants” since at least half of the 140 million-person population was female.⁶⁴ Any uneducated citizen, especially a woman, could mean the ruin of the Soviet system. A woman can “ruin the common cause if she is downtrodden and backward, not, of course, as a result of her ill-will, but because of her backwardness.”⁶⁵

Backwardness in women was a bigger concern than backwardness in men because of the role women traditionally have in raising and teaching children. Women’s education was necessary to raise proper Soviet children. Women took on the role as

⁵⁷ Engel, *Women in Russia 1700-2000*, 177-178.

⁵⁸ “Speech at Joint All-Union Conference of Collective Farm Shock Workers”; available from <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/subject/women/jaucf.htm>; Internet; accessed 10 September 2007.

⁵⁹ Engel, *Women in Imperial, Soviet, and Post-Soviet Russia* (Washington, D.C.: American Historical Association, 1999), 20-21.

⁶⁰ “On the Draft Constitution of the U.S.S.R.”; available from <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/subject/women/conts.htm>; Internet; accessed 10 September 2007.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ “On 5th Anniversary of First Women Workers’ and Peasants’ Congress”; available from <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/subject/women/afww.htm>; Internet; accessed 10 September 2007.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

a primary educator in the child's life. If a mother sympathized with and understood the Soviet system, then she would raise good children who would continue the regime and strive for the highest good; if she "trail[ed] in the wake of the priest, the kulak or the bourgeois," then she was a major threat to the rest of the citizens and to the Soviet state.⁶⁶ Stalin fully recognized the necessity of good mothers to raise good Soviet citizens. For example, one Soviet woman, Ina Konstantinova, wrote about the education she received from her mother about the Motherland. Upon hearing about the German bombing of Kiev, she wrote in her diary, "[C]ould I continue as before? No! I ought to make myself useful to my homeland in its hour of need, to the best of my ability."⁶⁷ When her mother told her not to go to war, but rather to stay working in the hospital, Ina replied "This is not what you have been telling me in the classroom."⁶⁸ This was the sense of duty and honor that Stalin wanted good parents to instill in the young people of the Soviet Union.

While women were necessary in producing dedicated citizens, Stalin also saw the utility of women in actual physical labor. In order to cope with its economic struggles and with the oncoming war, Stalin urged the citizens to participate in his Five Year Plans for rapid industrialization. He especially encouraged and praised the participation of women in these programs because women comprised the majority of the Soviet population. Stalin told the people that it was their duty to encourage women to work on collective farms because they were a "great force" needed to ensure the system's success.⁶⁹ In 1933, even before the proposed

constitution of the U.S.S.R. securing women's rights, Stalin tried to persuade women to work on the farms because it was the only place where they had the opportunity of "becoming equal with men. Without collective farms—inequality; in collective farms—equal rights."⁷⁰ When more women began joining the ranks on collective farms, Stalin encouraged men and women to work together. In 1944, he urged Soviet men to "welcome the growing social activity of the working women and their promotion to leading posts" as these were indisputable signs of the growth of the Soviet culture.⁷¹ When reporting on the success of industrialization and collective farming, Stalin said that "without the selfless labor of the men and women collective farmers," the country would not have been able to move forward.⁷²

Stalin tried to engrain the idea of women as full participants into the minds of all Soviet citizens. There had historically been a "strong-woman motif" in Russian culture, exhibited by the frequent appearance of the theme of Amazon women.⁷³ Epics and popular ballads in Russian history have sung the praises of female *bogatyr*s, or warrior heroes, and warrior maidens who could defeat men.⁷⁴ In July 1944, the Soviet

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Kazimiera J. Cottam, *Defending Leningrad: Women Behind Enemy Lines* (Nepean, Canada: New Military Publishing, 1998), 10.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 2.

⁶⁹ "Speech at Joint All-Union Conference."

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ "Report to the 17th Party Congress"; available from <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/subject/women/rpc.htm>; Internet; accessed 10 September 2007.

⁷² Bruce Franklin, ed. *The Essential Stalin: Major Theoretical Writings, 1905-1952* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1972), 399.

⁷³ Laurie S. Stoff, *They Fought for the Motherland: Russia's Women Soldiers in World War I and the Revolution* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2006), 16.

⁷⁴ Ibid; *bogatyr*s were powerful folk heroes possessing superhuman strength and pursuing stereotypically manly endeavors. Warrior maidens are women who challenge the epic heroes to show their physical superiority, but are usually later wooed by those same men.

government launched a new campaign to project exactly what qualities the iconic Soviet woman and mother ought to have. Photographs of this campaign show that the ideal woman was “stern, provident, tough as a tank driver, the nurse and teacher of armies to come.”⁷⁵ The propaganda does not fully convey the message of Stalin’s words. As Choi Chatterjee observes, transforming the Russian woman from an image of backwardness to a symbol of modernity “served as a means of justification for Stalinist policies.”⁷⁶ Stalin changed the image of women to serve the needs of his regime and to teach Soviets (specifically men) how women fit into the regime. We still see that the Soviet population had trouble, in some ways, dealing with the blurred line (or complete lack of one) between the sexes and their gender roles during the war. On one hand, there was the ideal of a woman as an equal participant as a man. But on the other hand, the Soviet campaign also showed this ideal woman as “sweet, innocent, untroubled by hardship, let alone by war.”⁷⁷ The ideal Soviet woman was not merely a hard-working, active citizen; she was also a loving wife and mother. This tension would become an issue for men both during and after World War II in dealing with women as comrades in arms.

Women were under constant encouragement to work in order to aid the state and preserve the regime. They were educated in the Soviet ideology, and they were expected to act as men’s equals in terms of their participation in the state’s programs. Stalin neither expected nor wanted women to dedicate their lives solely to the birthing and rearing of Soviet children

during the war. On the contrary, he wanted to first create the strongest citizenry he could, and then they would better be able to raise and educate a new generation of intelligent, eager Soviet citizens. By 1941, one of every seven party members of the CPSU (Communist Party of the Soviet Union) was a woman; by the same year, the *Komsomol* youth organization provided military training for both young men and women.⁷⁸ In this way, the Soviet system was somewhat liberating for women. It is no surprise, then, that women were so willing and eager to participate in the state and to defend Mother Russia during World War II.

THE HISTORY OF RUSSIAN WOMEN'S INVOLVEMENT IN COMBAT

As Cyril Black once claimed, the Soviet Union “represented a bewildering combination of modern and traditional elements.”⁷⁹ This is a perfect way to describe women’s place in Soviet Russia. Women’s involvement was expected in Soviet society, but it was not exclusive to the Soviet period. Russian women had a tradition of serving beside and even commanding men. Greeks have recorded the involvement of Amazon women, who controlled the south of Russia between the Don River and the Caucasus Mountains, fighting in war.⁸⁰ Recent archaeological excavations have uncovered the bodies of

⁷⁵ Catherine Merridale. *Ivan’s War: Life and Death in the Red Army, 1939-1945* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006), 316.

⁷⁶ Choi Chatterjee as quoted in Melanie Ilić, *Women in the Stalin Era* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 49.

⁷⁷ Merridale, *Ivan’s War*, 316.

⁷⁸ Dear, *The Oxford Companion*, 1276.

⁷⁹ Riha, *Readings in Russian Civilization*, 491.

⁸⁰ Dorothy Atkinson, “Society and the Sexes in the Russian Past,” in Dorothy Atkinson, Alexander Dallin, and Gail Lapidus, eds., *Women in Russia* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1977), 3-4, as cited in Anne Noggle, *A Dance With Death: Soviet Airwomen in World War II* (Texas: Texas A&M University Press, 2002), 4.

women buried with weapons, providing strong evidence that women warriors had lived in Pokrovka, on the Russian border with Kazakhstan.⁸¹ In addition, in the Russian Civil War of 1918-1922, women had fought with the partisan armies, unofficial bodies that used guerilla tactics to destroy supply lines and cut off enemy battalions.⁸² Some of the earliest accounts of Slavic society describe their females as warriors and hunters.⁸³ Ancient history supports a long tradition of female involvement in some form of combat.

