THE MOTHERLAND CALLS:
THE PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN WAR POSTERS DURING THE GREAT
PATRIOTIC WAR, 1941-1945.

A Thesis
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University, Fullerton

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
in
History

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Spring, 2017
ABSTRACT

This thesis focuses on the portrayal of Soviet women in propaganda posters during the Russian Great Patriotic War (1941-1945). While illustrations of mothers and workers were in no short supply, there was a tremendous lack of female soldiers depicted when there were nearly 1,000,000 in active service. Although women wanted to join the Red Army, the Soviet government denied them until it became apparent that they needed more soldiers. However, rather than depict female combatants, the regime continuously utilized the caricatures of women workers, victims, and family members who diligently waited for their men to return.

I argue that by focusing on the other roles women held during the war, the Soviet state purposefully removed female soldiers from propaganda to emphasize “appropriate” roles for women. Through the regime’s control over poster propaganda, they were able to dictate their own war narrative. It is the purpose of this research project to pull female combatants out of the shadows and reinsert them into the narrative of the Great Patriotic War.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT ...................................................................................................................  ii
LIST OF FIGURES ....................................................................................................... iv
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ............................................................................................. v

Chapter
1. WAR KICKS IN RUSSIA’S DOOR.................................................................  1
2. COME ON, LEND A HAND!............................................................................. 14
3. CONCLUSION..................................................................................................... 40

BIBLIOGRAPHY .......................................................................................................... 47
### LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I. Bondarenko and S. Miryuk volunteer for the army at a recruiting center</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Iraklii Toidze, <em>The motherland calls!</em></td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. V. Koretsky, <em>Be a hero!</em></td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. V. Kopecky, <em>Red army soldier, help!</em></td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. N. Zhukov, <em>Fight to kill!</em></td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. L. Lissitzky, <em>All for the front! Everything for victory!</em> (shortened form)</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. D. Shmarinov, <em>Warrior, reply to the Motherland with victory!</em></td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. <em>Join the army of front-lone women. Women-at-arms are soldiers helpers and friends!</em></td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. <em>Druzhinnitsy Red Cross! Do not leave the battlefield or wounded, nor his guns!</em></td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. <em>From the people’s revenge, do note leave the enemy!</em></td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. <em>Guerilla’s revenge, without mercy!</em></td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Iosif Serebranyi, <em>Come on, lend a hand!</em></td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Kiev station in Moscow. The photo was most likely taken in the autumn of 1945</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. In 1942 a special female sniper school was established near Moscow</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. <em>The Motherland Calls</em></td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. The World War II memorial in Washington D.C. depicts Soviet and American troops meeting in Berlin</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This is the closest I will ever get to an Academy Awards acceptance speech. So many people deserve credit for this endeavor, but for the purposes of keeping this short(er), only those directly intertwined with this process shall receive direct thanks.

First, I would like to thank California State University, Fullerton and the Department of History for providing me a thriving intellectual, social, and nurturing environment that drastically shaped my development in academia over the past several years. Multiple organizations (Phi Alpha Theta, History Student’s Association, and Camp Titan) helped me grow as a leader, team player, friend, colleague, and as an individual. In particular, Dr. Robert McLain deserves an ornate, hand-chiseled shrine, as he has been there every step of the way since 2012. I am utterly indebted to all that he has done for me, not just academically, but also by being a trusted friend and lovingly referring to me as his “Academic Daughter.” Dr.’s Nancy Fitch and Aitana Guia graciously agreed to be part of this committee, and although this topic was not their specialty, they have provided unparalleled support and guidance during this journey. Finally, I would like to thank Dr.’s Jasamin Rostam-Kolayi and Vanessa Gunther. I have known both of them since I started at CSUF in 2011 as a wide-eyed and bushy-tailed seventeen-year-old freshman, and they have been some of my most trusted confidants within the department ever since.

The person who single-handedly deals with me in the most efficient way is my fiancée, Russell Theodore Ray McKinney. No amount of thank you’s will ever be enough
for all the times he reassured me that what I was doing actually meant something, that I
wasn’t in over my head, and that every angry tear that escaped my eyes was wiped away
with reassurance. Our relationship has always been simple, loving, and pure. If you know
him, it is not hard to love him, and every day I fall in love with him all over again.

To my wonderful parents, Mark and Barbara, who have always showed me
nothing but unconditional love and support. Their constant nagging about when this
project was going to be done probably helped in the end, and now it is in writing so they
will be happy. Thank you always making me try new things, for never doubting me, and
for shaping me into the woman I am today. I promise I will try to make a lot of money
one day so you two can finally relax!

Finally, I would like to thank myself for actually finishing this project. You may
now commence your applause.

This thesis is dedicated to Vito, Frances, and Sadie.

To the nearly one million women who fought fascism when it entered their borders and
threatened to destroy their lives, this belongs to you.
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.

Vasily Chuikov, 1959.
CHAPTER 1
WAR KICKS IN RUSSIA’S DOOR

World War II (WWII) remains known as the single most destructive conflict in world history. It touched nearly every corner of the globe and drastically altered values, ideas, and lives. The death toll stands at approximately 50,000,000 from all countries combined. However, 70,000,000 dead represents a more accurate total. This number remains contested as many souls disappeared into the darkness of the war.\textsuperscript{1} Out of the 50,000,000 dead, Russia itself, the capital of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR, Russian: Союз Советских Социалистических Республик), suffered an estimated 27,000,000 wartime deaths.\textsuperscript{2}

The Great Patriotic War (Russian: Великая Отечественная война) began for the Russians on June 22, 1941 when Hitler launched Operation Barbarossa.\textsuperscript{3} In the years leading up to the invasion, Germany and the USSR signed numerous political and


\textsuperscript{2} The official number of Soviet war causalities is disputed between the west and the east. Western scholars reached a consensus of anywhere from 25,000,000 to 27,000,000 causalities, whereas Russian scholars argue the number is much higher due to faulty records and secret files kept in the archives. Richard Overy, \textit{Russia’s War: A History of the Soviet War Effort: 1941-1945} (London, United Kingdom: Penguin Books, 1998), 287. Euridice Charon Cardona and Roger D. Markwick, \textit{Soviet Women on the Frontline of the Second World War} (Basingstoke, United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 231.

\textsuperscript{3} The code name “Barbarossa” derived from the medieval Emperor Frederick Barbarossa, a major figure in the Holy Roman Empire and of the Third Crusade in the 12\textsuperscript{th} century.
economic agreements for strategic purposes despite how much Stalin and Hitler disliked each other. Russian and German foreign ministers Vyacheslav Molotov and Joachim von Ribbentrop signed the most notorious of these treaties, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, in August 1939 shortly before the German invasion of Poland. The agreement divided Poland into spheres of influence and provided a buffer for both states.

However, in the following two years Hitler backed out of that agreement and attempted to carry out his ultimate goal of eliminating Bolshevism, and by extension, the Slavic race. His aimed to repopulate the Russian lands with Germans, and enslave those who remained. With the Soviet Union under his control, Hitler would control all of Europe. The faith in success for the invasion, in the Nazi’s eyes, lay in Stalin’s reputation as dictator and leader. He butchered most of the Russian high command during the Great Purge of the 1930s, leaving the Soviet army with many inexperienced leaders, an extreme contrast to the elite German Army. With preparations finalized, which included a delay of several weeks, weapons amassed, and soldiers prepared, the German Army marched its way through eastern Poland and invaded the Soviet Union, bringing the war to Russia.

