

“WARRIOR, AVENGE!”: *FRONTOVICHKI* AND SOVIET GENDER ROLES IN THE  
GREAT PATRIOTIC WAR (1941-1945)

History 301

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Prior to World War II, totalitarian regimes often dictated that women, like men, needed to be mobilized in service to the state: the state preceded the individual. However, state service took varied forms; for example, in Fascist Italy, the “battle for births” urged women to advance Fascism through motherhood. In the Soviet Union, women’s roles were complex. Women had been “liberated” from bourgeois oppression by communism, according to state narratives, yet women were still obligated to serve the state via reproduction, as evidenced by the 1936 Soviet anti-abortion law.<sup>1</sup> During World War II, women’s complicated situation within Soviet society expressed itself in the up to one million women who served in the Red Army.<sup>2</sup> Although women combatants, *frontovichki*,<sup>3</sup> were certainly the minority, women were not confined to nursing or administrative roles, but were pilots, snipers, machine gunners, and even commanding officers. In this essay, I examine the role of Soviet women in combat on the Eastern Front, with a particular focus on women’s self-representations in contrast to state representations of women, to understand how combat changed women’s social roles in Soviet society.

While, as Anne Krylova argues, women typically viewed combat identities as non-oppositional to feminine ones, state and popular narratives regarding women soldiers were not uniformly positive. Popular media, like the iconic film character Anka the Machine Gunner, played significant roles in shaping women’s combat identities, but such narratives were often counteracted by Soviet war propaganda, which emphasized combat as male-oriented.<sup>4</sup> Women often faced obstacles in the formation and enacting of combat identities, either from male peers at home or from commanding officers and state officials. The *frontovichki*, then, worked within

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<sup>1</sup> Markwick, Roger D. and Euridice Charon Cardona, *Soviet Women on the Frontline in the Second World War* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), xxii.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>4</sup> See Figures 1 and 2.

state narratives about the “Great Patriotic War,” while simultaneously exercising significant agency in their participation on the front lines. Influenced by state propaganda, popular culture, and their own experiences of combat education, women subverted “conventional” gender roles to engage in a unique form of service to the state. *Frontovichki* interrogated and expanded the social roles of women in the Soviet Union by their participation in combat on the Eastern Front.

Although D’Ann Campbell characterizes women as “the invisible combatants of World War II,”<sup>5</sup> and *frontovichki* were certainly a minority of combatants, women’s presence on Soviet front lines was visible and sizable, especially in comparison to other major powers. Over half of Soviet women in the Red Army served at the front line, and Soviet women were mobilized relatively early in the war; while Germany did not mobilize women until 1943 (and then, the state mobilized women only “reluctantly” and inefficiently), Soviet women began enlisting directly after war broke out in 1941.<sup>6</sup> Soviet women made up about 8 percent of total Soviet combatants, and up to 150,000 Soviet women were decorated for war service,<sup>7</sup> including Marina Raskova, a female pilot who was decorated as a Hero of the Soviet Union and whose three flying regiments included many other decorated women.<sup>8</sup> Many Soviet women fought in all-female regiments, with female commanders.<sup>9</sup> Importantly, *frontovichki* were volunteers, not conscripted as male soldiers were. Article 13 of the 1939 universal military duty law allowed women with technical or medical training to enlist, and also permitted women to enroll in training groups.<sup>10</sup> Soviet women were also not restricted to one arena of combat. While much scholarship exists on

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<sup>5</sup> Campbell, D’Ann, “Women in Combat: The World War II Experience in the United States, Great Britain, Germany, and the Soviet Union,” *The Journal of Military History* 57, no. 2 (1993): 301.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 318.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 320.

<sup>8</sup> Krylova, Anne. *Soviet Women in Combat: A History of Violence on the Eastern Front* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 79.

<sup>9</sup> Campbell, 318.

