

Soviet Women fighting for their Rodina

By Christopher Araimo

As the summer of 1942 rolled on, the 1077th Anti-Aircraft Regiment of the Red Army was posted on the western outskirts of the key city of Stalingrad. This unit was composed of grammar school age girls and some college age women. While the British used women in an AA role during the early years, these units were almost never on the front line compared to the 1077th. As the women of the 1077th began their morning, preparing to face that day's onslaught from the air, as they were targeted relentlessly by German dive bombers with greater frequency in what was the lead up to what was about to happen. Over the horizon came Hitler's mighty blitzkrieg, its goal was a direct order from the Fuhrer himself, to destroy the city bearing the name of his enemy, Stalingrad. The 1077th were the only units in the immediate line of advance of the German Panzer tanks. The women did not flee, they did not surrender as they knew that fate for them was worse for death, they lowered their AA guns to their maximum depression and began opening fire on the leading Panzers, even though their weapons were in no way designed, nor had they been trained, to combat tanks.

Despite being under intense fire, and hopelessly outgunned, the Soviets manning the guns fought to the last. This stunned the Germans who traded "shot for shot" with them. As part of the Nazi propaganda movement, Germans had been taught that all the people to the East, the Slavs, were what was called "Untermensch" meaning "under" or "sub" human. How could these lesser men fight so ferociously and by all accounts bravely. As they looked over the corpses, the Germans were even more shocked.¹ And thus, the first heroes to die protecting the most vital city

¹ Anthony Beever, *Stalingrad: The Fateful Siege: 1942-1943* (New York: Viking-Penguin Books, 1999), 106-108.

in the Soviet Union short of Moscow, were teenage girls, and they would not be the last. Across the Soviet Union at the time, many women were trying to find a way to fight with a rifle or to serve as combat medics on the frontline. Others were being recruited to form three special all women air wings of the Soviet Air Force. Having been lobbying since the start of Operation Barbarossa and the early days of The Great Patriotic War for combat roles, young college age women from all parts of the Soviet Union, wanting to protect their Motherland were now in the foxholes and cockpits, ready to fight.

This thesis paper will examine the hurdles women overcame to be able to serve and the ones they faced while they did so, examine why the Soviets did adopt them into the army, and most importantly, what made these women enlist with such enthusiasm and force, and go on to perform admirably?

My answer to the prior questions posed, which I will argue in this paper was that as a result of the prewar years cultural changes, women had a feeling of more equal footing to men in the USSR than other nations, this combined with a kind of nationalism unique to Russia, inspired many women to take to the front and fight alongside men to protect their Motherland as they were just as capable, willing, and determined as the men, if not more so.

Up until Gorbachev's détente and the collapse of the Soviet Union, not many scholars have been able to really study the history of this topic and hear the real story from those who were still alive about their unvarnished experiences. Up until this point only what all aligned with the Soviet vision of the post war time was allowed to be printed. This image was of Soviet women as taking care of their husband or male relative who fought in the War, and to reproduce to help make up for the massive casualties the Soviet Union suffered. This began right from the end of the War, with the famous quote "do not speak of the services you rendered, let others do it

for you, that will be better” given by President Kalinin to a group of demobilizing women pilots.² As we will see however, no one spoke for them. It was the collapse of the Soviet Union that really opened this under studied field for scholars. Since then, there have been many primary source accounts told by these women, and scholarly work done in the now somewhat opened military archives in modern Russia. In writing about Soviet women and their experiences in combat during World War Two, or, as many of them still call it, The Great Patriotic War, I found the following three books to be the most helpful and insightful on the topic in terms of providing primary source material. The first is a compilation of first-hand oral accounts from women who served in all capacities, written by Nobel Prize in literature winner Svetlana Alexievich, *The Unwomanly Face of War: An Oral History of Women in World War II*.³ It has only been translated into English in the last five years. The second work is a memoir, also originally published in Russian and recently translated to English, *Lady Death: The Memoirs of Stalin’s Sniper*.⁴ This is an autobiographical memoir from Lyudmila Pavlichenko, who was a Soviet sniper during the War and had over three hundred kills. Lastly, there is Reina Pennington’s book *Wings, Women, & War: Soviet Airwomen in World War II Combat*.⁵ It combines first-hand accounts given by women who served, with her own commentary and observations. Probably the most eminent of these scholars, Dr. Pennington, holds a Ph.D. in the field of Russian history and a certificate in women’s studies from the University of South Carolina and teaches the subject at the University of Norwich. It is an excellent primary source, with important commentary by one

² Reina Pennington, “‘Do not speak of the services you rendered’: Women Veterans of Aviation in the Soviet Union.” *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 9, no.1 (1996), 143.

³ Svetlana Alexievitch, *The Unwomanly Face of War: An Oral History of Women in World War II*. Translated by Richard Pevear, and Larissa Volokhonsky. New York City, New York: Random House, 2018.

⁴ Lyudmilla Pavlichenko, *Lady Death: The Memoirs of Stalin’s Sniper*. Translated by Martin David Foreman. Barnsley, South Yorkshire, UK. Greenhill Books, 2018.

⁵ Reina Pennington, *Wings, Women, and War: Soviet Airwomen in World War II Combat*. Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2001.

of the top scholars in the field and probably the most cited scholar in this thesis, as she has written numerous articles in this field for academic journals in addition to her book. Another highly regarded scholar on this topic, who has worked with Dr. Pennington as they are among the few in this field, is Dr. Roger R. Reese who got his Ph.D. from the University of Texas and is the Director of Graduate Studies and Professor who specializes in Social and Military History of the Soviet Union at Texas A&M. He has written multiple books and journal articles about Russian and Soviet Union military history, among them *Why Stalin's Soldiers Fought: The Red Army's Military Effectiveness in World War II*.⁶ In this work are two chapters dedicated to discussing the role of women in combat during that time. There is also the excellent work, *Soviet Women on the Frontline in the Second World War* which was written by Roger D. Marwick, a professor of Modern European history at the University of Newcastle, Australia, and his writing partner on this book Dr. Euridice Charon Cardona also of the University of Newcastle.⁷ What is great about these three scholarly works is that they all tell a unique aspect of the war while bringing their own views based on their scholarly research of why these women did what they did and achieved the success they did, to each work.