Conscription in the Red Army spanned the length of the war (1939 -1945) and at its height comprised nearly 35,000,000 soldiers. Of that 35,000,000, nearly 12,000,000 soldiers were injured or never returned home. Apart from the millions of men who were destroyed in the fight against fascism, another demographic sacrificed for the protection

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4 Stalin’s Great Purge (Russian: Большой террор), (1936-1939) resulted in the arrest and trial of accused “saboteurs.” All levels of Soviet society either faced exile to Siberia, intensive labor camps, or execution. Due to faulty records, it is estimated that anywhere from 600,000 to 3,000,000 individuals were murdered. The Red Army and Communist Party suffered especially. Peter Whitewood, “The Purge of the Red Army and the Soviet Mass Operations, 1937-38,” The Slavonic and East European Review 93, no. 2 (April 2015): 286.
of the Motherland. Russian women, unlike other countries among the belligerent Axis and Allied powers, flocked to the battlefield to help their comrades-in-arms from the moment the Nazis entered their country. The Soviet government initially turned them away from recruitment centers, but the loss of nearly 3,000,000 troops in the first six months of the war forced women into a sort of “voluntary draft.” Although men still viewed them as weak and incapable of killing, women found themselves thrust into various positions such as combat medics, pilots, partisans, and snipers—all of which earned them a deadly reputation from their German adversaries. The women fought for their husbands, fathers, brothers, sons, and most importantly, their country.

In total, over 800,000 women served in the Red Army throughout the war. Out of that number, nearly 200,000 earned decorations for their service, many posthumously. Eighty-nine won the country’s highest honor, the Hero of the Soviet Union. The charnel house in the East claimed at least 100,000 thousand Soviet women as killed in action (KIA), missing in action (MIA), or having succumbed to their wounds. Even though they numbered nearly a million, only a few managed to secure their place in history, save for some notable examples. The Night Witches, a group of pilots who flew dangerous nighttime bombing missions, Luydmilla Pavlichenko, a sniper who within a year reached 309 confirmed kills, and Zoya Kosmodneyanskaya, an eighteen-year-old partisan who

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5 Artem Drabkin, *The Red Army at War: Rare Photographs from Wartime Archives*, trans. Vladimir Kroupnik (South Yorkshire, United Kingdom: Pen & Sword Military, 2010), 112.

6 These numbers reflect Soviet records for what they considered “draftees,” yet the number of dead in regards to female volunteers remains largely unknown due to the lack of records kept by the Soviets. Reese, 297.
(supposedly) famously yelled at her German captors before they executed her, “There are two-hundred million of us. You can’t kill us all!”

During the early 1920s and the creation of the USSR, Vladimir Lenin began to advocate for the equality of women, an idea that distinguished them from their western capitalist counterparts. However, Joseph Stalin thwarted his plan, and instead pushed for an inherently patriarchal utopia in which he himself was the “father,” soldiers and heroes the “sons,” and the state the “family.” Contrary to new ideas introduced during the revolution, old notions of gender served to validate Stalin’s new regime. The Soviets gave women more rights in terms of work options, but they encouraged the women to maintain their traditional roles. Nonetheless, Soviet women theoretically kept the right to defend their home in the case of a military attack, a call that resonated within women’s minds during the summer of 1941 when Hitler’s army invaded.

Lyudmilla Pavlichenko was an Ukranian-born Soviet sniper with 309 confirmed kills who fought in Odessa and Sevastopol from 1941-42. Wounded by mortar fire, the government pulled her from the front and sent her to tour allied countries to encourage the opening of a second front. After war’s end, she finished her education and became a historian. Zoya Kosmodeynskaya served in partisan unit 9903 from October 1941 until her death in December 1941. Her task was to burn the village of Petrischevo, the station of a German calvary regiment. The Nazis caught her, then brutally tortured and executed the eighteen-year-old. The state spread Zoya’s story to encourage enlistment. Both she and Pavlichenko received the Hero of the Soviet Union. Front Line Heroines: Stories of Ten Soviet Women (Soviet War News, 1945), 46.


Binary opposition and social gender relationships are both part of the meaning of power, and if questioned they can alter or threaten an entire government. Political upheavals, in order to legitimize their power either revise or create new terms of gender. However, new regimes can also reinforce old notions of gender to legitimize their power, as seen with Stalin and the Soviet Union. Joan Wallach Scott, “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis” The American Historical Review 91, no. 5 (December 1986): 174.
Large numbers of women engaged in actual fighting during the war, yet what did that mean? Earlier scholarship and many Soviet studies at the time maintained, or wanted to argue, that this marked a considerable achievement in women’s equality. However, if one examines more recent literature, the corollary between military effort and equality seemingly falls short. Rather, as this thesis maintains, the historiography shows that the Soviet Union deliberately evaded the use of women in combat propaganda in order to reinforce traditional gender tropes, ones that regulated their war contributions through the barrage of state sanctioned propaganda. Effectively, the Soviet Government removed women from the larger narrative of the Great Patriotic War and pushed them into the shadow of obscurity. It is the goal of this study to place them back into their rightful place amongst their comrades.

State sanctioned propaganda was the most notable way the regime distributed its rhetoric. Posters espoused Soviet ideology and demonstrated to the people of the USSR, and on a larger scale the world, the supremacy of communism. The state had mastered the formula for its art, and this was especially true during World War II. To legitimize war, posters had to invoke explicit appeals to manhood—in particular the defense of women and children.\(^{10}\) Similarly, posters prescribed women’s place in Soviet society amongst industry and general assistance. Propaganda minimally, if ever, situated women in combat; rather, it turned them into rallying points for men to fight. This was the irony of the propaganda campaigns—images of women were not in short supply, but it was how these women were portrayed that raises questions.

\(^{10}\) To legitimize war, regimes make explicit appeals to manhood—a primary way is through the defense of women and children. Governments promote a narrative that reinforces the duty of men (sons) to serve their leader (the father), and links national strength to masculinity. Scott, 173.
Although Stalin allowed women to fight against the Germans, their contributions to the battlefield rarely made headlines. Rather, Soviet propaganda characterized them as mothers, victims, and workers—accessory pieces rather than battle-hardened soldiers. By using war propaganda viewed during the early years of the war (1941-1942), I argue that the Soviet regime emphasized conventional gender roles in an attempt to write female soldiers out of the war narrative in order to maintain traditional female archetypes. Essentially, women only faced battle due to one overwhelming reason—they had to.

As seen below, the vast literature of the war effort gives short shrift to the millions of women caught up in the war. Many of the authors within the scant historiography cross-reference one another, the mention of women in the Red Army contained in larger histories is often minimal; calls for more work on the subject by extant authors are frequent, and there exists no seminal work. Obviously missing from this historiography are Russian books and articles, where Russian nationals have more direct access to records kept by their government. This is largely in part due to language barriers. However, the bibliographies of western books show that much of the scholarship is Russian, which indicates the topic is more widely studied in the east. Frankly, little in English exists prior to 2000, and any information available is brief at best.11 Mary Louise O’Brien and Lt. Col. Chris Jefferies of the United States Air Force conducted one of the first analytical American studies on the subject in 1982 when they examined how women

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functioned within the Soviet military during the Cold War in the 70s and 80s, and if it paralleled the women who served in World War II. Short and to the point, they reached a basic conclusion: Soviet women were massively involved in WWII due to the huge Red Army causalities. Although women were included in the Soviet draft laws, only during direct wartime were they enlisted—which accounted for the four-year period when women were forcibly placed in battle. The authors echo similar work in noting that most women found themselves (in the greatest percentage) in rear areas to release men for combat duty, or in medical positions. Nonetheless, many women necessarily entered combat due to the huge Soviet losses.