<sup>10</sup> Campbell, 319.

women pilots and snipers, women also operated AA guns, drove tanks, and commanded units.<sup>11</sup> By contrast, in Britain, women were primarily engaged in non-combat duties to reallocate male labour to the front; in America, women were never sent to the front lines as combatants.<sup>12</sup>

It is important, however, not to interpret these statistics as evidence of the Soviets abandoning binary oppositional gender narratives about women in domestic roles. Conversely, Soviet gender narratives were characterized by their duality: women, who made up 39% of the workforce in 1939 and 56% by 1945, were supposedly liberated from bourgeois gender roles in the Soviet Union,<sup>13</sup> but that liberation included an obligation to reproduce and engage in the domestic sphere. Ironically, the same year that the anti-abortion law passed, 1936, the Stalinist Constitution declared women “liberated” in Article 122.<sup>14</sup> Soviet women in the 1930s were therefore present in industrial workplaces while simultaneously carrying out domestic responsibility.<sup>15</sup> The same duality extended to military engagement as the Soviet Union prepared for an upcoming war throughout the 1930s. Pre-war, the Komsomol (Communist Party Youth Organization) encouraged women to take on the same social and political roles as men, while maintaining their domestic presence; exhortations for women to “take up flying,” for example, had military implications.<sup>16</sup> Although the Komsomol prized physical strength, bravery, and heroism as masculine attributes, young women also identified with these values.<sup>17</sup> In the pre-war period, Soviet media promoted all youth rising up in defense of the “motherland.” In the 1930s,

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 320.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 302.

<sup>13</sup> Nakachi, Mie, “A Postwar Sexual Liberation? Gendered Experience of the Soviet Union’s Great Patriotic War,” *Cahiers du monde russe* 52, no. 2/3 (2011): 424.

<sup>14</sup> Markwick and Cardona, xxii.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 14.

for example, home economics for girls was removed from the education curriculum, and students learned how to use a gas mask and shoot a rifle in gender-integrated paramilitary classes.<sup>18</sup>

Popular culture further promoted women's "liberation" under communism, presenting women as military heroes. *Chapayev* (1934), directed by the Vassilev brothers, depicts as one of its primary side characters a female hero of the Russian Civil War, Anka the Machine Gunner, who embodies the ideal woman combatant in service of the Soviet Union and communism. Anka first appears learning to use weapons and pushing off the advances of a male peer;<sup>19</sup> her feminine identity is focused on combat to defend communism, not on sexuality or motherhood. Released as the Soviet education system integrated more military training for men and women, *Chapayev* provided an ideal figure for young women to emulate in their state service; importantly, that ideal was in a combat role. Nina Onilova, a woman who began in medical service and later became a machine gunner, longed to be "like Anka."<sup>20</sup> Importantly, as Yulia Gradszkova notes, film was arguably the most important method of popular communication in the Soviet Union between the wars, especially before education reform began to increase literacy.<sup>21</sup> Film illustrated the desirable direction of social change, suggesting that, at least on some level, women changing to become skilled soldiers like Anka was desirable.

Popular culture also presented women in combat sanctioned specifically by the Communist Party, which significantly means that female combatants were not engaging in rebellion against the state. Pyotr Pavlenko's 1936 novel, *Na Vostoke (In the Far East)*, depicts the female protagonist thanking the Party for entrusting her with a military position before

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<sup>18</sup> Krylova, 51.

<sup>19</sup> Vasilyev, Sergei and Georgi Vasilyev, *Chapayev* (1934), film.

<sup>20</sup> Markwick and Cardona, 172.

<sup>21</sup> Gradszkova, Yulia. "Speaking For Those 'Backward': Gender and Ethnic Minorities in Soviet Silent Film," *Region* 2, no. 2 (2013): 203.

leaving for military engagement.<sup>22</sup> However, where film and literature offered explicit images of women combatants, even glorifying this role for women, state news media and propaganda was more limited. Krylova notes that paramilitary rallies and the press, while acknowledging women's military accomplishments, stopped short of explicitly characterizing women as future soldiers, despite their skills.<sup>23</sup> The war poster in Figure 1 depicts a male Red soldier attacking Fascist leaders. Conversely, the poster in Figure 2 depicts a woman holding a wounded child, emphasizing women's domestic and motherly roles, while asking the "warrior," presumably male, to "avenge" war atrocities.<sup>24</sup> Despite the limitations of state discourse, however, as military training coincided with domestic responsibility, more young women came to envision the upcoming war as their "fate;" the groundwork for the *frontovichki* was laid in prewar Soviet attitudes towards women, particularly in schools, but also in popular culture.