On Sunday, June 22nd, 1941, Nazi Germany launched Operation Barbarossa, a massive invasion of the Soviet Union. Despite warnings from the United States, Great Britain, and their own spies in Nazi Germany and Japan, this took Soviet High Command completely by surprise. Almost two years earlier in August 1939, the Foreign Ministers of each nation met and signed the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, named for the two men, which was a pact of non-aggression

⁶ Reese, Roger, *Why Stalin's soldiers fought: The Red Army's military effectiveness in World War II*. Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1996.

⁷ Roger Marwick and Euridice Charon Cardona, *Soviet Women on the Frontline in the Second World War*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

between the two politically hostile nations. Stalin and his ministers could not believe Hitler would violate the pact so quickly and went into a depression, leading Foreign Minister Molotov to have to tell the nation. Stalin finally addressed his panicked nation on July 3rd and put aside the struggle of communism, which many of the people of the Soviet Union associated with the Red Terror and fear. Not many were willing to fight for the country, and in the western states, like Ukraine, the Nazis had been welcomed as liberators. Knowing this, Stalin instead addressed the people of the nation as “brothers and sisters,” calling it “A Great Patriotic War” and one that “all people” must respond to (Find Footnote). His speech was galvanizing to the nation, among them many women who wanted greatly to protect the Motherland. A great example of this is an account provided by Elena Antonovna Kudina, who was a private and driver in the war, about her family’s reaction to the speech.

“But when Stalin began to speak ... He addressed us: “Brothers and sisters ...” Then everybody forgot their grievances ... We had an uncle sitting in a labor camp, mama’s brother, a railroad worker, had been arrested at work ... You know who arrested him? The NKVD ... Our beloved uncle, and we knew he wasn’t guilty of anything. We believed it. He was decorated after the Civil War ... But after Stalin’s speech Mama said: “We’ll defend the Motherland and sort it out later.” Everybody loved the Motherland. I ran to the recruiting office at once. I had angina, I still had a high temperature. But I couldn’t wait ...”⁸

Unfortunately for Kudina, in the early stages of the war, Women were not allowed into armed and dangerous roles. It was thought even in the more socially equal socialist state of the Soviet Union that men were still meant to be the soldiers. The Stalinist State did consider women to have an important role in the country, at least based on the Country’s latest Constitution.

Marwick points this out, as well as the unique burden and responsibilities during the thirties and war years, in his contribution in the academic journal, *The Palgrave handbook of women and gender in twentieth-century Russia and the Soviet Union*. He writes about the constitution and

⁸ Alexievitch, *The Unwomanly Face of War*, 22.

the state, “Article 122 of the December 1936 ‘Stalin’ Constitution granted women ‘equal rights with men in all spheres of economic, state, cultural, social, and political life’. The explicit assumption was that the Soviet Stat was now a socialist state that could provide the material wherewithal for women’s emancipation from the burden’s of domestic women and motherhood.” And “Henceforth, the ‘model of womandhood’ prosyletised in women’s magazine ‘combined pre-revolutionary traditions, including the Orthodox Church’s emphasis on the sanctity of motherhood and the literary trope of the strong self-sacrificing Russian peasant woman’. The centrality of the family and motherhood meshed with the discursive reconfiguration of the 1930s of the Soviet Union as the Soviet motherland, as *rodina-mat* (literally: motherland-mother). When war came, *rodina-mat* resonated with Stalin’s call for women on the homefront to give their all to the military struggle.”⁹ We will see this feeling of mothers of the motherland in many of the testimonies provided like the one above as well as others such as the next one which shows the youthful determination the younger generation had that in a way romanticized war. As Sergeant Major Elena Pavlovna Yakovleva recounted: “We went to the recruiting office time after time ... And when we came yet again, after I don’t know how many times, the commissar almost threw us out “If you had at least some profession. If you were nurses, drivers ... What are you able to do? What will you do at the front?” But we didn’t understand him. This question had never presented itself to us: what will we do? We wanted to go to war, that’s all.”¹⁰ The Soviet Union however did press them into many roles in factories from the outset to help rebuild the Army that would be shattered over the next six months materially and in terms of manpower. It was only when the staggering number of casualties came in from the early stages of the defense

⁹ Roger Marwick, “The Motherland Calls: Soviet Women in the Great Patriotic War, 1941-1945,” *The Palgrave handbook of women and gender in twentieth-century Russia and the Soviet Union*, no.1 (2018): 218-219. <https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-54905-1>

¹⁰ Alexievitch, *The Unwomanly Face of War*, 26.

of the Motherland, did women finally start to gain leverage in trying to achieve more important and, in their mind, impactful, roles. As Dr. Reese states with numbers “Initially, in June and July 1941, the Red Army rejected female volunteers; only weeks later when it was clear that the war would be a long one, did it begin to accept their applications. Female applicants, some of whom had been turned away by the army, deluged the *opolchenie* (local combat divisions) and other volunteer units which accepted them by the tens of thousands. By the eighteenth day of the war, 10 July 1941, nearly 200,000 women had volunteered for the *opolchenie*.”¹¹ These women, despite the hardships and cruelties under the Stalinist State, still wanted to do whatever they could to protect the Motherland, and felt they were just as capable as their male relatives and friends who were out there dying already. They would go on to serve in these over the next few years of the war as the situation got more dire for the country, and this paper will lay out all those ways they served and the chronology behind each of the ways they were able to break through in a particular field of soldiery. It will then discuss the ways they were treated during the war, both by their allies and the Nazis, as well as their life after the war and how their experience as veterans was noticeably worse and lesser regarded than that of the men who had served.