In addition, there are many accounts of women joining in arms with men as early as the 1700s. Under Catherine the Great, a Don Cossack woman named Tatiana Markina donned a military uniform and became a captain under the guise of being a man.⁸⁴ During the Napoleonic Wars, numerous peasant women fought against the French as partisans; in addition, a woman named Nadezhda Durova became the first woman in the Russian Empire to hold an officer's rank as a woman.⁸⁵ Similar accounts of women dressing as men in order to fight in combat are recorded in the Crimean War (1854-1855), the Russo-Turkish War (1877-1878), the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905), and World War I (1914-1918). Some statistics claim that in 1915, about 400 women were serving in the Russian Army.⁸⁶

The best example of women in combat came after the March Revolution in 1917. In the middle of that year, the First Petrograd Women's Battalion was formed as

the first all-female combat unit.⁸⁷ By early August of that year, there were almost 50,000 men and 4,000 women volunteers known to the All-Russian Central Volunteer Committee; of those, about 1500 women were in the Moscow Battalion.⁸⁸ Over the course of 1917 alone, more than fifteen all-female units were formed, and more than 5,000 women volunteered for those units.⁸⁹ At the height of the Russian Civil War in 1920 nearly 66,000 women were serving in the Red Army, and the majority of those women were volunteers.⁹⁰ The women's battalions were quite effective and successful. Their dedication was seen when the First Petrograd Women's Battalion marched to the defence of the Provisional Government (in other words, against the Bolsheviks). A soldier observed that the women "made the best show of any soldiers I have seen since the [March] Revolution."⁹¹ At the siege of the Winter Palace in 1917, a member of the Russian military staff observed "the Women's Battalion regulating the movements of the crowds and arresting anyone who showed resistance."⁹² The women were so dedicated that when "the cadets had already laid down their arms, the women volunteers still held on."⁹³

The involvement of women in the Russian armed forces was therefore not a new concept. Russian women had for centuries exhibited persistence and determination in serving their country during times of conflict. Their involvement in World War II can, therefore, be seen as part of a pattern of women's involvement in

⁸¹ Stoff, *They Fought for the Motherland*, 18.

⁸² Dear, *The Oxford Companion*, 1275.

⁸³ Stoff, *They Fought for the Motherland*, 19.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ Nadezhda Durova, *The Cavalry Maiden: Journals of a Russian Officer in the Napoleonic Wars*, trans. Mary Fleming Zirin (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), ix, xxviii, as cited in Ann Noggle, *A Dance With Death*, 4.

⁸⁷ Linda Edmondson, ed. *Women and Society in Russia and the Soviet Union* (New York, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 131-132.

⁸⁸ Edmondson, *Women and Society*, 131.

⁸⁹ Stoff, *They Fought for the Motherland*, 53.

⁹⁰ Noggle, *A Dance With Death*, 5.

⁹¹ Edmondson, *Women and Society*, 139.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 131.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

Russia's military history. However, despite this historical pattern of involvement, women were not immediately accepted into combat in World War II.

A SLOW, BUT IMPORTANT, START: WOMEN IN INDUSTRY

The speed with which Soviet women were eager to enlist, and the depth of their involvement in World War II, can be seen as revolutionary. The speed of the German invasion of Russia, which shocked both the Russians and the German command itself, "turned home fronts into frontlines in a matter of moments,"⁹⁴ so the need to mobilize quickly was imperative. At first, however, women were not permitted to enlist to fight directly in warfare. Universal military service laws of 1925 and 1939 allowed women to enlist as volunteers who served mainly in medical services, but women were actively discouraged from enlisting in the armed forces.⁹⁵ Women were sometimes accepted for training to become nurses, but most were persuaded that they could help the war effort by enrolling as blood donors and staying at home.⁹⁶

Even in the Soviet Union, war was an activity that was considered to be outside the scope of women's affairs. According to Marxist doctrine, women were equal citizens in their rights and responsibilities (although not obligated to serve in the military); however, by the middle of the 1920s, women were being encouraged to remain in more traditional roles within the household.⁹⁷ A popular view of women's involvement in warfare can be phrased accordingly:

"Warfare is...the one human activity from which women, with the most insignificant exceptions, have always and everywhere stood apart"; as Keegan further asserts, women "rarely fight among themselves and they never, in any military sense, fight men."⁹⁸ More specifically than the societal perception of women in combat are the sentiments expressed by the commanders and rank-and-file soldiers. Soviet women recounting their experiences with these men explained that "they tried not to send us. You had to request to be sent out or earn the right, to distinguish yourself in some way."⁹⁹ Other than being driven by their historical involvement in previous Russian combat, the circumstances surrounding the women's upbringings can explain their wish to be involved in the defense of their homeland. Most of those fighting were born between 1923 and 1926, and these years knew many social transformations because of Stalin's rule; their adolescence was spent in the wake of the "Great Terror" of 1937-1938.¹⁰⁰ Markwick attributes the women's willingness to volunteer for the front to patriotism and a desire to defend their *rodina* (or Motherland).¹⁰¹ In the days immediately following the outbreak of the war in Russia, tens of thousands of women flocked to registration and recruitment centers to join in the fighting; to their dismay, many women were still mainly employed in cleaning uniforms, preparing food and ladling it to the soldiers.¹⁰²

Women had been heavily involved in industry in Russia long before the drive to recruit them before and during World War

⁹⁴ Engel, *Women in Russia*, 213.

⁹⁵ Noggle, *A Dance With Death*, 5.

⁹⁶ Merridale, *Ivan's War*, 92.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ John Keegan, *A History of Warfare* (New York: Knopf, 1993), 76.

⁹⁹ Engel, *Women In Russia 1700-2000*, 216.

¹⁰⁰ Roger D. Markwick, "'Totalitarianism': The Soviet and Nazi Experiences Compared" (Australia: The University of Newcastle, 2005), 1.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁰² Engel, *Women In Russia 1700-2000*, 213.

II. By 1917, the proportion of women in Russian industry as a whole had risen to a strong 43.2 percent.¹⁰³ World War II renewed efforts to get women involved in industry. At first, the *Komsomol*, the Communist Party Youth Organization, which organized youth of the Soviet Union and instilled loyalty to the party and the Soviet Union in them, pressed women to participate merely in production for the Soviet Union; propaganda saying “Women to the tractor!” and “Women join the *Komsomol!*” were prominent during the 1930s.¹⁰⁴ As mentioned earlier, women were discouraged from enlisting to fight in the war. Propaganda and the Soviet government encouraged them instead to remain at home and take on the jobs that men had before being deployed. In 1940, 41 percent of workers in Soviet industry were women; by 1943, that involvement peaked at 53 percent and decreased only slightly to 51 percent in 1945. This increase in female involvement in the Soviet workforce was even more dramatic when one considers the national economy as a whole. In 1940, only 38.4 percent of the workforce had been female; by 1945, that number increased dramatically to 56 percent.¹⁰⁵ The importance of female involvement is even clearer in the example of Baku, the Soviet Union’s main source for oil.¹⁰⁶ By the middle of 1942, 33 percent of all the workers working 18-hour shifts were women; by 1944, women’s participation had skyrocketed to 60 percent.¹⁰⁷ This was a trend in most areas of industry in the Soviet Union during World War II. While this can

easily be attributed to the fact that men were being enlisted and deployed in huge numbers, taking into consideration the number of women who were able to be involved at the front and in the armed forces, this represents considerable female involvement in the Soviet economy.