Although prewar policies in education and images in popular culture promoted women's participation in defending the "motherland" and communism against external threats, women often faced obstacles when volunteering for combat. M. A. Kazarinova, Chief of Staff in the Dive Bomber Regiment, recalled in her memoir: "many of us wrote letters to the Academy's commandant, asking to be sent to the front. Invariably, we were all told to await our orders. Meanwhile, the situation at the front continued to deteriorate."<sup>25</sup> Even as need at the front increased, individual officers objected to women's volunteering. Zoya Mal'kova, aircraft mechanic, wrote of three girls who were repeatedly refused assignments to combat duty: "But

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<sup>22</sup> Pavlenko, Pytor, *Na Vostoke* (Moskva: Sovetskii pisatel, 1936), cited in Anne Krylova, *Soviet Women in Combat: A History of Violence on the Eastern Front* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 40.

<sup>23</sup> Krylova, 61.

<sup>24</sup> Although reproductions, these two posters exhibit clearly that state praise of women's military ability often stopped short of presenting women as soldiers. While women soldiers were rewarded for exceptional service, discourse promoting citizens to engage in military combat against Soviet enemies was limited to men.

<sup>25</sup> Cottam, Kazimiera J., *Women in Air War: the Eastern Front of World War II* (Nepean: New Military Publishing, 1997), 1.

we are indeed capable of serving the army!’ Anya Shakova... said boldly... ‘You’ll be called up when you’re needed,’ the officer cut the girls short and went back to his paperwork.”<sup>26</sup> Mass mobilization of women began in 1942-1943, primarily to compensate for 6.5 million male casualties on the front lines;<sup>27</sup> at the beginning of the war, women in combat had volunteered without explicit encouragement, but now the state was more actively recruiting women. But even as mobilization targets soared (the State Committee of Defense and the People’s Commissariat of Defense issued a dozen secret decrees for the active mobilization of 250,000 women),<sup>28</sup> women met opposition, largely from men, both once in the army and at home. For instance, in 1943 when Valentin Markov took charge of the largely-female 125<sup>th</sup> Dive Bomber Regiment after its previous commander, Marina Raskova, died, he believed the women would be too undisciplined to command, and “could not imagine” how they could manage their aircraft.<sup>29</sup> Only later, after their first combat mission together, would he realize the women were “self-disciplined, careful, obedient to orders [and] very courageous.”<sup>30</sup>

Fundamentally, the contradictions of Soviet policy towards women combatants was prompted by war’s destabilization of more traditional gender roles, the effects of which were felt both at home and at the front. As Nakachi notes, the employment of women at the front broke up families. Women departed for the front as a means of protecting their families and homes, as well as the state.<sup>31</sup> Soldiers wanted families to “wait for them,” but long periods of separation often led to both soldiers and partners at home forming new relationships,<sup>32</sup> disrupting domestic stability. Furthermore, women at the front were often conflicted in how they expressed

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 249.

<sup>27</sup> Markwick and Cardona, 121.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>29</sup> Krylova, 264.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 265.

<sup>31</sup> Nakachi, 427.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 428.

femininity in their new occupations, as femininity could lead to doubts over whether women belonged at the front. Male commandants were often concerned about women's abilities to perform combat duties, even when women themselves were confident in their capacity; as Raskova told her regiment, "you are the first female regiment that ever existed. The men are amazed by this, though you and I see nothing special in it."<sup>33</sup> Male skepticism often led to women justifying their presence at the front by listing their qualifications. "It was suggested to me that I think very carefully," wrote A. M. Bereznitzkaya of her departure to the front, "and should withdraw if I had any doubts about my ability to withstand the battle zone."<sup>34</sup> Anya Shakova told a male officer: "We are alpinists accustomed to hardships. We can do anything: cover 50 kilometers on foot per day, fire a rifle, drive a motorcycle, and sleep in the snow."<sup>35</sup> During the October 1941 mobilization of women for air war under Order 0099, women volunteers were asked two basic questions: Can you fight? Can you become a soldier?<sup>36</sup> Women were allowed at the front, but only if their gender did not interfere with their combat duties.