Sir Rodric Braithwaite, in contrast, paints a picture of heroism that clashed against the mentality of the 80s and 90s. In his book *Moscow 1941*, he provides the reader with multiple stories of women who willingly volunteered. Praskovia Sergeeva came from a village in the Kalinin Region North of Moscow. She volunteered as a nurse once the war started despite her mother’s misgivings. She saw action almost immediately, and served in the Battle of Moscow, eventually meeting with American soldiers on the Elbe. Marina Raskova, the famed pilot of the *Rodina* flight, wrote in her diary about the girls who came to volunteer at the Air Academy,

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13 Ibid.

They came from all over the capital—from colleges, from offices, from factories. They were of all kids, lightheaded, noisy, calm, reserved; some with close cropped hair, some with long thick pigtails; mechanics, parachutists, pilots and ordinary members of the Komsomol who knew nothing about flying.\textsuperscript{15}

While there are numerous examples of women who flocked to join the war effort, many were turned away in the initial months of the war. However, once casualties from the front became apparent, the government approved legislation that allowed women to enlist. Therefore, it is true that the government reached a point of necessity with recruiting women to the battlefield. However, communism raised women under the banner “all are equal,” and in turn, women saw war as their patriotic duty.\textsuperscript{16} Additionally, WWII was not a normal war—it was a cultural and ideological clash on an unprecedented scale.\textsuperscript{17}

Divergent from its predecessors, post-war literature that emerged in 2000 not only departed from the “necessity” narrative, but also dedicated full-length articles and books specifically to the topic. Reina Pennington’s \textit{Wings, Women, and War} focused exclusively on the inclusion of women in the Soviet Air Force where she discussed the larger narrative of women on the front lines.\textsuperscript{18} Pennington concluded that male soldiers who interacted directly with women on the front adjusted quickly to their presence, that

\textsuperscript{15} Braithwaite, 103.


\textsuperscript{18} Reina Pennington, \textit{Wings, Women, and War: Soviet Airwomen in World War II Combat} (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2010).
Soviet leaders did extremely little to propagandize combat women, and that rapid post-war demobilization of women from military service directly resulted due to pro-natalist policies.\textsuperscript{19} This phenomenon is mentioned repeatedly in gendered analysis of history, which insists on the importance of women’s maternal and reproductive functions.\textsuperscript{20}

Perhaps the best analysis of Soviet women in combat, however, comes from Anna Krylova’s “Stalinist Identity from the Viewpoint of Gender.” She examined the conditions in 1930s Stalinist Russia that indoctrinated a new generation of women with the belief they held equal footing with men. In her words, “…the conceivability of women’s compatibility with combat, war and violence was a product of the radical undoing of traditional gender differences that Stalinist society underwent in the 1930s.”\textsuperscript{21}

In other words, Soviet women had already become accustomed to a language of gender equality. However, as later demonstrated by their male counterparts on the battlefield, men did not share this sentiment. As Krylova argued, by the time the war kicked in Russia’s front door, women more readily saw military service as an acceptable option than in the past.\textsuperscript{22} They represented a new Soviet hybrid—a woman who could be innately feminine, yet possess military prowess.\textsuperscript{23} Krylova concludes that although these women believed they would be the “stuff of legends” for their participation in the war,

\textsuperscript{19} Pennington, \textit{Wings, Women, and War}, 163-175.

\textsuperscript{20} Scott, 174.


\textsuperscript{22} Krylova, “Stalinist Identity from the Viewpoint of Gender,” 647.

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.
their reality included harsh mistreatment by fellow soldiers, society, and the government. That mistreatment took the form of rampant sexual harassment, rumors of husband hunting, and the emphasis on silence when they returned home. Rather than becoming legends, the Soviet elite emphasized that women were “forced” to serve on the home front, and painted them as damsels in need of rescue.

More recently, the work of Roger Markwick delved deeper into the issues that haunted women after the war, particularly from a regime focused on the masculine paradigm of a soldier. Markwick compared the ways women’s written recollections coincided or diverged from the official state memory.24 Many women frontovichki (masculine: frontoviki) wished to forget the horrors they saw during the war, yet they remained proud of their “sacred duty.” Markwick noted that young generations of Russians are familiar with women who worked on the frontlines, yet they often don’t know that women served directly in combat. He notes that the 50th anniversary of the war saw a peak in the remembrance of combat women with “large celebratory publications and websites,” which explained the vast amount of literature during the following years; once again, however, that was largely a reflection on Russian literature.25 Like Krylova, Markwick suggested that women worked to maintain femininity in their positions—they would not look or behave like men. By sifting through testimonial and recollections of female veterans, Markwick concluded that women had no intention to rewrite the war’s history. When women were finally able to speak of their


25 Ibid., 405.
experiences under Khrushchev, they simply wanted to inject the female perspective of the war—which incidentally did not differ too drastically from the male.26

Markwick once again pursued the topic of female soldiers when he collaborated with Euridice Cardona (the co-author of his 2012 book) on “Our Brigade Will Not Be Sent to the Front.”27 Looking specifically at the 1st Women’s Reserve Rifle Regiment and the 1st Separate Women’s Volunteer Rifle Brigade, Markwick and Cardona used the two groups to explore the treatment those women received under the guise of equality.28 They concluded, as it was apparent in the units, that women faced harsh treatment amongst men who did not wish to fight with them, and many faced the stark reality of sexual harassment (something the Soviets fervently denied or refused to acknowledge).

Evidently, equality for women under the banner of socialism, even when they fought and died alongside men, was a lost reality. Others who produced work during this time echoed that bleak phenomenon. Again, Reina Pennington delved into the topic, and her conclusions mirrored that of Markwick and Cardona—and even those of the late 1980s.29

The Soviet state only included women as they were desperate for soldiers, and nowhere is it evidenced that they planned to allow women to turn their service into fully-fledged military careers. However, Pennington acknowledged that this was not just a Soviet problem, but part of a larger phenomenon across the globe, particularly where the war

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26 Markwick, 420.


28 Ibid., 240.

completely devastated a country and its people.\textsuperscript{30} Following the end of the war, women found themselves back in the home and encouraged to settle down and start families—very similar to the American response. However, the main difference is that Soviet women had fought in battle, killed, and died to protect the country from massacre and enslavement. The USSR advocated the mantra that “all had suffered” during the war, so the government was unsympathetic to women and their plight. In the wake of 27,000,000 dead, women were crucial to the repopulation of the country—and a military career would simply not allow that.

Anna Krylova addressed the question of gender and politics on Soviet women in WWII more fully in 2010, and the explanations effectively came full circle.\textsuperscript{31} Her monograph revisited the new identity Soviet women adopted as they came of age during the 1930s, through the notion of a complimentary “nonoppositional though still binary concept of gender.”\textsuperscript{32} To Krylova, the idea of a women’s liberation, something well chronicled in United States feminist history, never occurred, nor considered by Soviet women. Rather, women believed in an identity where they still maintained their traditional roles, the difference being they had the option to hold a nonconformist life.\textsuperscript{33} This starkly contrasts with the enthusiasm of women in the 1930s in regards to their new roles not allowed in the traditional world. More specifically, it is counterproductive to her

\textsuperscript{30} Pennington, “Offensive Women,” 775-820.


\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 13.