As Professor Marwick and Dr. Cardona state at the beginning of their section on Soviet nurses, “Women nurses and doctors were the acceptable feminine face of the Soviet Union at war.”¹² It helped fit the image of what Stalin wanted most women to be, the caretakers of the nation, mothers and healers. Couple this with the mass influx of anywhere from 16-year-old girls to college aged women in wanting to serve and they would go on to make up a large part of the medical corp. According to the statistics provided in a chart by Prof. Marwick and Dr. Cardona, of Red Army medical personnel women comprised 43% of surgeons, 46% of doctors, 57%

¹¹ Reese, *Why Stalin's soldiers fought*, 267-268.

¹² Marwick and Cardona, *Soviet Women on the Frontline in the Second World War*, 56.

medical assistants, 100% nurses, and 40% paramedics.¹³ This is what led to the marked separation in roles that women had in the Soviet Union as opposed to other nations. Many of these roles were not filled by women in other armies, and the role of the nurse was drastically different. Before the war, the Soviet Union employed many women in medical jobs to begin with, and women were often seen as healers of the nation, so they had the knowledge to do the job. Couple that with the severe shortage of men after the horrendous losses at the start of Operation Barbarossa, and the need to have every man available in a fighting role and you can see how women were called upon for that role almost immediately. The difference however with the nursing in the Red Army is that nurses were often given weapons to defend themselves as they were on the frontlines rescuing the troops wounded in action and bringing them safely back to friendly territory while under enemy fire. They were expected to use their weapons to defend themselves and their wounded charges, and many were killed in this line of duty, unlike any other nation in the War. It is estimated that 126,000 women who served in the medical field were killed.¹⁴ Yet knowing these risks did nothing to deter the women who wanted to serve and who kept up their fervent push for more roles.

With the realization the War was going to be a long and brutal one, with tremendous defeats accompanied by huge losses in manpower, In March of 1942 the first of many decrees were made to free up women to serve in more auxiliary roles so more men could go to the front. “It authorized the NKO (People’s Commissariat for Defence) to mobilize one hundred thousand “girl-Komsomol members” to replace male soldiers.”¹⁵ Among the jobs they would go into was the role of anti-aircraft gunners. This was a job that the British also used their women for, but

¹³ Marwick and Cardona, *Soviet Women on the Frontline in the Second World War*, 58.

¹⁴ Marwick and Cardona, *Soviet Women on the Frontline in the Second World War*, 66.

¹⁵ David Glantz, *Scraping the Barrel: The military use of Sub-Standard Manpower* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 168.

mostly in mixed units that would only occasionally be deployed across the Island and did suffer casualties, though only in the hundreds. Whereas in the Soviet Union

“There were no limits on what Soviet AA gunners could or were expected to do. To aim, load and fire the guns was to expose the crew to direct attack by enemy aircraft. Soviet women not only did this, suffering death and injury in the process, but in doing so excelled at military tasks that had hitherto been the preserve of men, undoubtedly facilitated by the traditional rigors of manual labor which Soviet women had endured well before the outbreak of war.”¹⁶

Their anti-aircraft batteries were either close to frontlines or protecting key cities that were about to be attacked as well as more industrial ones further inland. But this exposed them to close in bombings from planes and from being overrun by ground forces. As this essay mentioned at the start, one need only look at the heroism of the 1077th anti-aircraft Regiment. They faced direct ground combat that they were ill prepared for, with weapons not designed for the role, and against a superior force with no chance of success. It says something that in Anthony Beevor’s acclaimed book on Stalingrad, during which he talks only in passing about other women during the Battle of Stalingrad, he takes three pages to describe the battle between the 1077th and the enemy Panzers. Their tenacity and dedication to fight to the last is shown in a letter Beevor cites from a German soldier, “It is completely wrong to describe them as ‘soldiers in skirts,’ The Russian women has long been fully prepared for combat duties and to fill any post of which a woman might be capable. Russian soldiers treat these women with great wariness.”¹⁷ This was something not seen in any of the other theaters of war during the Second World War. Also, by this time in the war, most nations involved realized that one of their most effective anti-tank weapons in their respective arsenals were usually their higher velocity anti-aircraft cannons, especially those that could depress their gun elevation to be able to hit tanks. The Soviets and

¹⁶ Marwick and Cardona, *Soviet Women on the Frontline in the Second World War*, 161.

¹⁷ Beevor, *Stalingrad: The Fateful Siege*, 108.

Germans were two who frequently employed this tactic. Knowing this we still see many anti-aircraft roles near the front, which could become de facto anti-tank guns in emergencies were ordered to be crewed by women in Soviet High Command. It seems likely, especially once reports like that of the 1077th came back, that the army brass knew these women might be put into situation like that again and found them to be acceptably suited for it. This especially seems likely the later the War went on, as they now had men able to do the role, but still had these women in the role of anti-air gunners. The women served with distinction even though they had to kill, and they suffered from it just as any man who would serve might, especially in the unique role as an anti-aircraft gunner. Sergeant Vera Borisnova Sapgir was one of them. When recalling her experience of having to kill, she said