In addition to being charged with assuming industrial roles, Soviet women were encouraged to continue with their social lives, because in the initial months of the war, women were not encouraged to enlist for combat. However, underlying themes preparing women for the possibility of involvement in war were seen in tandem with the propaganda discouraging it. Some social activities were reminiscent of Germany’s disguising the Luftwaffe as “glider clubs,” or preparation for “commercial airlines”; marksmanship clubs and rock climbing were encouraged for women in case they had to shoot a gun or fight in the mountainous regions of Russia. While this indirectly encouraged women to be ready to fight, they were discouraged from directly fighting at the time. Such examples often were encouraged in women’s magazines. In the magazine *Obshchestvenitsa* (“Female Activist”) during 1939, there were articles titled “If war breaks out” which discussed women’s preparation and highlighted the role of the female sniper; in fact, articles concerning female snipers had begun to appear as early as 1937. Women snipers made the front pages of Soviet newspapers, embedding in the back of the Soviet woman’s mind that there was a standard “for self-sacrifice, professional pride, and patriotism” that would be expected from them soon.¹⁰⁸ The same magazine also had women writing in to inform readers that over 1,000 house-wives had finished various specialization courses including training as radio operators.¹⁰⁹ Long before the Central

¹⁰³ Engel, *Women In Imperial, Soviet, and Post-Soviet Russia*, 19.

¹⁰⁴ Markwick, “Totalitarianism”, 2.

¹⁰⁵ Ilić, *Women in the Stalin Era*, 219.

¹⁰⁶ Vagif Agayev, et al. “World War II and Azerbaijan”; available from http://azer.com/aiweb/categories/magazine/32_folder/32_articles/32_ww22.html; Internet; accessed 13 November 2007.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Merridale, *Ivan’s War*, 166.

¹⁰⁹ Ilić, *Women in the Stalin Era*, 162.

Committee of the Communist Party formally accepted women into the military in 1942, women were being prepared for the possibility of combat.

PROVING THEMSELVES: THE START OF MILITARY INVOLVEMENT

Leaving aside for the moment the motivation behind the decision to allow women to serve, they were ultimately given that permission. Near the end of the war, any woman who did not have children and was not otherwise employed in industrial or governmental work was subject to mobilization into the PVO (*protivovozdushnaia*, or Air Defense Force).¹¹⁰ Women were encouraged to help their mother country. They were being prepared in every facet of life for that possibility, and it was ultimately necessary, for one reason or another, to bring women into World War II. Soviet women were critical to the success the Red Army had in holding Nazi Germany's eastern warfront.

The first major presence women had in Soviet fighting was in the medical field. The Soviet government drafted female medical students, enrolled them in crash courses to prepare them for the front line, and then sent them there; their presence was necessary because of the vicious fighting on the front lines. Statistically, 41 percent of all physicians, 43 percent of all field surgeons, 43 percent of all medical assistants, and 100 percent of nurses on the Soviet front were female. These nurses were not only charged with the medical care of wounded soldiers, but they often entered the battlefield under heavy fire in order to

retrieve these wounded men. The line between noncombatant medical personnel and fighting troops was often blurred on the front. Frontline physicians often carried their own weapons. Casualties among female medics, many of whom carried rifles of their own and claimed to be better shots than those fighting on the front, were second only to those women of the fighting forces.¹¹¹ Many women signed up to be nurses in hopes to use that as a means to get to the front line; for example, Elena Iakovleva, made a nurse after only three months of training, deserted the hospital to go to the front line in February 1942.¹¹²

While expected to bear the same hardships as men, Soviet women, in order to prove themselves to their male counterparts, often volunteered for more hazardous work.¹¹³ Soviet women certainly did prove themselves to the men, and they proved that they could be equally tenacious and brutal in warfare, both in dealing with the enemy and even with Soviet "cowards"; one nurse serving at the front volunteered to execute two such men who had fled.¹¹⁴ A Soviet woman driver serving in Stalingrad "confessed delight in crushing the skulls of German dead beneath the wheels of her ammunition truck."¹¹⁵

THE GREATEST ARENA: VOYENNO-VOZDUSHNIYE

Soviet women also took delight in performing the tasks in the *Voyenno-Vozdushniye*, or Air Forces. The women serving in the Soviet Air Force are the most

¹¹⁰ Pennington, *Wings, Women, and War: Soviet Airwomen in World War II Combat* (Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2001), 56.

¹¹¹ Engel, *Women In Russia 1700-2000*, 213-214.

¹¹² Markwick, "Totalitarianism", 7.

¹¹³ Richard Overy, *Russia's War* (New York: Penguin Group, 1998), 242.

¹¹⁴ Aleksievich, *U voiny*, 140-141, as cited in Markwick, "Totalitarianism", 11.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

recognized among all Soviet women that served. The airwomen are credited with being the first women to serve in combat.¹¹⁶ Dasha Chalaya, a member of a Soviet dive bomber regiment, describes the women's training:

We began to train intensively, in a classroom, a munitions depot, on board aircraft, and on a shooting-range...working in severe weather toughened us; we became accustomed to hardships and developed physical strength. Without any difficulty, we handled 40 kilogram training bombs...¹¹⁷

Marina Raskova, a Soviet woman pilot, was able to convince Stalin and the Soviet Air Force to allow women into mostly male regiments and to create three all-female regiments in 1941.¹¹⁸ These Soviet airwomen contributed enormously to the defense of the Soviet Union both by fighting near the frontline and by defending the home territory. The three all-female regiments created thanks to Marina Raskova were a part of Aviation Group-122, and the whole of the personnel was female: pilots, navigators, mechanics, and ground crews. Aviation Group-122's regiments included the 586th Fighter Aviation Regiment, the 587th Day Bomber Aviation Regiment, and the 588th Night Bomber Aviation Regiment.¹¹⁹ The numbering of these regiments as the "500" series indicated that they were of particular interest to the GKO (*Gosudarstvennyy Komitet Oborony*, or State Committee for Defense).¹²⁰ These

three regiments were activated in early 1942 and served until the end of the war. They flew a combined total of over 30,000 combat sorties, and of the thirty-three women to receive the title "Heroes of the Soviet Union", thirty came from these regiments (including at least two fighter aces).¹²¹

Taken individually, the impact these regiments had in defending the Soviet Union is even more impressive. The 586th was initially assigned for air defense duties in Saratov.¹²² Its goal was not to achieve air superiority but rather to guard important targets. Specifically, the 586th was to protect oil refineries, ship repairing docks, gas plants, aircraft factories, and the only railroad bridge that crossed the Volga River; the 586th also escorted bombers and transport aircraft to the frontline.¹²³ This specific group became fully operational on 16 April 1942 and served until May 1945. Aside from Saratov, this regiment operated in Voronezh, Kostornaia, Kursk, Kiev, Zhitomir, Kotovsk, Bel'tsy, Debrecen, and Budapest. Its members flew a total of over 9,000 flights, nearly half of which were considered combat missions. In 125 air battles, this group managed to shoot down 38 enemy aircraft, including twelve fighters, fourteen bombers, one transport plane, and eleven reconnaissance craft. The 586th also hit targets on the ground, and they were able to destroy two Ju-52 aircraft, four tanks, thirty vehicles, twenty horses and several anti-aircraft sites.¹²⁴ The women of the 586th performed proudly, singing among themselves the lyrics of a well-known song:

¹¹⁶ Noggle, *A Dance With Death*, 3.

¹¹⁷ Kasimiera J. Cottam, ed. *Women in Air War: The Eastern Front of World War II* (Nepean, Canada: New Military Publishing, 1997), 63.

¹¹⁸ Engel, *Women in Russia 1700-2000*, 215-216.

¹¹⁹ Pennington, *Wings, Women, and War*, 2.

¹²⁰ Harold Stockton, Dariusz Tyminski, and Christer Bergström, *Marina Raskova and Soviet Female*

Pilots, retrieved from <http://www.elknet.pl/acestory/raskov/raskov.htm> on 15 November 2005, 2.

¹²¹ Pennington, *Wings, Women, and War*, 2.

¹²² Stockton, et al, *Marina Raskova*, ¶6.