\textsuperscript{33} Krylova, Soviet Women in Combat, 294
2004 article. However, even with the relatively recent appearance of her book, Krylova still puts forth that the Soviet female soldier is still a critical subject of further research, as it seems that historians are still struggling as to how they are situated in the war narrative. The closure of Soviet archives under the Putin administration to western historians after they had been opened under Gorbachev cripples the efforts to develop the literature. However, this is predominantly an observation of western scholarship. Regardless of barriers, Western writers continue to examine the Soviet Union and its policies in regard to the Great Patriotic War.
CHAPTER 2

“I CANNOT IMAGINE YOU IN HIGH-HEELED SHOES!”

In these days of the Great Fatherland War, the Soviet woman once again undoubtedly has proved that she is a worthy equal. She fights against her mortal enemy—German fascism—selflessly laboring for defense and in the flames of cruel battles. Lofty and noble is the image of the Soviet Woman, defending her freedom, honor and dignity, her family hearth, the future of her children, and her right to happiness. All progressive humanity follows her struggle, inspired by her courage, fortitude, and heroism.\textsuperscript{34}

As the collapse of Imperial Russia became apparent, Lenin advocated an army for the people, comprised of the people. Involvement in World War I had nearly destroyed the ill-prepared Tsarist forces, and following the abdication of the Tsar, the Provisional Government continued the campaign against the Germans—which further destroyed the depleted army.\textsuperscript{35} These mistakes provided the ammunition the Bolsheviks needed to spark their people’s revolution, which ended the monarchy and its outgrowths once and for all. After the 1917 October Revolution, the Council of People’s Commissars elected to form the Red Army in January of 1918.\textsuperscript{36} All citizens of Russia were eligible to join,

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item Translation of the official oath taken by female soldiers in the rifle brigades. Cardona and Markwick, “Our Brigade Will Not Be Sent to the Front,” 257.
\item For three-hundred years, the Romanov family ruled over Russia by “Divine Right,” a popular notion utilized by autocratic families to legitimize their rule. The dynasty began in 1613 with Tsar Michael I, and ended along with the collapse of the entire Russian Empire under Tsar Nicholas II. Richard Service, 20-33.
\item As 1917 continued on, many in Russia were upset with Alexander Kerensky and the Provisional Government that had formed following the abdication of Nicholas II. Still involved with World War I and conditions failing to improve, the people of Russia’s cities looked towards Vladimir Lenin and his Bolshevik party to bring a people’s government to the country. On October 25\textsuperscript{th}
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
and both men and women flocked to registration offices to enlist. Even before the establishment of the Red Army, women had taken up arms during World War I, and served in growing numbers by war’s end. After the collapse of the monarchy, Maria Bochkareva, who served with the 25th Reserve Battalion of the Russian Army, convinced Alexander Kerensky to form a women’s battalion. This led to the creation of the infamous Women’s Battalion of Death, who stood between the Bolsheviks and Whites during the October Revolution. Although the battalion mounted a brave resistance against their opponents, they ultimately failed. On November 30, 1917, the Bolshevik government ordered the dissolution of all women’s military formations and units.

The expulsion of women from military service conflicted with Lenin’s public speeches that emphasized women and their newfound equality in the new Soviet State. Early in 1920, a speech published in Pravda spoke of the need to recruit women as part of the electorate. Lenin proposed that women take a more active and engaged role in state elections, as that would ultimately give them full equality with men. Lenin proclaimed, “The Soviet government was the first and only government in the world to abolish completely all the old, bourgeois, infamous laws which placed women in an inferior position compared with men and which granted privileges to men...”

(November 7th on the new calendar), Lenin and his followers led an armed assault on the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg, the seat of the Provisional Government, where they issued an ultimatum to surrender. In the end, the Bolsheviks faced little resistance, and the palace was taken peacefully with only a few causalities. Service, 62.

37 Pravda (Russian: Правда, translation “Truth”) was the official government newspaper of the Soviet Union from 1918 until the collapse of the government in 1991. The newspaper was the only state sanctioned press during its communist years, and it reflected the policies and views of the party without question. Ibid., 72, 140.

proclamation was bold, and he placed the blame on landlords, capitalists, and merchants—the bane of existence in the west.\(^\text{39}\) Lenin often spoke of the west as the vile pit of inequality, a theme that permeated his speech “On International Women’s Day.”\(^\text{40}\) He argued that capitalism did not bolster formal equality, and that “…one of the most flagrant manifestations of this inconsistency is the inferior position of woman compared with man.”\(^\text{41}\) Although Lenin’s speech garnered hope, he did very little to put the ideas of women’s equality into practice, an issue that angered his contemporary Alexandra Kollontai.\(^\text{42}\) However, Lenin’s death quenched the flames of women’s rights, and the state focused its attention on a massive transformation of the military, particularly under the rise and takeover of Joseph Stalin.\(^\text{43}\)

Famously, Stalin’s memory revolves around his draconian methods of power and control, and the most infamous action of his Great Purge of 1937.\(^\text{44}\) However, and more ironically, Stalin’s 1930s nonetheless provided new opportunities for women. The women who grew under Stalin saw themselves as equal protectors of the motherland—

\(^{39}\) Ibid.


\(^{41}\) Ibid.

\(^{42}\) Alexandra Kollontai (1872-1952) was a Russian revolutionary aligned with the Bolsheviks from 1914 until her death. In the early years of the Soviet Union she was the most prominent woman in Soviet administration and founded the Zhenotdel (Women’s Department) in 1919, but she was denounced by Lenin after she helped form a left-wing faction of the Bolshevik party. Throughout her life she disregarded traditional familial values and advocated extensively for women’s rights. Tina Braun, “Peace Profile: Alexandra Kollontai,” \textit{Peace Review} 10, no. 2 (June 1998): 295-302.

\(^{43}\) Service, 152-6.

\(^{44}\) Refer to footnote 5.
mostly in part due to the official rhetoric of communism. As Krylova argued, those women would eventually face the Nazis with strength they found from their socialist upbringing—one that stressed equality amongst the sexes. When the Germans invaded the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941, the women who Stalin reared under his initial tenure were ready to face the enemy. However, that was also the moment official rhetoric split.

The Red Army’s twenty-year existence was inherently male dominated and women were technically not allowed to enlist into military service. However, rules be damned, women flocked to the recruitment stations after the official declaration of war (Figure 1).

![Figure 1](image.png)

*Figure 1.* I. Bondarenko and S. Miryuk volunteer for the army at a recruiting center.

Although the government initially turned them away, the charnel house of the Eastern Front provided a major impetus that allowed women to enlist. With government approval and fresh vigor, these recruits found themselves amongst men in an unheard-of situation—they would now stand beside them with arms, ready to kill the enemy as soon

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45 Rowley.

46 Drabkin, 111.
as they showed themselves. In order to sell the image of women serving their country, the Soviet government turned to their most effective domestic weapon—propaganda.

The central images featured in propaganda were women who represented the Russian motherland. Posters conveyed to young enlistees the protection of their mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters stood equal with protecting Russia itself. However, that message was directed to men—not men and women. Rather, women characterized highly specific and effective tropes: the mother, victim, worker, and savior. In spite of restrictions placed on women, they viewed their service as a right and duty. Before delving into the propaganda featured in this paper, it is crucial to explain the historical bond between Russia and its people, which manifested itself as the feminine concept of “*Rodina*” (Russian: родина), the motherland.