“Fortunately, I ... I didn’t see those people, the ones I killed ... But ... All the same ... Now I realize that I killed them. I think about it ... Because ... Because I’m old now. I pray for my soul. I told my daughter that when I die, she should take all my medals and decorations, not to a museum, but to a church. Give them to the priest ... They come to me in my sleep ... The dead ... My dead ... Though I never saw them, they come and look at me. I keep searching with my eyes, maybe someone was only wounded, badly wounded but could still be saved. I don’t know how to put it ... But they’re all dead ...”¹⁸

What really separated Soviet women from those of the other nations, was when they started to take on the role of soldiering and being thrust into a role that had been male dominated for most of history for the first real time. The catastrophic losses of manpower from the early months were originally filled by men from factories, hence why women had taken up the traditional male jobs during the pre-war and wartime years. The State and Central Committee were ambivalent towards the idea of women fighting, while many in the Army were opposed to it, but once large numbers of women began to deluge local Komsomols, which was the youth party headquarters, the Central Committee became open to the idea. What helped them and the

¹⁸ Alexievitch, *The Unwomanly Face of War*, 62.

women was the argument that women had already shown they could handle the traditionally male jobs of heavy factory and anti-aircraft work; thus, why could they not do the male job of soldiering just as well?¹⁹ However conscription was very localized, many of the women who fought as soldiers on the frontline were those who were closest to it, wanted to fight, and were allowed to for necessity. The only real group set up specifically for women infantry, was the Women's Volunteer Rifle Brigade, and was counterproductive to any woman who wanted to see front line combat. It was trained at camps far from the frontlines and was never really intended, despite the enthusiasm of the women there and the fact they were training them, to be a front-line unit. Women would frequently run away from the camps to try to get to the front and see combat while others tried the bureaucratic way to see combat. This can be seen in a letter written by one of the women in the training battalion, Trainee Shtyrkova to a male comrade who seems to be a higher up in the military. In part it reads

"I have been in the ranks of the RKKA for 8 months. Now I am in an anti-tank gun training battalion and am learning to be a tank destroyer. However, I am beginning to doubt that we will ever get to the front. I beg you therefore to enlist me in any active unit; but only at the front. There I cannot only save the lives of the wounded but also succeed in destroying fascist tanks. I know exactly what to do and I love my gun."²⁰

In the cities that were on the frontline, women would take up arms and help defend if the situation was dire, and it often was during 1941 through the winter of 1942-3 when the Soviets were often still on the defensive and being pushed back. As Dr. Pennington writes about how one of the women, who fought in the frontline city of Smolensk, was able to become a soldier for the Red Army

"The situation was fluid near the rapidly shifting front line in 1941, where broken and disorganized military units often recruited on the spot. After surviving a German bombing attack in the first weeks of the war, Katiusha Mikhailova went directly to a military headquarters in Smolensk to volunteer for combat duty. She was rejected. Then,

¹⁹ Reese, *Why Stalin's soldiers fought*, 279.

²⁰ Marwick and Cardona, *Soviet Women on the Frontline in the Second World War*, 181.

as the city came under attack, she found the commander of a rifle unit who desperately needed medical staff. She says he gave her a uniform and a rifle, and that was how she joined the Red Army.”²¹

This was an experience that many of the women who fought would go through and it's remarkable how similar the stories are. Often it was through sheer badgering and perseverance, combined with the desperation the male officers were facing, that led to these women joining up. At a time when men at the front were deserting from shell shock and low morale, women were pretty much begging for the chance to serve with a rifle in their hand alongside their male counterparts.

In the areas of the Soviet Union that fell to the Nazis, provided the village wasn't destroyed and its occupants killed or sent to the death camps, a number of women turned to becoming partisan fighters. Some were those who managed to escape the annihilation of their village and join up with other local partisans. They were aided by the fact that they had the greatest weapon on their side, knowledge of the geography and climate of the Motherland. They would handle all sorts of roles for the local partisan groups, including sabotage and espionage, and some would be armed during these missions. The life of a partisan was always hanging in the balance, as if they were discovered, a quick death by gunshot might be the best they could hope for. Even those who survived often had to experience horrors beyond belief, as former partisan Fekla Strui recalled of losing her legs;

“My legs were taken off right there in the forest. The operation took place in the most primitive conditions. I was put on a table to be operated on, there wasn't even any iodine, and my legs were sawn off with an ordinary saw, both legs ... the operation was performed without anesthetic, without anything.”²²

²¹ Reina Pennington, “Offensive Women: Women in Combat in the Red Army in the Second World War” *The Journal of Military History*; Jul 2010; 74, 3; ProQuest Central Essentials .780.

²² Pennington, “Offensive Women: Women in Combat in the Red Army in the Second World War” 797.

Yet still women continued to volunteer with local partisans and even push the men to put them on more dangerous missions.

The biggest field that women achieved success in, at least in ground combat, was, to the surprise of many men, sniping or marksmanship. If we look at the prewar years however, it shouldn't have been all that surprising. In the rural areas, women knew how to hunt just as well as their male counterparts, and hunting in the Russian winter snow is a slow laborious task. Those in the city, especially those in colleges or factory work, both of which were comprised of eighteen- to thirty-year-olds, were often part of shooting clubs through the local Komsomol. This meant that most of the women who were the prime age to fight already had experience with some degree of shooting and marksmanship. Despite this, it was still felt at the time that women were not meant to be snipers. Snipers must have the ability to lay motionless for hours or potentially days, all the while hyper focused on looking for their target. Once they find the target, they must factor in everything from weather to wind direction and speed, to their own breathing and body rhythm, because they only get one shot. Looking through their scopes they will see every detail of their target, before they will have to take the shot to kill them. It is one of the most daunting forms of warfare, some would say requiring the ability to be cold blooded killers, and it was felt women could not handle this role as for those reason. Women however were able to prove their male counterparts wrong during the first year and a half of the War, as they engaged on the ground and were shown to be able to kill. Some were dragooned in frontline cities to be snipers immediately, and they were able to handle it even without formal training, but more importantly they could kill and keep going. They were motivated by every bit as much hatred as their male counterparts towards the Nazis. No doubt, it affected them, but they were able to steel

themselves just like the men. Former sniper Klavdia Grigoryvena Krokhina recalled about her first experience with killing and subsequent justification of it.