¹²³ Vladimir Belyakov, "Russia's Women Top Guns", *Aviation History* 12, no. 4 (2002).

¹²⁴ Pennington, *Wings, Women, and War*, 104, 125.

*Even if it means sinking into a bog,
Even if it means freezing in ice,
Should you tell me to do it again,
I'll go through it all again!*¹²⁵

The 586th's damage to the German supply line (indicated by its destruction of horses and vehicles) in addition to holding its own defensive position no doubt had an enormous impact on Soviet ability to hold the line.

The 587th Regiment, also numbered the 125th Guards Bomber Regiment, did include some men but was overwhelmingly a female unit. This group flew what was considered the most complex aircraft of all Soviet-made aircraft: the Petlyakov Pe-2. This was a twin-engine, twin-tail dive bomber. The aircraft had powerful 1100-horsepower liquid-cooled engines, was capable of 336 miles per hour at 16,400ft, and held a bomb load of 1000kg (although pilots usually carried closer to 1200kg).¹²⁶ The 587th operated from January of 1943 through May 1945, flying a total of 1,134 combat missions and dropping an impressive total of 980,000 tons of bombs.¹²⁷ The regiment was sent to the Stalingrad front 22 November 1942 and also engaged in intense fighting in the Kuban area of southern Russia against the finest *Jagd Gruppen* (fighter group) of the German Luftwaffe, JG 54. Flying with the JG 54 was ace Erich Harmann, who had 352 confirmed combat kills.¹²⁸

The 588th Regiment, which also fought against JG 54, served from 27 May 1942 until 9 May 1945. The 588th, better known as the 46th Guards Women's Night Light-Bomber Regiment, conducted night bombing raids behind German lines. One

night bomber wrote to her father: "I most certainly plan to return home to you after the war; in any case, dealing with me would cost the Nazis dearly, since I am determined to use my newly acquired skills against them to the full."¹²⁹ Their mission was to raze tactical German targets located near the front lines, including fuel depots, ammunition dumps, ground troops, support vehicles, bridges, and enemy headquarters; occasionally, the 46th Guards were employed to fly supplies and ammunition to Soviet frontline troops as well.¹³⁰ Not only were these raids dangerous because of their very nature, but the missions were performed in open-cockpit biplanes that lacked parachutes until 1944 and were otherwise unarmed¹³¹. Additionally, weather was a major obstacle: "[L]ow clouds, fog, snow, ice, and gales that throw a light aircraft from one wingtip to the other and wrench the controls from your hand" added to the difficulty of their missions. The casualty rate for flying personnel was about 27 percent (high, but considered normal for a night-bomber regiment).¹³² Despite the dangers facing them, the airwomen of the 46th Guards were incredibly successful.

The Germans referred to the group as *nachthem*, or "Night Witches"; German Hauptmann Johannes Steinhoff stated that the Germans could not believe that "the Soviet airmen that caused us the greatest trouble were in fact women. These women feared nothing. They came night after night in their very slow biplanes, and for some periods they wouldn't give us any sleep at all."¹³³ Another enemy combatant wrote to another soldier "They fight like wild-cats

¹²⁵ Cottam, *Women in Air War*, 298.

¹²⁶ Noggle, *A Dance With Death*, 99.

¹²⁷ Pennington, *Wings, Women, and War*, 90; Harold Stockton, *Marina Raskova*, 6.

¹²⁸ Stockton, *Marina Raskova*, 6.

¹²⁹ Cottam, *Women in Air War*, 172.

¹³⁰ Noggle, *A Dance With Death*, 18.

¹³¹ Engel, *Women In Russia 1700-2000*, 216.

¹³² *Ibid.*

¹³³ Engel, *Women in Russia 1700-2000*, 216; Stockton, *Marina Raskova*, 4-5.

and are quite subhuman.”¹³⁴ The 46th Guards Night Bomber Regiment also patrolled in Stalingrad, Krasnodar, Novorossisk, Sevastopol, Minsk, Warsaw, and Berlin. Its crews flew over 24,000 combat missions, and from their ranks came twenty-four of the thirty-three female Heroes of the Soviet Union.¹³⁵ The unit dropped 3,000 tons of bombs; considering that the biplanes they flew could only hold 300kg at a time, this is a considerable feat.¹³⁶

Aside from the specific details of these three all-female regiments, women employed in the Soviet Air Force in general (whether in all-female or mostly male regiments) made significant contributions as a whole. The air force required skilled personnel, especially in the case of navigators. The women assigned to these jobs in the Soviet Air Force were often college graduates with degrees in engineering, physics, or mathematics (and occasionally humanities). Other than the medical services, the largest numbers of Soviet women were deployed in anti-aircraft defense, and the majority of these were gunners who were either directly engaged or directly exposed. In some cases, women formed 80 to 100 percent of anti-aircraft detachments; this included the 8,000 women who served in the chanel house of Stalingrad.¹³⁷

Every source on the subject records great victories by the Soviet women pilots. Mass formations of Ju-87B Stukas, supported by artillery and mortar fire, were laying siege to the south-central sector of Stalingrad's defenses on 13 September. The German aircraft totaled 1000 that day, while the Russians had a mere 389. Nevertheless, Lydia Litvyak, a Soviet woman on her second combat mission, shot down an Me-

109G-2, the pilot of which was Staff Sergeant Erwin Maier of the 2nd Staffel of Jagdgeschwader 53. Maier had only three days earlier scored his eleventh victory.¹³⁸ On 25 October 1942, a bomb strike by a female pilot set a fuel depot and the airfield of Armavir afire; the fire spread and, in addition to destroying six Ju-88s and He-111s, led to a quick withdrawal of the German unit to the Kerch Peninsula.¹³⁹ On 22 March 1943, Soviet women shot down two German fighter pilots: Lieutenant Franz Müller and Unteroffizier Karl-Otto Harloff.¹⁴⁰ During the Battle of Kursk in 1943 female Soviet combat units engaged in some of the heaviest combat operations in history; that battle arguably resulted in the collapse of any hope of German victory in the East.¹⁴¹ When German bombers attacked Saratov on the night of 24 September, Lieutenant Valeriya Khomyakova attacked and shot down a Ju-88 commanded by Gerhard Maak, a pilot decorated for his bombing of towns in Poland, France, the Netherlands, and England.¹⁴²

THE GLASS CEILING, THE SNIPERS, AND THE PARTISANS

At the onset of their introduction to combat, women were underestimated both by their comrades and by the enemy. At first, possibly to maintain German morale, German radio broadcasts alleged “All Soviet airmen are exterminated. Now Stalin is introducing all-female regiments, which will be destroyed easily as well.”¹⁴³ This was certainly not the case. Women's regiments

¹³⁴ Alan Clark, *Barbarossa: The Russian-German Conflict, 1941-1945* (New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc., 1965), 154.

¹³⁵ Pennington, *Wings, Women, and War*, 72.

¹³⁶ Stockton, *Marina Raskova*, 5.

¹³⁷ Markwick, ““Totalitarianism””, 8-9.

¹³⁸ Belyakov, “Russia's Women Top Guns”, 2-3.

¹³⁹ Stockton, *Marina Raskova*, 2.

¹⁴⁰ Stockton, *Marina Raskova*, 1.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid*, 3.

¹⁴² *Ibid*.

¹⁴³ *Ibid*.

performed basically the same numbers and types of missions as did other regiments. The average female performed at least as well if not better than the average male in each regiment. Vladimir Lavrinenkov observed that the women performed their duties with unusual physical strength and endurance, and the fact that these women “without complaining bore all the difficulties is a credit to them, and evoked tremendous respect from those around them.”¹⁴⁴ Two of the three female regiments were honored as Guard regiments,¹⁴⁵ and all personnel of all three regiments were decorated in some way (many as Heroes of the Soviet Union). Reina Pennington notes that “it is particularly interesting that the male eyewitnesses who often admitted to initial doubts about the women’s capabilities later praised their skills.”¹⁴⁶ They performed so well that their German opponents often assumed that they were men. German airmen were often incredulous when they confronted Russian airwomen in combat. Heinkel He-111 pilot Willy Meister noted that in a matter of two weeks, “our group lost five aircraft out of nine. Two were shot down by women. I saw them with my own eyes.”¹⁴⁷ Women’s abilities in the Soviet Air Force were absolutely essential in the holding of the German line.