Since the medieval period, the idea of “Mother Russia” remained an incredibly strong cultural and emotional connection for the people, regardless of their status. From the nobility to the most uneducated peasant, all knew the personified version of their homeland—a strong and proud woman, a quasi-deity in their eyes. In essence, personified Russia itself became a martyr and the soldiers a sacrifice to protect the people. The goal for those who took up arms in defense was to avenge the dead, along with their country.⁴⁷ Although the idea of the “motherland” evoked strong emotions from people, the feminine personification did not resurface until the outbreak of war. Rather, to reinforce women’s traditional roles, Stalin initially referred to Russia as the “fatherland” (Russian: отечество) and, as previously noted, situated himself as the patriarch. The shift

⁴⁷ Prokhorov. 60.
to the “fatherland” aligned with appeals to Soviet manhood, and the correlation of masculinity—manifested in soldiers—and national strength.\textsuperscript{48} Fixation on a masculine paradigm closely aligned with a return to traditional roles, and enforced the states “sons” to serve their “father,” Stalin. However, Germany’s invasion in 1941 returned the state’s narrative of masculinity in favor of the romantic notion of “divine maternity” of the Rodina, a deeply rooted cultural force.\textsuperscript{49} The choice for state propaganda to produce images that equated women to the “motherland” was highly perceptive. In effect, the millions who died without hesitation to protect their women and ancestral homeland unknowingly did so at the bidding of the regime.

The initial barrage of propaganda began in June 1941 after Germany launched Operation Barbarossa. Posters encouraged young men to enlist and join the war against the Nazis. One of the most famous posters read The motherland calls!\textsuperscript{50} (Figure 2). Here, a matronly Russian woman holds the Soviet Military Oath in her hand, with the other raised in a beckoning motion, effectively enacting either a call to arms, or more aggressively, her own charge towards the Germans invaders. On its own, a military charge forward is an inherently male action, and this mimics a seasoned field commander signaling his troops forward. Here however, the woman holds no rank, her age is ambiguous, and there are no definitive feminine traits. Flanked by an array of Mosin Nagants, the Soviet weapon of choice in WWII, the woman is further militarized. With

\textsuperscript{48} Refer to footnote 20. Scott, 173.

\textsuperscript{49} Prokhorov, 61.

\textsuperscript{50} Iraklii Toidze, The motherland calls! (Russian State Library, Poster Collection), 1941.
her hair pulled back, her strong and focused gaze directed at the viewer, and her rather masculine looking features (including her hands), the only clear hint to her gender is her dress and headscarf. With these traits, this peasant personification of Rodina lacks the vulnerable femininity of other posters that depicted women and children at risk of Nazi barbarism.

*Figure 2.* Iraklii Toidze, *The motherland calls!*

Clear and vivid, the muted background allows the woman to take center-stage; her presence the largest on the page, and her blazing red clothing would immediately grab the viewers’ attention. The color red compromised a myriad of meanings in terms of both communism and Russia as a whole. To start, deep red traditionally symbolizes blood, more specifically the blood of the workers. Under communism practice, the workers
would rise against their capitalist enemies and take back their lives and industry, undoubtedly with blood spilt along the way. More appropriately, however, red also carries a grammatical context. The word for red in Russian is “красный,” which is very similar to the word beautiful, “красивая.” With the similarity in sound, red in Russian is associated with the same thoughts one might have if something is beautiful, incidentally adding an air of femininity back into the woman. Moreover, her simple peasant style garb would be immediately recognizable to the soldier—here, Rodina is the strong Russian mother.

Women typically served as a focal point of war propaganda, which brought a personal level to the war effort and the fight. The poster Be a hero! utilized the same characteristics, yet this time it showed a woman sending her man, either son or husband, to war.\(^{51}\) (Figure 3). Different from The motherland calls! the woman here is used as a background character rather than the focal point of the piece. Shorter than her comrade, her hand placed over his heart is a nurturing rather than militaristic motion. Her gaze is that of love and pride, looking upon the face of the soldier for what may be the last time. Her facial expression also shows confidence, a strong message to the people that the country would defeat Hitler and his army. With more distinct feminine features than The motherland calls!, this woman resonates more closely with a traditional mother-archetype.

In contrast, the man towers over the woman, his uniform freshly pressed and ready to head off for battle. Unlike his wife/mother who looks upon him, he appears to

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\(^{51}\) V. Koretsky, Be a hero! (Russian State Library, Poster Collection), 1941.
look over her, metaphorically looking towards his future in the war. Slung over his shoulder is the Mosin Nagant. The gun itself is the largest object in the photo, and it extends well above both the man and woman. A symbol of Russian ingenuity and strength, the gun is the soldier’s lifeline against Hitler’s forces. Once again, the background is muted which allows the man, woman, and the Mosin, to take center stage. The red script of the original once again denotes blood, however this time it is from the soldier protecting his homeland and all he holds dear, not the worker amongst the revolution. With this poster however, it is important to note that the woman does not face any role in combat herself. Rather, she is the vessel to push him towards battle, the words Be a hero! themselves push the soldier forward, an instruction of what he must do.

Both of the posters are very simplistic in their presentation, but they drive the point home—accept the call of war, and defend Mother Russia and all you hold dear. These two pieces in particular utilized women in the more traditional way, as the “mother,” to nurture those around them yet encourage them to bravely face the enemy. Regardless of how programmed the Soviet state had its people, the twenty-seven million who died did not directly sacrifice their lives for Stalin or the party—they died for their families and for their homeland. Cleverly, however, the state recognized familial loyalty, and integrated it as a key component in the poster campaigns at the outset of war.
Although Stalin claimed victory for himself and the party, the average soldier, incidentally, could have cared less for party politics and worried more about the fate of his (or her) family if they fell into the hands of the fascists. One such poster that exemplifies this mentality, and indicated the recognition that family was the true reason to fight, is the dramatic poster *Red Army Soldier, Help!* (Figure 4)\(^{52}\) This piece depicts a mother, her child clutched protectively in her arms, defending him against the bloodstained bayonet of a German soldier, the swastika boldly emblazoned on the gun.

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\(^{52}\) V. Kopecky, *Red army soldier, help!* (Russian State Library, Poster Collection), 1942.
This depiction is much more graphic, a possible reflection of the bloody battle occurring at Stalingrad that continued to rage in 1942. However, here, the interesting distinction is that the woman is a victim, one who will fight, but a victim nonetheless. This calculated portrayal identified the woman as the regime wanted her, in need of protection from the atypical—male—Red Army soldier. This poster characterized the protection women, and the country, needed from men. Without it, all would be lost. Regardless of her depiction as a victim, the important thing to note is her posture. Rather than resigned to the inevitable, the woman has her child tucked to the side, and has placed herself directly between the blade and the child. Similar to the gaze of contemporary in *The motherland calls!* this woman looks to her enemy, conveniently out of view, with an emboldened look that conveyed her will to fight if necessary. Apart from Stalingrad, this poster also suggests Russian awareness of the atrocities Nazis committed as they made their way across the country. With knowledge of how women and children were treated, it further explains the woman’s will to fight and protect her child. This is the earliest poster that placed women in a pseudo-combat position. She does not fight in the war, but she will protect her child if necessary—a motherly obligation. For the state, this form of violence was appropriate for women, as she fulfills a female characteristic to defend her child.

The idea of defense for the people and the country served as a common theme early in the war, and posters reflected that expectation. *Red Army, Soldier, help!* was used within another poster, one that portrayed a soldier in the heat of battle. *Fight to kill!* deviated from the previous posters in terms of its ferocity, once again an homage to Stalingrad, and it was produced in full color (Figure 5). The poster invoked the power of
Figure 4. V. Kopecky, Red army soldier, help!