“The first time is frightening ... Very frightening ...

We were in hiding, and I was the lookout. And then I noticed one German poking up a little from a trench. I clicked, and he fell. And then, you know, I started shaking all over, I heard my bones knocking. I cried. When I shot at targets it was nothing, but now: I – killed! I killed some unknown man. I knew nothing about him, but I killed him.

Then it passed. And here’s how ... It happened like this ... We were already on the advance. We marched past a small settlement. I think it was in Ukraine. And there by the road we saw a barrack or a house, it was impossible to tell, it was all burned down, nothing left but blackened stones. A foundation ... Many of the girl’s didn’t go close to it, but it was as if something drew me there ... There were human bones among the cinders, with scorched little stars among them; these were our wounded or prisoners who had been burned. After that, however many I killed, I felt no pity. I had seen those blackened little stars ...”²³

These women knew what the horrors of War would entail yet still volunteered for these incredibly dangerous roles and went on to fulfill them with great distinction.

Whilst many women served as snipers, some with notable distinction, there is one woman who is synonymous with the image of the Soviet women sniper, and that is Lyudmilla Pavlichenko. There are two main reasons for this. First was that her 309 confirmed kills were the most by a woman sniper, and second was that she was also one of the few women soldiers from the Soviet Union who was known to the West through Russian propaganda spreading her exploits. She felt the call to serve for the same reason as many. Pavlichenko describes at a point in her memoir, her feeling towards the invading Nazis and how it grew as she saw their atrocities, which was also very similar to the motivation discussed earlier of fear and anger at the Nazis were a very big motivator for these women. She writes

“When I first went to war, I felt only anger at the Germans for disrupting my peaceful life, for attacking us. But what I saw later engendered within me such an inextinguishable hatred that it was difficult to express it in any other way other than a bullet through a Nazi’s heart.

²³ Alexievitch, *The Unwomanly Face of War*, 10.

In one village retaken from the enemy I saw the body of a thirteen-year-old girl. The Nazis had butchered her. That was how they demonstrated their ability to wield a bayonet – the brutes! I saw brains splattered on the walls of a house, and besides it the body of a three-year-old child. Germans had lived in that house. The child had played up and cried, preventing these beasts from getting some rest. They did not even allow the mother to bury her child. The poor women went out of her mind ...”²⁴

This hatred of the Nazis was experienced by many women who saw or heard of the atrocities that were being carried out by the advancing German Army. They knew what their fates may be if their village, town, or city, was overrun. Many women recall similar experiences to Pavlichenko which would cement their hatred of the Germans and further motivate them to try want to kill enemies of the Motherland to protect themselves and their loved ones.

Pavlichenko had taken up shooting during her pre combat years when she worked in a factory, like many women her age, and on the advice of a male colleague. She had a natural ability at it, which combined with the hours she spent on the hobby before the war, led her to have the natural skills required of a sniper. She volunteered and was assigned as a sniper during the start of the Siege of Odessa, during which she married her husband, fellow sniper Alexei Kitsenko, only to have him get killed a few days later. He was wounded badly by a mortar shell, but they kept him alive for four days before he died in her arms.²⁵ This furthered her hatred of the Germans and she promised to kill one hundred fascists in his honor. She was eventually sent from Odessa to Sevastopol to fight in the siege of that city. She describes that siege as “Legendary Sevastopol,” which is the chapter title for that section of her memoir. Her feats of marksmanship and killing had made her very famous within the Red Army, thus when she was wounded during the siege, she was evacuated to Moscow where she would recover but never was sent back to combat as she was a valuable propaganda tool.

²⁴ Pavlichenko, *Lady Death*, 171.

²⁵ Pavlichenko, *Lady Death*, 142.

This led to a remarkable experience for Pavlichenko, after some months helping the Red Army with propaganda, she was taken to meet and asked by Stalin himself to go to America and Canada on a good will tour to rally support. Given her accomplishments, gender, and age, being only college age, she was asked to go along with two other male soldiers, whom she knew. She describes her first meeting with the leader of the Soviet Union,

“We were probably in Stalin’s office for about twenty minutes, although we were unaware of the passing of time. Time stood still for us. Mikhailov introduced us one by one, with me last. Joseph Vissarionovich merely said a few sentences about the responsible mission of the Party and government, the Allies, who were unwilling to open a second front, and the American people, who needed to know the truth about our struggle against Nazism.

‘Do you have any requests comrades?’ he asked.

Krasavchenko and Pchelintsev were in a state of profound paralysis and a pause hung over the office. I was not affected in the same way. I experienced something different: an unprecedented enthusiasm. I wanted to hear words from the supreme commander-in-chief which were addressed specifically to me.

‘Yes, Comrade Stalin, I have a request,’ I said softly. ‘We really need an English-Russian and Russian-English dictionary, with a grammar textbook as well. Because it is important to know your allies well, just like your enemies!’

‘Well said, Comrade Pavlichenko.’ The leader of the world proletariat smiled. ‘You will receive the books. From me personally.’”²⁶

This was an important meeting for Pavlichenko because it established in her a personal connection to Stalin, and they visited again upon her return. It also is a telling because it shows that enthusiasm to serve the Motherland and Comrade Stalin that he invoked across the nation after his earlier mentioned speech and again shows how it was a catalyst for many women to serve. Pavlichenko also describes at a point in her memoir, her feeling towards the invading Nazis, which was also very similar to the motivation discussed earlier of fear and anger at the Nazis were a very big motivator for these women.

