

Conflict and Compromise for “the Invisible Combatants” of WWII:

Fighting for Freedom and Women’s Rights on the Front Line

Jagan Nautiyal

Senior Division Essay

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The global conflict of WWII could not have been fought with only half of the world's population; a compromise had to be reached between women's rights and the need for able-bodied soldiers. As U.S. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt announced at the Yalta conference, "The structure of world peace cannot be the work of one man, or one party, or one nation...it must be a peace which rests on the cooperative effort of the whole world" ("Address to Congress on the Yalta Conference"). All nations temporarily extended women's rights in order to expand their fighting forces, but Russia was the only country to formally allow women to fight in combat missions.

When the Germans invaded Russia on June 22, 1941, they destroyed 4,000 of Russia's 7,700 planes in the first week. The Russians were forced to turn to Marina Raskova to form the three women regiments that would change the course of WWII on the Eastern Front. Known as the Russian "Amelia Earhart," Raskova was the navigator on the longest non-stop flight ever recorded at the time (1938). When her aircraft started icing up over Siberia, she and the co-pilot threw everything out to gain altitude, but they



Figure 1 Raskova and her crewmembers on the longest non-stop flight ever recorded honored forever on Russian stamps (Styles).

were still falling, so Raskova jumped out to lighten the load, and was rescued ten days later. Her fearlessness and dedication in this incident made her the

most well known woman pilot and idol of her time, making her the perfect person to recruit three brand new female regiments. Her dedication continued throughout the

conflict, as she rarely slept due to constantly working with her regiments: the women's fighter pilots in the morning, the dive bombers during the day, and the night bombers in the evening. Raskova said, "We'll rest when the war is over" (Pennington). In addition to the conflict on the front, the women had to fight just as hard for the right to fight and die for their country. As night bomber Nadezhda Popova declared, "No one in the armed services wanted to give women the freedom to die" (Martin).

The compromise for the women's night bomber regiment was that they were allowed to fight, but only in Polikarpov Po-2s, which were originally meant for crop dusting. The planes had a maximum speed of 96mph, which is significantly slower than the stall speed of the German (men's) planes. The women bombers learned to be just as effective as male pilots despite their weaker planes by shutting off their engine and gliding over the target area before dropping their bombs. The Germans feared these stealth attacks,

spreading rumors that the Russian female pilots took pills to have cat-like night vision. The Germans called the women "Night Witches" due

to the sound of the wind on the wing bracing wires. By the time the Germans heard the noise, it was already too late. The women flew eight or more missions a night, since they could only carry two bombs under each wing due to the weight restrictions on their



Figure 2 Night Witches were a common propaganda topic as they struck the heart of many Russian people (Dowdy).

planes. They flew at extremely low altitudes, often lower than the treetops, compromising their own safety by not taking parachutes so that they could carry extra bombs. Night witch Polina Gelman declared, “We hated the German fascists so much that we didn't care which aircraft we were to fly; we would have flown a broom if we were able to fire at them” (Pope).

One of the most famous Russian fighter pilots in this conflict was Lily Litvak. She smuggled books on aviation into her house and told her parents she was going to an afternoon drama society, but instead went and flew at a club. By the time her parents found out, she already had her pilot's license. In June 1941 Litvak tried to enlist, but was told she did not have enough airtime. Like many of the other women, she lied and added 100 hours to her logbook and went to the next enlistment office, where she was accepted. After her training with the 586th female fighter pilot regiment, Litvak was stationed near Stalingrad with a male fighter group in September 1942. It was later that month in the battle for Stalingrad that she became really famous. On the 13th of September, Litvak became the first woman to shoot down an enemy plane. Later that day, she also shot down ace German pilot Erwin Maier. Maier asked to see the pilot who shot him down so he could congratulate “him,” and thought he was being tricked when they brought in the tiny female Lily Litvak. He refused to believe it until she gave a play by play of their aerial battle. Litvak became known as the “White Rose of Stalingrad” because of the white flowers she painted on her fuselage for every kill she made. Litvak was one of the only female ace pilots in WWII, credited with twelve individual and four shared kills. Less than a year after her first military posting, on August 1, 1943 Lily Litvak was attacked by eight Messerschmitt Bf 109s. Neither her plane nor her body were found for

many years, so she could not be awarded the title Hero of the Soviet Union, even though she fought for it and earned it.