Figure 5. N. Zhukov, Fight to kill!
visuals twofold, once with the soldier fighting for his life, but also with the call from
victims directly behind him—the poster behind him a reminder of his own wife and child
who counted on him for safety.\textsuperscript{53} His intense and enraged glare points towards the
enemy, and the rows of magazine clips demonstrate an ongoing attack. This poster also
worked in conjunction with the previous poster, \textit{Be a hero!}, as this soldier fulfills his duty
to protect the people and his country from the fascist invaders. The lone soldier, the only
to work the machine gun, elevates him to a hero-status in his own right, a narrative
popular in Stalin’s regime. That same status did not apply to women at the time since,
according to the posters, they were not involved in combat, or even more broadly the war.
Of the four posters discussed, women only fit the mold of mother and victim. This initial
barrage of propaganda overlooked that by early 1942 thousands of women requested
combat positions, and impacted men’s view of women on the battlefield—after all, the
state has emphasized that they need protection.

The latter half of 1942 saw an important shift in women’s portrayal in propaganda
posters. Victory in Stalingrad alone cost the Red Army lost over 1,000,000 soldiers.
Added to the nearly 5,000,000 killed or wounded since Barbarossa, the decision to
include women in the war narrative became a necessity. \textit{Let’s make plenty of tanks, anti-
tank guns and MDGD, planes, guns, mortars, missiles, machine guns, rifles! All for the
front! Everything for victory!} (Figure 6) demonstrated one facet of women’s
importance—industry.\textsuperscript{54}

\textsuperscript{53} N. Zhukov, \textit{Fight to kill!} (Russian State Library, Poster Collection), 1942.

\textsuperscript{54} L. Lissitzky, \textit{All for the front! Everything for victory!} (Russian State Library, Poster Collection), 1942.
Amongst the backdrop of a factory full of workers, a man and woman gaze outward, flanked by a tank and plane. A direct reference to the popular image of “Stakhanovite” workers (more commonly known as “shock workers”), Russia’s capacity for war industry directly aided the victory over Germany. With the majority of men on the battlefield, women ensured the country’s production levels did not suffer. Again, the woman in the poster takes a back seat to her male counterpart in terms of her prominence and size, yet it metaphorically speaks to her role as the backbone in the Russian war effort.

Figure 6. L. Lissitzky, All for the front! Everything for Victory! (Shortened form).

55 Stakhanovite workers, named after Aleksei Stakhanov, were diligent and enthusiastic shock workers who sought overachievement in their work. The Stakhanovite movement significantly increased labor productivity in the Soviet Union, and the party praised them for their enthusiasm by giving them more favorable work conditions along with better pay. Overy, 18.
With the need for more bodies apparent by mid-1942, Soviet artists had no choice but to include women. Now, the reality is perhaps the artist simply decided to place a woman in his poster, as factory jobs were acceptable for women. However, beginning in 1942 the number of women with a more hands-on role in the war, both on and off the battlefield, drastically increased. Due to the importance of industry within the Soviet Union, these women became soldiers in their own right. In the state’s eyes, this provided an acceptable outlet for women to contribute. Rather than resemblance to a mother or victim, women in industrial posters fit the role of the worker. The caricature of the worker was crucial to not only Soviet ideology but also communism as a whole. The idea of the dedicated female worker fit their narrative, one promoted to the people and utilized for factory recruitment.

Apart from *All for the front! Everything for victory!*, another prominent poster of the time is (roughly translated to) *Warrior, reply to the Motherland with victory!* This poster features a strong and masculine looking woman (once again set against an empty background) who holds a bundle of wheat in one hand, a PPSh in the other (Figure 7).56

Similar to the matron in *The motherland calls!* this worker epitomized women by the end of 1942. Again stripped of any definitive female traits, her focused gaze is strong and unwavering. With the woman closely resembling her 1941 predecessor, it can be deduced that the combination of the *Rodina* and women naturally manifested itself as semi-masculine to maintain the presence of the “fatherland.”

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56 The PPSh is a Soviet submachine gun. Cheap and reliable, the gun saw extensive combat in World War II and the Korean War. Useful in close quarter combat, Georgi Shpagin developed the gun after the Winter War with Finland. By war’s end, over 5,000,000 PPSh’s were produced. D. Shmarinov, *Warrior, reply to Motherland with victory!* 1942, http://sovposters.ru/view/683/.
However, once again the red (красный) peasant blouse evokes the notion of beauty through the spoken word. Transformed into a provider, this woman offered a PPSH or wheat to the person she faced, and she spoke to both men and women. Comparable to the Mosin Nagant featured early in war posters; the PPSH was the lifeline of the soldier. It is implied the woman made the gun, now she offers it to a soldier, distinctly separating herself from actually using it. As the gun belongs to the soldier, the wheat belongs to the people.

To ensure the home front survived, women continued to work the fields and provide sustenance for those at home and those at the front. The importance of wheat can be traced back to biblical times, as John 12:24 reads “Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it
produces many seeds.” A comparison between dying wheat and dying soldiers can be inferred here. Like the wheat, a single Russian death is just that, death. However, their death in battle contributes the war as whole, which will ultimately bring victory to Russia. Therefore, the soldier’s death allows Russia to remain free, where men and women can produce Russian children without the fear of annihilation. Apart from the biblical reference, wheat played an extremely important part of Russian culture. Both Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky utilized wheat and its societal significance in their writings, and John 12:24 served as the epigraph for Dostoyevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov* along with reference in the text. Moreover, Vladimir Lenin won over the people of Russia with his simple promise of “Peace, land, and bread.” With such a powerful connection to salvation and culture, women were inexplicably linked to the traditional ideals the state promoted—a further deterrent from an active combat role. Doubling as a factory worker and as a farmer, the woman provides safety and security to the people of Russia, her motherland.

The common themes this poster collection feature is motherhood, victimhood, and work. Each poster is powerful in its own right, however they all lack a crucial subject—the female soldier. Hidden amongst the Soviet posters are two that finally tackled the question of women at the front, yet addressed it in a way that was acceptable in the regime’s narrative of the war. While both posters feature female subjects, they are portrayed in vastly different ways. Produced at the end of 1941, the first poster roughly

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57 Jn. 12:24 (New International Version (NIV)).

58 Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* (Russia: 1879).
translates to Join the army of front-line women. Women-at-arms are soldier's helpers and friends! (Figure 8). At the forefront are both a male soldier and a female combat medic, with the woman taking the foreground rather than standing behind the man. With his hands readying his weapon and hers clutching her aide pack, they are prepared to face the war zone in the background, aided by Soviet tanks, trucks, and planes—a homage to what women workers produced. The second poster is Druzhinnitsy Red Cross! Do not leave the battlefield or wounded, nor his guns! (Figure 9), which shows a much more compromising situation. Again, both a male soldier and female medic are featured, however, they are clearly in a dire predicament, crouched low and crawling on the field while explosions erupt behind them.

While both of these posters feature women, there is a stark contrast in their portrayal. The first poster is much more subdued and less hands-on for the part of the woman. Although there is clearly a battle raging behind them, the medic and soldier have yet to engage, which allows the woman to remain detached from the actual fight. Her uniform and appearance seem well kept, an encouraged trait for women on the front in spite of the conditions. It is important to highlight that while the medical field remained an appropriate tract for women to follow, the casualty rate of combat medics was extremely high.


60 Druzhinnitsy Red Cross! Do not leave the battlefield or wounded, nor his guns! 1942, www.sovposters.ru/view/705/.
Figure 8. Join the army of front-line women. Women-at-arms are soldier’s helpers and friends!