This was likewise the case in pivotal battles like Leningrad and Stalingrad. At the siege of Leningrad, the line was held largely by women forces. In 1942, women comprised 75 per cent of the city’s population of 790,000 since most of the men had been called to serve in the Red Army or had been

evacuated with their factories.¹⁴⁸ Women were also the “first page” of the defense of Stalingrad; the female volunteers present there were anti-aircraft gunners of an extremely young age, but their impact is unquestionable.¹⁴⁹

Despite all this proof of their capability in the Air Force, there remained a glass ceiling for female combatants; apart from the three all-female regiments, women only exercised command up to platoon level and almost never rose above the rank of colonel.¹⁵⁰ Military procedure was not altered by women’s presence in the troops, including the issuing of uniforms; women often fought wearing men’s undershirts and undergarments, men’s uniforms, and oversized men’s boots.¹⁵¹ Women had to improvise: the female soldiers cut the bottoms out of slacks to make skirts, and the female physicians made stockings out of the ribbons they had been given for dragging the wounded off the field.¹⁵² While women were adjusting to their new roles in combat, Soviet leaders also struggled to appropriately accommodate the women. As an experiment, Soviet authorities introduced 43 “mobile front-line tea shops,” which were equipped with hairdressers, cosmetics counters, dominoes, and checkers.¹⁵³ In addition in August of 1942, rations of chocolate were issued in place of cigarettes for non-smoking female combatants.¹⁵⁴

In addition to problems with adjusting to combat with men, women encountered huge difficulties with sexual harassment. The men on the front lines had been

¹⁴⁴ Pennington, *Wings, Women, and War*, 161-162.

¹⁴⁵ “Guard” refers to the Russian Imperial Guard, a distinguished regiment traditionally closely serving the tsar. The Soviet Union distinguished regiments as “Guard” regiments when the regiment served with great honor.

¹⁴⁶ Pennington, *Wings, Women, and War*, 170.

¹⁴⁷ Belyakov, *Russia’s Women Top Guns*, 3.

¹⁴⁸ Evan Mawdsley, *Thunder in the East: The Nazi-Soviet War, 1941-1945* (Great Britain: Hodder Education, 2005), 136.

¹⁴⁹ Markwick, ““Totalitarianism””, 9.

¹⁵⁰ Engel, *Women In Russia 1700-2000*, 216-217.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵² *Ibid.*

¹⁵³ Merridale, *Ivan’s War*, 165.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 166.

away from their wives for years, and taking advantage of women had been one of the “perks of power” for men at the front.¹⁵⁵ Women who won promotions on the front-line faced prejudice as prostitutes who “slept with officers as a way of getting on;” some assumed that the women wished to become pregnant, which would guarantee their removal from the front.¹⁵⁶ Competition to take advantage of women on the front was ferocious, and women would often trust one officer to protect her from the others.¹⁵⁷ Their dependence on some men to help them, along with the fact that their male superiors were often the ones taking advantage of them, prevented women from rising in the ranks and contributed further to men’s underestimation of female combatants.

The underestimation of the capabilities of Soviet women was also true for the female snipers in the war. Soviet women snipers were a huge factor in the Soviet Union’s success although they are rarely represented in history as playing any role at all. This was the only other field in which women were specifically trained and ordained by the Soviet State to kill. On 21 May 1943, a formal decree established the Central Women’s School for Sniper Training. In a matter of only two years, that school was able to turn out 1,061 snipers and 407 instructors, and these women snipers are credited with having killed or wounded thousands of *Wehrmacht* officers and men.¹⁵⁸ It was believed early on (as mentioned in the discussion of the *Obshchestvennitsa* magazine) that women had the qualities that would be required of snipers, including patience, precision, endurance, and shooting skills. There were

two groups of snipers in the Soviet Union. One was part of the Reserves of the Supreme High Command (RVGK), and the other were assigned to standard infantry units. The RVGK had separate brigades, one composed entirely of women.¹⁵⁹ These women snipers hunted the German forces in all weather, crawling between foxholes and the neutral zone, risking bombardment and death under heavy fire; they were very physically fit and resourceful. The women either worked alone or in pairs, and the most experienced among them claimed to have shot 300 enemy soldiers and officers apiece.¹⁶⁰ In a letter home, Natasha Kovshova described her motivation as a sniper in the following manner:

My hatred for the cursed fascist beast grows stronger everyday, with every battle...I will shoot the vermin point blank. I will pump bullet after bullet into their foul skulls, stuffed with insane thoughts about our Moscow and of ruling over us, a free, proud, and bold people.¹⁶¹

Their dedication to their work and to their survival made their individual achievements possible. The most successful of the female snipers was Private Lyudmila Pavlichenko, who in three months of fighting at Odessa recorded 187 kills. In May 1942, she was cited by the Southern Red Army Council for having killed 257 German soldiers. Her personal total amounted to 309

¹⁵⁵ Engel, *Women In Russia 1700-2000*, 217-218.

¹⁵⁶ Merridale, *Ivan’s War*, 241.

¹⁵⁷ Engel, *Women In Russia 1700-2000*, 217-218.

¹⁵⁸ Ivanova, *Khrabreishie iz prekrasnykh*, 150-54, as cited in Markwick, “Totalitarianism”, 9.

¹⁵⁹ Lester W. Grau and Charles Q. Cutshaw, “Russian Snipers in the Mountains and Cities of Chechnya”, *Professional Forum*, retrieved from <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/report/2002/snipers.pdf> on 11 November 2005.

¹⁶⁰ Engel, *Women In Russia 1700-2000*, 216.

¹⁶¹ Kovshova, N. Unpublished letters 30 Jul 1942 and undated, Pisma c fronta iz kollektzii Tsentral’nogo muzeia Vooruzhennykh sil. [Letters from the front from the collection of the Central Museum of the Armed Forces] Tom I, ll. 116, 120, as cited in Markwick, “Totalitarianism”, 11.

enemy forces, including 36 enemy snipers, one of whom had killed more than 500 Soviet snipers according to his kill logbook. Lance Corporal Maria Ivanova Morozova, a sniper with the Soviet 62nd Rifle Battalion, won eleven combat decorations for her success, and Nina Alexetevna Lobkovskaya was credited with 309 kills of her own during the war as well.¹⁶² The Germans, as they had given the 46th Guards regiment the Night Witches nickname, dubbed the Soviet riflemen they met on the Eastern front as “Bolshevik beasts”, “amazons devoid of femininity”, and “ferocious riflemen.”¹⁶³ The Soviet women snipers were highly skilled, and their capabilities as fighters made them a serious threat to the German forces. These women snipers were able to eliminate an impressive number of enemy officers who, no doubt, could have caused considerably more damage had they not been targeted and killed (for example, the enemy sniper who had killed over 500 Soviet snipers). Just as a directive was issued among the German troops to kill any and all commissars that they encountered, *Wehrmacht* directives either authorized or required the German army (and also the police and SS) to execute these women immediately; “no quarter was to be given to the captured ... ‘Jewish rifle woman’”, so very few were taken prisoner.¹⁶⁴ Even if these women were captured, they were subject to violations and atrocities while being imprisoned that made being executed seem a better option. This explains why many Soviet women combatants saved their last bullets for themselves, and only 500 (of

the original 2,000) women Soviet snipers survived the war.¹⁶⁵

This *Wehrmacht* directive also applied to women partisans. Women involved in World War II often acted as partisans, causing considerable trouble for the Nazi supply line and non-front line forces. Soviet women were particularly suited for partisan work near the beginning of the war because they could move about more easily than men could, as messengers and scouts, and it was one of the only places in the early phases of war in which the women were allowed to directly take up arms. A total of 28,500 women became *partizanki*, representing 9.8 percent of the total partisan forces.¹⁶⁶ Women, in addition to serving in partisan forces, were able to take on leadership roles as partisans because of their abilities to move around. In 1941, Soviet woman Liza Ivanova organized and led a group of sixty-eight men and women guerillas in Russia. On 19 June 1944, as part of a first wave of attacks, partisan units began a systematic assault on the web of German communications; they were able to destroy 1,000 transports and cripple the German supply and redeployment systems. These ground attacks were then followed on 21 June by air attacks, and some of the bombing strikes were carried out by the women flying night raids in biplanes.¹⁶⁷