Ironically, despite male concerns over female combat capacity, visible expressions of traditional femininity were not necessarily disparaged at the front, as evidenced by female soldiers decorating dugouts with flowers;<sup>37</sup> however, limits to feminine self-expression existed, as female soldiers could be rebuked for how they chose to dress. Liliya Litviak, for instance, faced opposition both for modifying her uniform and for dyeing her hair blonde; notably, however, she "was one of the best pilots" in her unit.<sup>38</sup> Feminine self-presentation through clothing and grooming was likely less accepted because it had more potential to interfere with

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<sup>33</sup> Cottam, 121.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 249.

<sup>36</sup> Krylova, 129.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 270.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 274.



combat capabilities than decorations in dugouts. Conventional, visual expressions of feminine identities may have been more accepted due to fears that women at the front would become too masculine while engaged in violent combat. Roza Shanina, a sniper in the Red Army, longed for more involvement at the heart of battle: “I want to be where the fighting is fiercest. I want to be there with the soldiers.”<sup>39</sup> Yet she was also aware that her desire was perceived as abnormal: “Oh gods! Why am I so peculiar?”<sup>40</sup> Trained specifically as assassins, women snipers like Shanina were, Markwick and Cardona argue, “the antithesis of Soviet or any other womanhood.”<sup>41</sup> However, because of their ability to directly kill so many enemy Germans, snipers also became celebrities among combatants and at home.<sup>42</sup> Stalin’s 1944 Family Law limited access to divorce and deprived children born out-of-wedlock of legal rights like inheritance,<sup>43</sup> possibly in an effort to counteract wartime disruption of traditional families and domesticity and legislating a return to more traditional (and more restrictive) femininity. The Law also encouraged women to return to childbearing roles by providing financial support for women with children.<sup>44</sup> At home, women were interrogated about their desires to participate in dangerous, masculine professions like piloting or gunning; Tamara Sycheva’s husband encouraged her to stay at home and “remain a woman,” fearing her masculinization through frontline combat as a sniper.<sup>45</sup>

Tensions between excessive femininity and excessive masculinity in *frontovichki* reveal ironies in Soviet gender discourse. Women who were “too feminine”—weak, untrained, sensitive, or vain—would be unable to fulfill their duty to the state through combat and defense.

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<sup>39</sup> Vinogradova, Lyuba, *Avenging Angels: Soviet Women Snipers on the Eastern Front*, trans. Arch Tait (Great Britain: MacLehose Press, 2017), 181.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 203.

<sup>42</sup> Markwick and Cardona, 204.

<sup>43</sup> Nakachi, 423.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 433.

<sup>45</sup> Krylova, 88.

Simultaneously, women in combat who became “too masculine”—violent, sexually liberal, or uninterested in family and domesticity—would be unable to continue serving the state through “heroic reproduction”<sup>46</sup> after the war. Soviet women were, first and foremost, idealized as guardians of the family and the Motherland; their sanctioned participation in combat was an extension of this original role, primarily (though not entirely) because of military necessity.<sup>47</sup> Campbell notes this trend more globally, as women in Britain were mobilized in noncombat roles when more men were needed at the front lines.<sup>48</sup> Yet Krylova is correct in her reluctance to reduce women’s combat roles to merely strategic exceptions to typical gender discourse. Noting that Order 0099, despite occurring in a military crisis, was not an emergency measure,<sup>49</sup> Krylova refuses to simplify women’s military participation. The undeniable evidence that the Soviet state permitted and encouraged women to prepare for combat roles through education, training, and popular representations of women in combat in the prewar period, before any military necessity, suggests that women’s mobilization was not only a direct response to immediate military needs, but rather a new and developing way for women to defend the “motherland.” Gender discourse in the Soviet Union, then, was primarily focused on how women could serve the communist state through their gendered identities. Just as the state presented service as necessary, women often saw themselves as crucial to the war effort. Female sniper Katya Peredeva, for example, enlisted “as a matter of conscience” after boys in her class at school were killed at the front.<sup>50</sup>