Figure 9. Druzhinnitsy Red Cross! Do not leave the battlefield or wounded, nor his guns!
Women who volunteered for the front often found themselves pushed towards the medical path, since it was viewed as a nurturing, motherly, and supportive—something that was emphasized to women on the home front by their commanders, and ultimately by the regime. However, this image is appropriately shattered with the second poster. Here, the woman is crawling along the ground with her hand wrapped around her comrade’s arm in an act that demonstrates her pulling him to safety amongst the throes of battle. With her hair disheveled and determined gaze, she accurately portrays what these women faced on the front. As always, the bright pop of red from the flag they carry into battle, along with the nurse’s cross, are prominent amongst the grayscale background, and the Mosin Nagant has reappeared.

Although this style of poster placed women on the battlefield, they still adhered to the state narrative of women’s role as an accessory. Since _Join the army of front-line women_ appeared in 1941, it is clear that the regime could not deny the outpour of female volunteers recruitment centers received. Although the typical poster at the time portrayed a woman as a mother, victim, or worker, the female soldier could not be ignored—therefore portrayal as a nurse provided an acceptable avenue.

Apart from combat medics, another role highlighted by the press was partisans. Compromised of civilians to wage guerilla warfare against the Germans, women joined these units in lieu of formal enlistment. By war’s end, the number of active partisans numbered nearly 1,000,000; however, there is no official estimate as to how many were women. Regardless, women’s presence garnered minor publicity. In 1941, the poster
From the people’s revenge, do not leave the enemy! (Figure 10) portrayed a newly formed militia with a key participant among their ranks.\textsuperscript{61}

Figure 10

As the partisans abandon the death and destruction behind them, they march onward with their Mosin Nagants. In stark contrast against soldiers from the cities, these rural partisans appear hardened with age and work, yet still ready to fight. Although war is most often associated with young men, the ferocity on the eastern front forced many into service even if they were past the acceptable age to fight. War with Germany spared no one as evidenced by these elder men, and one older woman. With skies reminiscent of

\textsuperscript{61} From the people’s revenge, do not leave the enemy! www.sovposters.ru/view/638/.
fire and a body hung from the gallows, a vengeful stare plasters the faces of the new recruits. Behind the lead man, the woman holds the same fire in her eyes. The key aspect to notice is she does not hold a gun herself, therefore her direct involvement with the group is questioned. Although she is in rank and file surrounded by rifles, it is unclear if one of the guns belongs to her or if she is simply marching with the men. Cleverly, the artist has removed the weapon from the woman, not only removing her from the narrative, but metaphorically stripping the power to kill from her hands.

As noted from the previous posters, femininity revolved around acceptable caricatures of mothers, victims, and workers. For the Soviets, femininity did not align with killing—a primary function of partisans. Although this poster acknowledged women as soldiers, it avoided the phenomenon of women in the Red Army who served as front line warriors. Service as a partisan put women and death in the same realm, however, what many actually did involved the destruction of German supplies. Therefore, the state’s narrative again portrayed women as accessories rather than combatants.

In contrast to posters that removed women from combat, *Guerilla’s revenge, without mercy!* (Figure 11) not only placed a weapon in female hands, but showed her about to kill a German soldier.62 Armed with a Mosin Nagant, the woman depicted wears no uniform, which designates her as a partisan fighter. Behind her, another soldier (it is unclear if it is a man or woman) impales their German adversary with the bayonet of their gun. Visually, the women towers above her victim.

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Figure 11. Guerilla’s revenge, without mercy!

Mouse-like in appearance, the German only shields his hand—his stance exaggerates his role as the victim, the role traditionally assigned to women. The gender reversal is clever with the portrayal of the Soviet woman as the dominant force, especially with her hardened gaze that resembles a man’s. However, the most striking image the poster displays is the method the woman uses to kill her opponent. While her comrade uses their bayonet, the woman prepares to bludgeon the Nazi with the butt of her weapon. Unlike other posters that shielded women from death, this woman is directly involved in someone’s execution, which ultimately countered the notion that women were less effective in combat than men. Contradictory with the state’s narrative, women can kill, and they will do it in a much more gruesome way that involves hand-to-hand combat.
The point of propaganda posters was to rally the people against the Germans and defend the Russian homeland. However, propaganda also served a different purpose in that they were targeted campaigns put forth by the party. As Steven Jug argues in his article “Red Army Romance,” men did not accept women at the front lines wholeheartedly (and older citizens had a hard time grasping the concept of a female soldier), largely due to an ideological perception they had about women and war—a perception reinforced by traditional female tropes in poster art. With the State Media propagating acceptable paths for women to follow, they successfully pulled female soldiers from the war narrative—although ironically they had needed them to fight Hitler’s army. With the few exceptions of women actually portrayed on the field, women in propaganda posters were often relegated to a factory job, a nurse, or simply the awaiting mother/wife/child. These roles perpetuated the female stereotype that had long been accepted before the Bolsheviks even assumed power in 1917, and continued well into the post-war years.

Susan Corbessero examined those stereotypes in her article, “Femininity (Con)scripted: Female Images in Soviet Wartime Poster Propaganda, 1941-1945.” Corbessero argued that the Soviet regime did more to hinder women and their war contributions through propaganda, as it “…represented femininity as symbolically conscripted and demobilized in order to serve wartime needs and post-war goals of reconstruction...” An integrated military, although implied by Lenin and his gender


65 Ibid., 103.
rhetoric, did not adhere with Stalin’s regime, and explains the lack of posters that portrayed female soldiers. Although 1942 saw exceptions to the rule with *Join the army of frontline women!*, *Druzhinnitsy Red Cross!*, *From the people’s revenge*, and *Guerilla’s revenge* in relation to tremendous losses suffered by the army, the majority of posters emphasized women’s role as the mother, victim, and worker—a glorified accessory piece. Following the monumental victories in Stalingrad and Kursk, posters shifted away from a combative female in favor of women who assisted the war effort in traditional ways while they waited for their men to return home. The portrayal of long-established female roles proved mainstream in the final year of the war as victory appeared imminent, and women who once resembled masculine factory workers now looked hyper-feminine with their rouged cheeks and lips, styled hair, and more form-fitting clothing as shown in *Come on, lend a hand!* (Figure 12).

![Image](image-url)  
*Figure 12. Iosif Serebrianyi, *Come on, lend a hand!* (Russian State Library, Poster Collection), 1944.*

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66 Iosif Serebrianyi, *Come on, lend a hand!* (Russian State Library, Poster Collection), 1944.
Soviet propaganda posters dominated the public sphere during the war years and this allowed the state to dictate the narrative it wanted. The regime lied to the people about Soviet defeats and the true number of war dead, and their lies perpetuated until the opening of the Russian Archives in the 1990s. However, a major wrongdoing is how they attempted to write women out of the battlefield and into the proper caricatures the state deemed appropriate. The lack of female combatants in posters, although they numbered nearly 1,000,000, demonstrated that the state did viewed military service as a necessity rather than an appropriate avenue for women. The bombardment of mothers and workers promoted the ideal woman, a narrative that held no room for women who died for Mother Russia.
CONCLUSION
“WE WANTED TO LIVE WITH GLORY”

Life after the War

In the early hours of May 9, 1945, the Moscow Radio gave the formal announcement of an ultimate victory by the Soviets over the Third Reich. Citizens in all the major cities took to the streets to rejoice and celebrate, overwhelmed with both elation and grief (Figure 13).  

Figure 13. Kiev station in Moscow. The photo was most likely taken in the autumn of 1945.

Nearly every person in the USSR was directly affected by the war, and the question now loomed—how would those whose lives intertwined with combat reintegrate into society? For men, the answer was simple; they would retake their jobs in the factories or make the

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67 Drabkin, 128.
military their career. Those who had distinguished themselves in service also had the opportunity to join the state party and engage in politics. Unfortunately, these same opportunities mostly did not exist for their female counterparts.