Pavlichenko’s visit to the United States was quite remarkable, for after stopping for a night in Miami after flying in from the Soviet Union via a stop in Africa, she and her two

²⁶ Pavlichenko, *Lady Death*, 179.

companions were taken by limo to the White House, where despite the early hour, they were greeted by First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt. The next day they had breakfast, Pavlichenko, her compatriots, the First Lady and some of her invited guests who led various aid campaigns, and some army translators. It was during this breakfast when Eleanor addressed Lyudmila with a question, as Pavlichenko recounted in her memoir.

“Suddenly Eleanor addressed a question to me, and this question was translated into Russian to me by a young man with a lieutenant’s epaulettes: ‘If you had a good view of the faces of your enemies through telescopic sights, but still fired to kill, it would be hard for American woman to understand you, dear Lyudmilla.’

The interpreter tried to soften the force of this sentence somehow. It sounded polite, but had a certain unpleasant undertone. The First Lady looked at me intently, without dropping her gaze. Why had she asked this question was not quite clear. Maybe she had decided to subject me to a test. We had already been told about publications in some British and American newspapers which suggested that we were not frontline soldiers or snipers, but merely Communist propagandists specifically sent to address the international student assembly. This meant that the president’s wife would have to be given a clear and comprehensible answer.

‘Mrs. Roosevelt, we are glad to visit your beautiful, prosperity country. Many years you do not know the wars. Nobody destroys your towns, villages, plant. Nobody kills your inhabitants, your sisters, brothers, fathers,’ I said slowly, and for some reason my words took those present by surprise.

Of course, my speech was not notable for its elegance: there were some mistakes in pronunciation, in the use of tenses, and the sentence construction was too basic. But the Americans got the meaning of it. I explained to those living in a state far from the struggle against Fascism that we had come from a place where bombs were destroying towns and villages, blood was being spilt, where innocent people were being killed, and my native land was undergoing a severe ordeal.

An accurate bullet was no more than a response to a vicious enemy. My husband had lost his life at Sevastopol before my very eyes and, as far as I was concerned, any man I saw through the eyepiece of my telescopic sight was the one who killed him.

Strangely enough, Eleanor was embarrassed. She hurriedly looked away and said that she had not wished to offend me; however, she thought this conversation was very important and we would continue it in a more suitable setting, but now, unfortunately, it was time for her to go. The First Lady rose from the table and hurriedly bidding us goodbye, left the small dining room.

‘What did you just say to her?’ Nikolai Krasavchenko knitted his brows and, exploiting his status as head of the delegation, looked me very sternly in the eye.

‘Nothing in particular.’ I brushed him off. ‘We can’t let the cheeky Yanks get away with things.’”²⁷

²⁷ Pavlichenko, *Lady Death*, 183.

This was the first real example Eleanor Roosevelt had, of direct contact with a soldier of the Soviet Union, and a women soldier at that. It is very revealing of how the two different countries view women's roles in the war and how American women might not even respond to a woman fighting at the front. But it also shows the geopolitical differences between the two nations, as one was very much more war weary than the other, as Pavlichenko's words state. She and her compatriots were equally bewildered by the American press and the interest they had and questions they presented, as Pavlichenko referred to it as a "slinging match" between her and the journalists after a student rally her group spoke at. She then again was met by Mrs. Roosevelt after this event to invite them to a dinner held by a former U.S. Ambassador to the Soviet Union. Eleanor even insisted on taking Lyudmila herself, even driving the car. It was here the Pavlichenko's opinion of Mrs. Roosevelt started to change. Her initial perception was based on her preconceived views, based on what the Soviets described as the Roosevelt's privileged upbringing. Eventually she then took her, and her two fellow soldiers, to meet the most powerful man in America, her husband, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. She describes him as "without question he was a very exceptional man, possessing a sharp mind a strong will" as they chatted about the war. She found him very engaged on the aspects of the Soviet struggle at the time, and his knowledge of the battles they had fought. They even joked about the American press. It's then Pavlichenko brings up an amazing part of the story, in terms of Franklin Roosevelt and his views and helping the Soviet Union in the war.

"I could have gone on joking, but I wanted to ask Roosevelt that most important question – about more active assistance for the Soviet Union, about the opening of a second front in Western Europe which would draw away some of the German divisions now fighting on the banks of the Volga.

Roosevelt seemed to guess what I was thinking. 'Tell the Soviet government and Mr. Stalin personally', he said pensively, 'that it's difficult for me at the moment to render more real assistance to your country. We Americans are still not ready for decisive

action. We are held back by our British partners. But in their heart and soul the American people are with our Russian allies.’”²⁸

Pavlichenko finished her trip to the United States able to call Eleanor Roosevelt a friend. She talks about the correspondence they kept with each other after the war. Upon her return to the Soviet Union, she again met with Stalin to discuss the trip. It was in this meeting, that he asked her not to return to the front, as she wanted, but to become a teacher of rifleman and pass on her knowledge to hundreds of potential snipers in the hopes of contributing more for the war effort. He also awarded her with that most prodigious title, Hero of the Soviet Union, in recognition of her exemplary service. After the war ended, she completed her degree and served for a time with the Navy before a medical discharge. Even though she had a pension for her service, she would then help design some of the next generation of sniper rifles for the Soviet Union, including the famed Dragunov. She did suffer however, especially over the death of her husband during Sevastopol, from what we now call post traumatic stress disorder, and died shortly after finishing her memoir. Her legacy to a generation of Soviet women was unmatched though, she represented to them what Vasily Zaitsev was to the men of the Red Army, their most famous hero.