While Soviet women’s initial involvement in fighting for the Soviet Union as partisans constituted such large numbers of behind-the-scenes forces, the involvement of women on the frontlines increased as well. Of the million Soviet women (including partisans) who served in the military of the Soviet Union, over half served at the front at any given time; Soviet women are

¹⁶² Thomas W. Bruher, *Lyudmila Pavlichenko: The Greatest Woman Sniper* from <http://www.snipersparadise.com/history/pavlichenk.htm> on 14 November 2005.

¹⁶³ Markwick, “Totalitarianism”, 12.

¹⁶⁴ Markwick, “Totalitarianism”, 13.

¹⁶⁵ Aleksievich, *U voiny*, 129, as cited in Markwick, “Totalitarianism”, 13.

¹⁶⁶ Engel, *Women In Russia 1700-2000*, 213; Markwick, “Totalitarianism”, 9.

¹⁶⁷ Richard Overy, *Russia’s War*, 241.

credited as being the only female combatants in World War II who fought outside their own borders.¹⁶⁸ The Soviet women on the frontlines, or *frontovichki*,¹⁶⁹ were active quite early. Women machine-gunners were among those who defended Kiev in September 1941, and a women's militia battalion took part in the defense of Odessa.¹⁷⁰ In 1943, 8 percent of the Red Army overall consisted of Soviet women, and the bulk of these were serving on what was called the "second front." This second front, while consisting of medical services and supply and logistics operations, was often considered a combat front because of the nature of the fighting in the war (as earlier described).¹⁷¹ By 1945, there were 246,000 women in uniform fighting at the front lines, and some sources claim that over the course of the war, 70 percent of the 800,000 Soviet women who served in the Red Army (about 560,000 women) served on the front lines at some point.¹⁷² The presence of women on the front lines made a considerable difference in the amount of effort and force with which the Red Army was able to hold the Nazis for the majority of the war in the Eastern Theatre.

WHY SOVIET WOMEN WENT OUT WHILE GERMAN WOMEN STAYED IN

There are a number of reasons given by various authors on the subject as to why Soviet women were ultimately given the opportunity to enlist to fight in World War II. Colonel Zhuravlev, a General of Artil-

lery, wrote that the Central Committee of the Communist Party justified the recruitment of women in two ways: it would answer the women's demands to serve, and it would free men to go to the front line.¹⁷³ The first explanation is supported by Markwick, who states that "under mass pressure," resolutions mobilizing Soviet women to the air force, military transport, and communications positions were passed.¹⁷⁴ However, this explanation makes the decision a public relations exercise to win popular favor. This idea is harshly criticized by many scholars, the main argument being that it, unlike a public relations stunt, was not carefully planned, had no official policy for recruitment, and employed no strong propaganda urging women to enlist (as there had been for women to take up industrial and economically-beneficial work).¹⁷⁵

The second explanation seems slightly more feasible. By the end of 1941, more than four million of the original 5 million men serving on the Soviet front had been killed or captured, so in 1942 the government made a concerted effort to "compensate for the hemorrhaging of the routed Red Army."¹⁷⁶ In that year, the recruitment of women was said to have very specific replacement goals. Women were to replace eight of ten men in antiaircraft artillery, three of five men in machine gun crews, and varying numbers for other positions; basically, this would free a majority of the rear forces to go serve on the front.¹⁷⁷ For example, by March 1942, 100,000 women from the *Komsomol* were called up and formed crews on the anti-aircraft guns.¹⁷⁸

¹⁶⁸ Pennington, *Wings, Women, and War*, 1.

¹⁶⁹ Markwick, "Totalitarianism", 1.

¹⁷⁰ Engel, *Women In Russia 1700-2000*, 215.

¹⁷¹ Fiesler, 'Zhenshchiny na voine', 11, 14, as cited in Markwick, "Totalitarianism", 9.

¹⁷² Overy, *Russia's War*, 241-242; information retrieved from <http://www.lothene.demon.co.uk/others/women20.html> on 12 November 2005.

¹⁷³ Pennington, *Wings, Women, and War*, 56.

¹⁷⁴ Murmanseva, *Sovietskie zhenshchiny*, 122, as cited in Roger D. Markwick, "Totalitarianism", 7.

¹⁷⁵ Reina Pennington, *Wings, Women, and War*, 2-3.

¹⁷⁶ Seniavskaia, *1941-1945 Frontovoe pokolenie*, 77, as cited in Markwick, "Totalitarianism", 6.

¹⁷⁷ Pennington, *Wings, Women, and War*, 56-57.

¹⁷⁸ Mawdsley, *Thunder in the East*, 214.

Nevertheless, this second explanation has its shortcomings as well. At the time that the women's air force regiments were created in 1941, there was absolutely no shortage of manpower. By September of that year, the Soviets had lost over 7,500 aircraft, but the majority of those aircraft had been destroyed on the ground, and the pilots were not killed. Even before the war, for each trained female pilot there were at least two or three male pilots on reserve status and available for duty.¹⁷⁹ It is also argued that boosting morale was a factor in enlisting Soviet women, although Pennington argues that it was not a main goal.¹⁸⁰ Conversely, Markwick asserts that "Stalin's prime motivation for deploying women flyers was to boost male military morale."¹⁸¹ Soviet women's presence in the armed forces had the added effect of improving the soldiers' hygiene.

We can see why desperation for troops is an incomplete explanation by looking at the Nazi regime as an example. While Soviet and Nazi ideologies differed somewhat, both can be looked at under a similar light as both are fairly extremist in their ideologies; they are perceived to have had very rigid expectations and duties for their citizens. They actually have many important similarities. Both Nazi and Soviet ideologies called for expansion of territory (while Hitler's desire for *lebensraum* was one of his driving forces in World War II, Stalin had no intentions of expansion beyond the Baltic States; his only expansionist dreams involved the expansion of communism, not of the borders of the Soviet Union); both hoped to exercise complete control over their citizens and their citizens' lives; both valued an ideal race or society. While the two regimes had similar goals,

they had almost entirely different approaches to reaching those goals. Their difference in approach helps to explain their differing views of a woman's role in war. Both the Nazis and Soviets suffered great losses in their armed forces. However, one regime allowed women in combat while the other limited their work to industry at most. So lack of troops cannot fully explain either regime's motivation in their treatment of women.

Ultimately, it was a difference in ideology or in the way their ideology was implemented. The Nazi leaders argued that "valuable" men and "valuable" women were of equal worth—that they were *gleichwertig aber nicht gleichartig*, or "equivalent but different."¹⁸² While the Soviet regime meant equal in duties and responsibilities, the Nazi regime wanted to draw a strong distinction between the sexes with little to no room for crossover. Hitler said, "In my state, the mother is the most important citizen."¹⁸³ While Soviets encouraged women to educate their children with Soviet principles, the Nazi regime took that a step further. Instead of being *a* goal, being a good Nazi wife and mother was *the* goal; there was nothing higher. Women in the Nazi regime were to produce more of the Aryan race and to provide for the men and children so that they could be the best Aryans possible.