As women were demobilized from service, they found themselves pushed into the home and back to domestic life, although a heavily skewed reality faced them. In 1946, there were approximately 96.2 million women to 74.4 million men.\(^68\) This meant that women assumed the double-burden of post-war reconstruction in both the factories and at home. Factories required labor, and with a substantial shortage of it, women worked to rebuild Soviet production. However, they were also expected the rehabilitate the Soviet population, which left many as single-mothers who juggled motherhood and work alone. They received no special treatment for their wartime deeds, rather, like the images that refused to portray them, female combatants faded away.

The call to arms came urgently and naturally to the women who faced the horrors of Nazi occupation. Women who grew under Stalin’s regime saw their place amongst their comrades in battle as rightful. For the nearly one million who served, their lives were inexplicably altered by the ferocity that was the Great Patriotic War. However, they also faced the harsh reality that not everyone viewed their patriotic duty the same way they did. Propaganda posters excluded combat from a woman’s world and emphasized appropriate roles in the home and workplace. Crueler than the posters however, relatives and friends viewed female soldiers as husband hunters who only went to the front for men. The men they “hunted” viewed women as inferior burdens, and often turned them

\(^{68}\) Cardona and Markwick, Soviet Women on the Frontline of the Second World War, 232.
into sexual conquests over which they could wield unlimited power. And the government, the same entity that raised them under the promise of equality, turned their backs on them when they returned home from the field. Stalin’s death in 1953, nearly ten years following the war, ever so slightly allowed women (at least those who wanted to) to voice their memories of combat. Under Nikita Khrushchev, the process of de-Stalinization was enacted in an effort to usher in a less repressive era in the Soviet Union. It was under this policy that the Stalingrad hero Marshal Chuikov spoke about the horrid mistreatment of female veterans in contrast to their performance—the quote referenced in the opening of this paper. Chuikov’s sentiment acknowledged that official recognition lacked amongst the echelons of Soviet society. Due to negative attitudes towards women at the front, many repressed their feelings and memories of the war—yet in private, women still clung to pride and honor they felt for serving their country.

The following excerpt, although lengthy, demonstrated those intense feelings many harbored towards female soldiers. Originally written by Tena Kartasheva (a Belorussian wireless operator) in 1945, the anecdote “An Unforeseen Circumstance” never reached publication due to repression of women’s recollections of war. The words sadly capture the attitude of men who surely saw women exploit themselves on the field, yet also beautifully captured the strong self-image women held onto:

> Every Sunday Igor, having grabbed his skis, dropped in on Natasha and they went for a ski outside town . . . he rang the bell. Natasha was ready . . . ‘Well, let’s go’, she said, looking at him. ‘I’m ready.’ ‘Wait a moment, Natasha. Take off your leather boots please. You Look better in felt boots. I don’t like it when women wear leather boots. It makes me think of the war and army girls. I don’t want you to be like them, one little bit. I can’t

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69 Service, 338-42.

70 V. I. Chuikov and Ivan Grigorevich Paderin, Nachalo puti, Voennye memuary (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1959), 249.
stand them. I avoid all of those who were in the army; I don’t even want to speak with them. They are . . . ’ But he didn’t finish. Natasha went white. Her eyes narrowed and flashed. Her lips trembled. ‘What did you say? What did you say?’, she repeated in a choked whisper, staring at him as if he was a freak. Seizing Igor by the sleeve, she led him to the wardrobe and, flinging open the door, showed him a uniform with sergeant’s epaulettes, shiny buttons and a precisely turned-up white collar. Pinned to its left breast were two medals, on the right a badge for excellence, clearly visible in the dark wardrobe. Natasha, fondly patting her uniform, looked at him with baleful eyes that said it all: ‘What do you see here?’ Igor was silent . . . He was ashamed . . . She looked at him intently . . . I know why you have such a view of an army woman. Many of you think that if a young woman spends so long among men she must be immoral. Isn’t that right? . . . But war is also life. Many girls befriended boys. Many married them. But among your mates there were, excuse the expression, a lot of scum, for whom love, friendship or even respect was an unknown . . . ‘Yes’, he confessed finally. ‘I believe you Natasha, you are right. I never thought seriously about this. But certain striking facts and tales about bad behavior by army women gave me this impression. I pitied and despised them, but now I see how wrong I was. You have opened my eyes, as if I had just awoken. What a terrible awakening!’

Natasha’s unheralded pride in her service is contagious, and her attitude towards her boyfriend, clearly initially disdainful of female soldiers, is powerful. Although women were less likely to stand up to those who spoke ill of their service, the personal conviction they carried always stayed with them (Figure 14).


72 Drabkin, 112.
Figure 14. In 1942 a special female sniper school was established near Moscow. In twenty-seven months around 2,000 women graduated. Some became very professional and highly decorated. These snipers were armed with Mosin rifles plus PU optical sights. The girl on the right is decorated with the highest military award, the Order of the Red Banner, as well as the Order of Glory 3rd class. On her right breast is an “Excellent Sniper” badge.

The dedication women had found itself physically manifested, albeit on a much smaller scale than their male counterparts, through public memorials. The grandest Russian memorial to the Great Patriotic War is the colossal statue Memayev Kurgan, more commonly known as, The Motherland Calls (Figure 15). Overlooking Volgograd (formerly Stalingrad), construction of the memorial finished in 1967 and at the time was the tallest sculpture in the world standing at 171 ft. tall. Reminiscent of the war poster of the same name, Memayev Kurgan enacts the same patriotic call that her predecessor did in the original 1941 poster. The statue, more clearly a woman, echoed the feminine qualities and comparison to the motherland. Sword in hand, Memayev Kurgan is ready to

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73 The Motherland Calls, Concrete sculpture, Volgograd, Russia, http://artinrussia.org/motherland-calls-collapse/.
lead willing Russians into battle, a battle cry reminiscent of the past posters. Aside from being largest memorial in Russia, this statue is also one of the most infamous female statues. There are few to no memorials in Russia that honor female soldiers, specifically or part of the collective, who fought and died. However, across the sea in the capital of their old capitalist foe, the World War II Memorial in Washington D.C. features a small homage to the women encountered on the front lines (Figure 16).

Figure 15. The Motherland Calls.

Figure 16. The World War II memorial in Washington D.C. depicts Soviet and American troops meeting in Berlin. A female soldier is depicted on the left end of the Soviet forces.
Along the panels that tell the story of the war, visitors can view the final image that shows American and Soviet troops meeting in Germany. Amongst the group of Russian men, a single woman is present, clearly dressed in a soldier’s uniform. In these memorials, a glimmer of hope exists that one day the women who gave their lives to protect Russia from fascism will have their stories fully told.

It has been the point of this article to shed light on the still under-analyzed subject of Soviet women in combat in relation to the posters that portrayed them during the Great Patriotic War. As mentioned by other prominent figures in this field, the topic is still evolving as historians discover more documents in the Russian Archives and the collection of testimony from female veterans grows. On the part of the Soviet state, they failed their female combatants with their emphasis of women as accessory pieces rather than crucial soldiers—soldiers they needed to continue the fight when it seemed lost. In a country where the regime ruled over every aspect of life, the poster campaigns of the war were critical for emphasis of how the state expected its citizens to behave. By analyzing the themes of motherhood, victimhood, and assistance that posters conveyed in regard to women, it is apparent that the regime only called upon women in their hour of desperation.

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