Women soldiers were also useful in Soviet propaganda abroad. Although the Soviet Union had abandoned the drive for “international socialism” in the 1920s, instead building

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<sup>46</sup> Markwick and Cardona, 3.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 229.

<sup>48</sup> Campbell, 313.

<sup>49</sup> Krylova, 124.

<sup>50</sup> Vinogradova, 27.

“socialism in one country,” the Soviet Union was still presented, at home and abroad, as surpassing bourgeois capitalist states in economic and social progress. Where the women in military service—combat or noncombat—in Britain, Germany, and the United States were not publicized, the Soviet Union sent women in combat units on publicity tours<sup>51</sup> to advertise not only the exceptional strength and skill of Soviet women, but also Soviet social progress. In August 1942, Lyudmila Pavlichenko visited Washington, DC and stayed in the White House as the personal guest of the President and First Lady. Newspapers described Pavlichenko as a “Soviet warrior princess... [she] has been awarded the Order of Lenin and wounded on four occasions.”<sup>52</sup> Tours displayed how Soviet women were “liberated” and allowed to participate in combat alongside male colleagues.

In studying the *frontvichki* of World War II, it is difficult to delineate boundaries between women’s agency and state propaganda narratives regarding gender roles. As primary sources indicate, women were eager and willing to go to the front; even such enthusiasm, though, was often encouraged by women’s experiences in prewar education and training. But women combatants were faced with too many obstacles for their military participation to be stripped of any individual agency. Women were active in asserting their right to participate in combat, not only while enlisting, but after arriving at the front, by emphasizing their skills, training, and personality traits like courage and toughness. Furthermore, women actively presented themselves as “feminine” once at the front; Krylova notes the disappointment of one pilot after realizing that her enemies in a mission would not necessarily identify their regiment as a female one.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Campbell, 320.

<sup>52</sup> Vinogradova, 35.

<sup>53</sup> Krylova, 272.

Examining Soviet women in combat during World War II is perhaps most useful in reaching and understanding of Soviet gender narratives more broadly. Like those of many totalitarian regimes, Soviet attitudes towards women are often characterized by historians as mainly restrictive, with a disproportionate emphasis on motherhood, reproduction, sexual morality, monogamy, and domesticity. Women's experiences in combat overturn many of these tropes, however, as women left their families to engage in combat, often forming new, nonmarital "unions" at the front. Nakichi particularly characterizes time at the front as a period of sexual liberation for many women, who "hooked up" with male peers and obtained illegal abortions if they became pregnant.<sup>54</sup> While women's combat may be understood as simply a different expression of the same female responsibility to protect and uphold the home, participation on the front lines allowed women to participate in a traditionally masculine profession, exercise their exceptional skills, and disengage from childbearing, if only temporarily. Women, like men, served the state in wartime. The ways that they did so can be primarily characterized by complex interplay between women's own agency and state policy; the desire for traditional domesticity, the practical need for military defense, and the impetus to reinforce narratives of social progress and liberation; and the inevitable social consequences of upsetting gender oppositions.

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<sup>54</sup> Nakachi, 430.

Figure 1: Aivazian, A. and Mikh Schulman. OKHO TASS No. 425 (ITAR-TASS Window Poster no. 425)"/Part of a folio of 8 posters reproduced by Russian War Relief, Inc. based on an exhibit held at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. 1944.



Figure 2: Petrovich, Pavel and Sokolov-Skalia. OKHO TASS No. 714 (ITAR-TASS Window Poster no. 714)"/Part of a folio of 8 posters reproduced by Russian War Relief, Inc. based on an exhibit held at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. 1944.



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