Hitler's sentiment was reflected in all of his policies. While other countries at the time had bans on abortion, Germany's was the only one that was extremely harsh; a woman who received an abortion, or anyone who helped her receive one, could be imprisoned for five years or, after 1943, could be "executed for impairing the 'vitality of the German Volk'."¹⁸⁴ Hitler publicly stated

¹⁷⁹ Pennington, *Wings, Women, and War*, 57.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid*, 65-69.

¹⁸¹ Markwick, "Totalitarianism", 7.

¹⁸² Stephenson, *Women in Nazi Germany*, 19.

¹⁸³ Cate Haste, *Nazi Women: Hitler's Seduction of a Nation* (London: Channel 4 Books, 2001), 74.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 89.

that if a country's birth rate decreased, then the highest accomplishments of a people would be decimated, "because the most valuable forces are not first- or second-born."¹⁸⁵ While Stalin felt that the Soviet State could only be strengthened if all citizens (including women) were full participants in the state, Hitler did not consider women to be capable of basically any kind of political participation. A woman should be inculcated with Nazi ideology, and she did have the power to sway her husband and children to act in accordance with that ideology.

The Nazis despised Bolshevism for many reasons, not the least of which was the radical change it offered in women's status as early as 1917. Soviet gender policy became yet another scapegoat for Germany's ills.¹⁸⁶ Hitler felt that "intellect plays no role" in a woman's thought process because she, no matter how intelligent, "cannot separate reason from feeling."¹⁸⁷ For this reason, as well as Hitler's personal feelings on the subject, women played essentially no part in the Nazi state, at least politically. From the time that the Nazi Party was founded in 1921, women were denied any position of power in its hierarchy; they could be members, but certainly not leaders. In fact, the only reference to women in the Nazi Party's programme was in Point 21, which pledged "protection for mothers."¹⁸⁸ Women were steadily excluded from most of public life under the Nazi regime as well. They were not eligible for promotions of any kind—even in education, women were removed from the higher levels of the school system; female judges and lawyers were dismissed or disbarred altogether, while the Women

Lawyers Association was dissolved.¹⁸⁹ The idea was, once again, that women who worked were depriving men of jobs and hence failing in their womanly duty to the *Volk*.¹⁹⁰

The only way in which Hitler utilized women before or during World War II was in industry, and only then out of sheer desperation. Hitler was hesitant to employ women during the war. He felt that the Nazi woman had become a "work machine" as a result of World War I, and he felt that a major goal of the Nazi party should be to "restore [the Nazi woman] to her true profession—motherhood."¹⁹¹ But the labor shortage of the late 1930s demanded that more and more women be allowed into the workforce. Only under that immense economic pressure were women encouraged to participate in the state. Between 1935 and 1937, there was a substantial increase in the number of women working in German industry (from 1,463,000 to 1,749,000).¹⁹² However, the number of women in industry leveled off after that point and would never rise more than 6 percent annually. The number of German women in employment "hardly increased at all" during the war, despite the shortage of labor.¹⁹³ The Nazis even launched a massive campaign from 1939 to 1940, led by the German magazine *NS-Frauenwarte*, to encourage women to take paid employment or to work as volunteers.¹⁹⁴ In 1939, women comprised 37 percent of the German workforce; by the end of the war, that figure had risen to 51 percent. But one must bear in mind the large number of non-German female forced laborers "employed" in Germany, who raise the statistic substantially.¹⁹⁵ It can be

¹⁸⁵ Weinberg, *Hitler's Second Book*, 237.

¹⁸⁶ Stephenson, *Women in Nazi Germany*, 6.

¹⁸⁷ Haste, *Nazi Women*, 73.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 83.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 84.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 79.

¹⁹² Stephenson, *Women in Nazi Germany*, 53.

¹⁹³ Dear, *The Oxford Companion*, 1278.

¹⁹⁴ Stephenson, *Women in Nazi Germany*, 103.

¹⁹⁵ Overy, *The Dictators*, 508.

inferred, then, that more women chose to volunteer than work in industry. Nazi ideology, while teaching women that men ought to work and women ought not, did not leave German women much choice in the matter.

In German industry, we see an example of lack of resources driving Hitler to turn to women to fill the positions he needed to keep his war machine in motion. However, this never extended into combat. Despite his desperation for troops, especially after the Normandy invasions of 1944, Hitler never engaged women in any sort of combat. Nazi women were permitted to wear military uniforms when they volunteered for auxiliary service, but they could not serve in combat situations; the only exceptions made to this rule were in anti-aircraft defenses and as “signals staff” with the front line formations outside of Germany.¹⁹⁶ Otherwise, women could not contribute directly to the war effort.

Even in desperation, Hitler and the Nazi regime refused to employ women in war because it was against their ideology to do so. Hitler’s views on race and eugenics also played a major role. Women were suited for certain activities and duties, but they could not perform in the same ways that men could. Women were critical to producing the next generation, arguably moreso than men. Therefore, women had to be protected at all costs, and participating in combat would certainly serve to undermine that goal. By contrast, the Soviet Union’s and Stalin’s encouragement of women to contribute to the war effort was justified by Marxist ideology. It is true that the Soviet forces suffered heavy casualties, putting them in need of forces. But the idea that this was the only factor in allowing women to fight seems a gross overgeneralization.

It seems that the most significant explanation of why Soviet women were ultimately allowed in combat lies in Soviet ideology. Soviet ideology encouraged the non-distinctness of members of society. It ultimately strove to treat each citizen equally. The ultimate goal of true Marxism was complete equality in the sense that there was no personal property. In trying to achieve this end, regimes with a basis in Marxism were at least theoretically obliged to treat their citizens equally—be that equally poorly or equally well. By treating citizens equally, citizens would come to view one another truly as comrades in the Motherland, and personal property (or anything “personal”) would become a non-issue. If all property is public, and all citizens view one another as equals, then it follows that each citizen has an equal duty to protect and to strengthen the public property. Each member of the state has some kind of vested interest in the state by virtue of being a citizen. It follows from Soviet ideology, then, that women not only *can* participate in the defense of the Motherland, but that they *ought to* do so. It is admirable, patriotic, and good to be a full citizen in that way.

Nevertheless, not even ideology explains the success of the Soviet policies regarding women. Markwick’s assertion that the Soviets allowed women to fight “under mass pressure”, while not widely accepted, leads us to an explanation about why the policy was successful. Many policies in keeping with Soviet ideology were not popular. For example, Stalin’s attempts to collectivize agriculture with the *kolkhoz* and *sovkhos* was met with firm opposition from farmers. Those on collective farms did not conform to the Soviet plan.¹⁹⁷ But their resistance generally went unpunished by the state since the war drew the state’s attention

¹⁹⁶ Gordon Williamson, *World War II: German Women’s Auxiliary Services* (UK: Osprey Publishing Limited, 2003), 4.

¹⁹⁷ Mawdsley, *The Stalin Years*, 46.

elsewhere. However, the *success* of the Soviet policies regarding women (rather than the policies themselves) has quite a bit to do with popular opinion and the “mass pressure” that Markwick speaks of. The Soviet Union’s measure allowing women in combat roles was a genuinely popular measure. Perhaps its popularity has roots Russia’s history of female service in some form (some official, some unofficial) in combat roles. Women were satisfied by finally having the means to fulfill the duties that the Soviet state placed on them—to defend the *rodina* to the best of their means and ability.

We see, then, that it is a combination of ideology and popular opinion that makes women’s involvement in combat in the Soviet Union fairly unique. The Soviet state pursued its ideology further by allowing women, at least in combat and in industry, to be treated equally to men as comrades. In turn, the Soviet women felt a stronger sense of connection to the state, making them more eager and willing to serve their country. The Soviet use of women in combat can actually be seen as an advancement of the goals of the Soviet regime rather than an abandonment of them. It is all the more in keeping with the goals of communism that the policy should be so heartily embraced and hailed by the segment of the population that the policy intended to affect (in this case, women).