The final way that women served in the Soviet Union during the Great Patriotic War was arguably the one they have been most remembered for, although you can make a case for the snipers just discussed. But this new role was as members of the Soviet Air Force. In fact, there were three whole “wings” that were crewed and staffed exclusively by women, at least at their inception. What is amazing about these three groups is the story behind how they were able to get started, and the jobs they took on once they had their units officially made. You see, the United States made use of women pilots, but only as cargo carriers usually behind enemy lines, and never to engage the enemy. The women of the Soviet Union Air Force, however, were

²⁸ Pavlichenko, *Lady Death*, 193.

placed into combat roles and expected to kill Nazis. They excelled at it. The following section will discuss their history and how they were able to get into the air and then become the force that inspired fear in the Germans.

It's important to start with the fact that in the prewar years, women in the Soviet Union were big fliers. Many joined flight clubs as a hobby and others were barnstormers across the country, and a very select few at the time were able to get a military commission. But by far what these prewar women became famous for was setting international flying records. Many Americans are familiar with the exploits of Amelia Earhart and Charles Lindbergh, but the Soviet Union had many such tales and icons of their own when it came to flight, and the most famous one was held by a flight crewed by three women who all were early female members of the Soviet Air Force. In what would come to be called the Flight of the Rodina, (Rodina is Russian for Motherland) three women, Marina Raskova, Polina Osipenko, and Valentina Grizdubova, set off in a plane called the Rodina in a harrowing flight across the Soviet Union. Stalin himself had a personal appreciation for the mission and aided the women in their preparations. The goal of the flight was to reach Komsomolsk which was in the furthest eastern reaches of the vast Soviet Union, which was a major feat to undertake leaving from Moscow. It was a dangerous undertaking and almost ended in disaster. As Dr. Pennington describes it in her book "The aircraft completed most of its planned route, but poor visibility near the destination prevented the crew from locating one of the few possible airfields in the area. They were running low on fuel, and the women realized they would have to make a forced landing. The aircraft's emergency procedures called for the navigator to bail out before a forced landing."²⁹ The aircraft's navigator was Raskova, who bailed out before the plane itself crash landed in the snow-

²⁹ Pennington, *Wings, Women, and War*, 16.

covered forests of central-eastern Russia. The women who crashed made a shelter from the aircraft and had some emergency supplies, so they had some slight protection from the elements as they awaited rescue, but Raskova wandered the forest, in a flight suit not designed for the cold weather, for several days until she located the crash site and met up with her compatriots shortly before they were to be rescued, as Stalin would not allow such a historic event end in disaster. In the end “it broke the women’s international straight line distance by more than 1,500 kilometers and at the same time established a new women’s international nonstop broken line distance record.”³⁰ The three women would go on to become huge propaganda tools for the Soviet Union, as their story captured the headlines in the nation, and personally were toasted by Stalin at numerous events, including one where he said: “today these three women have avenged the heavy centuries of oppression of women.”³¹ Raskova because of her struggle in the wild, drew the most attention, but all three were appointed Hero of the Soviet Union, the first woman to receive it and only ones before the war.³² The flight itself, while not reaching its destination, was still a notable achievement over the rest, you see the flight even flew for longer than Charles Lindbergh’s transatlantic flight. So, it should be no surprise that the Soviet Union gave it such a hero’s reception and publicized it in great detail, while it was not mentioned much in the western countries where it was inconceivable for a group of women to attempt this. It surely played into the stereotype they had, especially the Nazis, of Soviet Women as masculine brutes. But it would go on to have a major impact on the future of women aviation in the Soviet Union, and that would be thanks to this event and the connection Stalin developed with these women, especially Raskova.

³⁰ Pennington, *Wings, Women, and War*, 17.

³¹ Pennington, *Wings, Women, and War*, 17.

³² Pennington, *Wings, Women, and War*, 17.

It was this connection that allowed Raskova to appeal to Stalin and the Central Committee to form air groups made entirely of women, from pretty much the start of the War. Like most situations detailed in this paper, women immediately flocked to volunteer and were turned away. It isn't known for sure how the origins of these units came to be, if it was from a committee in the government, the main Central Committee, or even Stalin himself. Regardless, he approved of it, and Raskova is often credited with using her connections to get them formed. There were three wings that were formed, the 46th Guards Night Bomber Aviation Regiment, the 125th Guards Bomber Aviation Regiment, and the 586th Fighter Aviation Regiment with Raskova as the group Commander.³³ From the onset the three groups were crewed entirely by women, as well as having every ground role filled by a women engineer or technician. Eventually they allowed some men into the ground roles later into the role, but by and large these three groups' pilots and bombers were all women. Their roles were dangerous ones, especially given the airplanes and equipment, or lack thereof in some cases, that they had to contend with. Alexandra Semyonovna Popova, a Lieutenant of the Guards pilot in one of the bombing units, describes what they had to contend and suffer with, while at the same time why they pressed on and the pride they felt in doing this extremely dangerous job.³⁴

Many of these women felt similarly and suffered similarly yet were highly effective in their specific roles. The 46th Guards Night Bomber Aviation Regiment for example proved to be deadly night bombers that struck fear into the Germans. So effective where they in their role, that

³³ Pennington, *Wings, Women, and War*.

³⁴ "The planes they gave us were Po-2s. Small, Slow. They flew only at a low level. Hedge-hopping. Just over the ground! Before the war young people in flying clubs learned to fly in them, but no one would have imagined they would have any military use. The plane was constructed entirely of plywood, covered in aircraft fabric. In fact, with cheesecloth. One direct hit and it caught fire and it caught fire and burned up completely in the air, before reaching the ground. Like a match. The only solid part was the M-11 motor. Later on, toward the end of the war, we were issued parachutes, and a machine gun was installed in the pilot's cabin, but before there had been no weapons, except for four bomb racks under the wing – that's all. Nowadays they'd call us kamikazes, and maybe we were kamikazes. Yes! We were! But victory was valued more than our lives. Victory!

the Nazi propaganda machine began to refer to them as “Night Witches” because, as one Soviet veteran recounted, they believed “that the Russian women were given special injections and pills to “give us feline’s perfect vision at night.” ”³⁵ These three groups fought with distinction under Raskova who they revered as their commander. It was during the Battle of Stalingrad, a battle in which all three groups played a vital role in the battle for air superiority in the skies over the city, that Raskova perished in a crash landing. Her death was a great loss to the rest of the women, who looked at her like a mother, despite not being much older than most of them. Indeed, the whole country including Stalin felt the loss. Further proving the connection that existed to some degree between the two, Stalin ordered that she be the first to receive a state funeral during, and despite, the ongoing war.³⁶

While Raskova was the most famous women of the pre-war and flew until her death, there is one pilot, who trained under her, and would go on to become famous for her aerial exploits. Her name is Lilya Litvyak, and she was both a bomber and fighter pilot who achieved fame in the skies over Stalingrad. What is fascinating about her, is that by the time she made her fame in Stalingrad she had been assigned to a male regiment of fighters. This is where she excelled immediately as one of her earliest air clashes shows,

“On September 13, she entered a dogfight against Germany’s Jagdgeschwader 53 unit, among the most lethal fighter pilots on earth. Litvyak came through unscathed and brought down her first Nazi plane, piloted by Erwin Maier, who was immediately captured by the Soviets. Later that day, Maier’s captors introduced him to Litvyak. It took a long time to convince him that this tiny blonde woman—little more than a girl—had been the one to end his war.”³⁷

³⁵ Douglas Martin, “Nadezhda Popova, WWII ‘Night Witch,’ Dies at 91,” *New York Times*, July 14, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/15/world/europe/nadezhda-popova-ww-ii-night-witch-dies-at-91.html?referringSource=articleShare>

³⁶ Reina Pennington, *Amazons to Fighter Pilots: A Biographical Dictionary of Military Women* Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2003. 354.

³⁷ Edward White, “The Short, Daring Life of Lilya Litvyak,” *The Paris Review*, October 6, 2017 <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2017/10/06/short-daring-life-lilya-litvyak-white-rose-stalingrad/>

This is a telling story because not only does it show the success, she was able to achieve in her first real dogfight, but it also allows one to have a microcosmic look at the views of the two combatants in how women should behave during war and their views on appropriate roles. After this she took on the title “The White Lily of Stalingrad” based on her name and the fact she painted a white lily on her plane.³⁸ The ‘Lily’ would go on to become an ace, which requires five confirmed kills, over the skies of Stalingrad and by the time she was shot down she had a kill list of 13. The deaths of both these women, along many of their other comrades affected each woman, yet most steeled themselves and continued to fight on in the skies against the fascist invaders just as bravely as the men of the Red Air Force.

As all the examples presented demonstrate, not only did women serve in a dedicated combat role during the Second World War in the Soviet Union, but they also did so across a variety of roles, and with distinction! Despite this, with exception, by the end of the war most women were being drummed out of service. Even as early as 1945, they were being depicted in Pravda as accompanying their husbands during the push to, and triumphant return from, Berlin.³⁹ This was deliberate on the part of the Central Committee. Among reasons given, besides reverting to pre-war sentiments, was the need for women to reproduce to make up for the number of lives lost during the Great Patriotic War. Yet the depths with which the Soviet’s went to ignore the contribution that women gave to achieve their ultimate victory, which included a great many deaths and even more rendered invalid, stunned even some of its most revered leaders from the War. Dr. Pennington points out a great example of this from Marshall Georgy Zhukov’s 1959 memoir, in which he writes

³⁸ Tamar Ketko, “Not victims: the image of Jews in World War Two,” *Jewish Culture and History* (2017): 282

³⁹ Marwick and Cardona, *Soviet Women on the Frontline in the Second World War*, 233.

“I can't overlook one very important question which, in my opinion, is still weakly covered in military literature, and at times unjustifiably forgotten in our reports and work on the generalization of the experience of the Great Patriotic War. I have in mind the question about the role of women in war, in the rear but also at the front. Equally with men they bore all the burdens of combat life and together with us men, they went all the way to Berlin.”⁴⁰

This was one of the most revered Military leaders of any nation, who also played a major role in Khrushchev's rise to leader of the Soviet Union in the 50's. If he was aware of this, clearly others were as well, yet the Union remained silent until the start of the Cold War thawing of tensions. It was then that these silenced women were finally able to start to tell their stories and connect with fellow veterans. As one put it to Alexievich when interviewed for her book,

“I want to speak ... to speak! To speak it all out! Finally, somebody wants to hear us. For too many years we said nothing. For decades. The first year, when I came back from the war, I talked and talked. Nobody listened. So I shut up ... It's good that you've (Alexievich) come along. I've been waiting all the while for somebody. I knew somebody would come. Had to come.”⁴¹

These women's stories have since become more known, and present-day Russia has taken steps towards recognizing the role these heroic, yet every day, women played in victory not just for the Soviet Union, but for all freedom loving people who wanted to triumph over the specter of fascism. Still, we have a long way to go in giving these women, however belatedly, the proper respect and credit they deserve. More study hopefully will be available as the archives in Russia hopefully become open to researchers. Until then, given the age of the few remaining women veterans, we must ask them for their service one last time, in telling their stories to any who will listen, of how women are just as capable of waging war as men, be that a blessing or curse.

⁴⁰ Pennington, “Offensive Women: Women in Combat in the Red Army in the Second World War” 820.

⁴¹ Alexievitch, *The Unwomanly Face of War*, 20.

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