CONCLUSION

The advancement of Marxist gender policies died out almost immediately after the war. Stalin set aside his own bias against women for the good of the Soviet state, but he could not quite allow for the real equality of citizens called for by true Marxism after the war. While Stalin’s propaganda during the war encouraged men to accept active

women citizens, the Soviet citizens were still slow to accept the idea of women being fully involved in the state, and Stalin’s propaganda soon changed. Women were subject to great amounts of criticism and distrust, even among allegedly good comrades of the Motherland. Since women were suspected of sexual misconduct in the military, any woman who wore the medal for military service (*za boevye zaslugi*) was said to have received it instead for sexual service (*za polevye zaslugi*).¹⁹⁸ As combatants, women were “objects of suspicion, aliens, in a misogynistic universe” known as war.¹⁹⁹

Large numbers of Soviet men hated or resented the women at home as well. Women civilians who wrote to the men at war increasingly told stories about hunger, rape, and death in the Motherland, a sharp blow to the soldiers’ morale.²⁰⁰ The Soviet woman at home was depicted as a strong, determined, beautiful woman who showed no signs of wearing in wartime. However, as the war ended, the real Soviet women were not able to match up to the soldiers’ dreams.²⁰¹ Soviet women at home, likewise, were disappointed when the soldiers returned; they resented the army that had “abandoned them to the Germans” for such a long stretch of time.²⁰²

The postwar period brought women back to many of the same traditional roles held before the war. On 22 June 1949, the Ministry for Transport and Mechanical Engineering issued the following statement regarding women in Soviet industry:

...the use of women’s labour in occupations which make particularly heavy demands on health is a con-

¹⁹⁸ Merridale, *Ivan’s War*, 241.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 315.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 317.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, 367.

sequence of wartime, in which patriotic women replaced the men of their homeland and took on all tasks, in order to help the front and ensure victory over the enemy.²⁰³

Once the war was over, this rationale no longer applied. As Ilić notes, the obstacle was no longer how to incorporate women into the workplace, but rather the deeply-rooted gender roles that had been held before the war.²⁰⁴ Women were not completely removed from industry. Stalin's fourth Five Year Plan (1946-1950) had ambitious goals, making women's contribution even more important.

There was no decline in the proportion and numbers of women in employment after the war. In 1950, women comprised 47 percent of the Soviet workforce as a whole; prewar levels were only 38.4 percent.²⁰⁵ This statistic, however, can also be seen as the result of huge numbers of men being killed during the war and women having to replace them. However, the roles they were allowed to assume in their contribution were strictly limited, and Soviet propaganda tried to encourage women away from the positions they had held during the war. Pressure was placed on managers to improve working conditions for women. This proved difficult because pregnant or nursing women were prohibited from working at night, and long hours of operation in factories were necessary to meet the goals of the Five Year Plan. Case managers, at the same time, refused to allow pregnant women to transfer to easier jobs.²⁰⁶ Dialogue concerning what to do with women in industry after the men returned from war occurred less often than dialogue concerning how to get women out

of industry. The discussion between the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Economic Affairs went from determining which jobs were safe for women to using the need to protect women workers as the grounds for their exclusion from the workplace.²⁰⁷

While being expected, on one hand, to "surrender [responsible and well-paid] positions to demobilized men,"²⁰⁸ the state began again to encourage women turn their attention to housework as well. Literature after the war assigned women to the task of "healing their damaged men."²⁰⁹ In order to restore men's self-esteem and faith in their manliness, images began to appear depicting wives welcoming their mutilated or traumatized husbands and fiancés home from war.²¹⁰ This provided men with the hope that life would slowly return to normal, and at the same time, it gave women a new purpose in a different direction from the purpose they had served in the war years.

The Soviet state designed its policies around reshaping the postwar society. Material and moral incentives were offered in order to encourage Soviets to increase the birthrate. In July of 1944, the USSR Supreme Soviet issued a decree that state aid would be increased for pregnant women, mothers with many children, and unmarried mothers; that measures for the protection of mothers and children would be strengthened; the title of "Heroine Mother" would be established; and the order of "Motherhood Glory" would be instituted with the "Motherhood Medal."²¹¹ Practically every woman was viewed as an actual or potential mother.²¹² The idea of motherhood and working in the home was overwhelmingly

²⁰³ Ilić, *Women in the Stalin Era*, 226.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

²⁰⁵ Ibid, 228.

²⁰⁶ Ibid, 226.

²⁰⁷ Ibid, 227.

²⁰⁸ Engel, *Women in Russia*, 228.

²⁰⁹ Ibid, 225.

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹ Ilić, *Women in the Stalin Era*, 277.

²¹² Ibid, 228.

emphasized by the state. But it is actually commonly accepted among historians that women did not regard the division of labor as unjust.²¹³ Women did draw the line, however, at bearing the number of children desired by the state. Many women refused to have large numbers of children because of the absence of basic amenities in the struggling postwar economy, and because state support, while offered, was insufficient.²¹⁴

During the postwar era, women were everywhere encouraged to be softer, more feminine, more traditional. While women's magazines before and during the war prepared women for the possibility of combat and working, women's magazines after the war returned to more traditional topics, offering advice on redecorating the home, general housekeeping, skin care, exercising, gardening, and cooking.²¹⁵ Simultaneously, images of the "untiring heroine worker" and Soviet woman patriot faded into the background.²¹⁶ But the Soviet heroine was not independently heroic to begin with. Soviet heroines were often completely dependent on the state to validate their authority; heroines rarely occupied positions of political power or any sort of strategic party positions.²¹⁷ The heroines' claim to fame was dependent on the fact that they "engaged in occupations traditionally reserved for men."²¹⁸ The Soviet heroine had always been temporary, so the Soviet Union in the postwar period could return its focus to creating the ideal communist state. The emphasis could now be on contributing *appropriately* to the good of the state, rather than just contributing *period*.

²¹³ Engel, *Women in Russia*, 229.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 225.

²¹⁶ Ilić, *Women in the Stalin Era*, 228.

²¹⁷ Choi Chatterjee in Ilić, *Women in the Stalin Era*, 64.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*

Stalin, in effect, moved towards true Marxism during the war, and then abandoned that development in the postwar period in favor of his own policies and principles. He began to allow for gender equality because of a number of motivations, and his policies had a pure Marxist aura to them. But Stalin was ultimately driven more forcefully by his own opinions—perhaps thinking himself greater than his predecessor Lenin—and felt it better than women be left to duties of home life. In any case, the involvement of Soviet women in World War II should be considered extremely significant both for the Soviet regime and for the war effort overall.

Only recently have the women of the former Soviet Union been receiving positive attention for their efforts during World War II. This is largely due to the suppression of important documents and records pertaining to the women by the Soviet Union. The postwar rush to return women to what were considered their proper gender roles²¹⁹ was a catalyst in allowing their stories to fade into the background of history. Nevertheless, even by looking only at statistics, it is certainly not difficult to grasp the extent to which women are an absolutely necessary factor in the Red Army's ability to ward off the Nazi forces. At the height of female participation near the end of 1943, more than 800,000 women served in the armed forces and partisan units. By the end of the war, more than one million women had served in some form in the Red Army, and these women fought on every front and in all branches. Soviet women constituted 8 percent of the military personnel overall.²²⁰ If one were to take the Soviet women entirely out of the equation—to reduce the

²¹⁹ Pennington, *Wings, Women, and War*, 153-160.

²²⁰ K. J. Cottam, "Soviet Women in WWII: The Ground Forces and the Navy," *International Journal of Women's Studies* 3, no. 4 (1980), 345, as cited in Engel, *Women In Russia 1700-2000*, 215.

Red Army by 8 percent of its personnel—and replay World War II without their presence in any way, it is almost certain that Soviet line never would have held, that German forces would then have been free to move their concentration back to the west, and that the war would have ended with an entirely different outcome.

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