The women in the air were not the only women fighting in the war; some of the best snipers were also Russian women. The women were initially sent home and refused military service, but due to the need for more soldiers to join the conflict, a specialized school for women snipers was created. Need necessitated the compromise. Throughout WWII, Russia allowed 2,000 women snipers to be trained, which accounted for 11,280 kills. The women snipers gained a reputation for being more patient than the men, so much so that the Germans dropped leaflets trying to recruit the women snipers. When front-line Russian soldiers often shared one rifle per ten men for lack of supplies, many of the women snipers were given a personal rifle with a plaque on the butt for shooting excellence and a congratulatory letter from Stalin.

One of the most famous women snipers was Lyudmila Pavlichenko, who was credited with 309 kills and is ranked number one in the world for deadliest female sniper.



Figure 3 Lyudmila Pavlichenko was welcomed to America by President Roosevelt and the First Lady (King).

When she was young, she joined a shooting club and won multiple awards. As soon as WWII started, Pavlichenko went down to the recruitment office and was accepted as readily as a man. After extensive

training, she was sent to the front to join the conflict, where she proved herself to be an incredible sniper. After being injured four times, Pavlichenko was finally pulled back from the front to train new women snipers. She was also sent to America and Canada to try and get them to join the war and create a second front, where she also ended up inspiring American women, including First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt. It was in the United States during a speech, where a reporter asked her about “frivolous” things like her clothing, that she replied, “I am 25 years old and I have killed 309 fascist invaders by now. Don’t you think, gentlemen, that you have been hiding behind my back for too long?” (King).

Some women had to fight harder to get into the military at the start of WWII. Before the war, Nina Petrova was a shooting instructor, and yet she was still initially refused on June 22, 1941. She was finally accepted as a sniper in November and made her way up the ranks until she became a *starshina*, the highest rank a non-commissioned officer can get. In one day, she killed 32 Nazis, giving her 100 kills at the age of 52. When General Feduninsky was signing requests for awards, he saw one that was recommending Nina Petrova for the Order of Glory 2nd class. He said about her, “Not young! You could say she is old! Call her up. Tell her to come to my place. I want to meet her. She fights better than many of the youngsters” (Obraztsov). General Feduninsky described Petrova as a thin, dynamic woman with white hair and a simple wrinkled face. When he offered her a glass of vodka, she turned it down, saying she did not drink, despite all of the things she had gone through. After their meeting, Feduninsky offered her a new uniform, to which she replied “Oh, no. No. I’m too old to get all dressed up, and besides, these pants are practical for crawling around the front lines.

However a new rifle, I wouldn't say no to. The grooves in my old barrel are totally damaged" (Obraztsov). Shortly afterwards, Petrova received a new rifle with a plaque that said "to *starshina* Petrova from the army commander" (Obraztsov). Like many women wanting their right to fight alongside men, she died a few days later when the truck she was riding in drove over a bridge that collapsed.

One of the best-known Russian women to fight for equal rights on the battlefield was Roza Shanina, who showed her fighting spirit by walking two hundred kilometers across frozen tundra, against her parents' wishes, to continue her schooling. When her regiment was placed behind friendly lines, she complained and asked to be relocated to the front, but was told "there will be enough war for you" here (Obraztsov). Shanina was also famous because she broke the rules and kept a diary while at the front, which was published after the war. Shanina was often upset about days of not fighting and wrote in her diary, "I sometimes regret not being born a man. Nobody would have paid any attention to me. Nobody would have tried to preserve me and I could have waged war as much as I wanted" (Obraztsov). She often deserted her group to sneak off to the

front to fight, saying in her diary, "I am ready to head back to the front lines again as if there were some force pulling me there. How can I explain it?... some think that I have a boyfriend on the front, but I don't know anyone. I want to fight! I want to see real war" (Obraztsov).

Arguments made by men to justify women's unequal rights and to keep them "safe" were based on immediate danger like being shot, as well as becoming prisoners of



Figure 4 Roza Shanina holding her *Triholineika* bolt-action rifle (Obraztsov).

war (POWs). Russian pilot POWs were treated better than the average prisoner, because the Luftwaffe treated them almost as equals; however, they still ate the bread that was specially made for them containing only 50% rye bran, 20% sugar beet residue, 20% cellulose flour, and 10% straw or leaf flour. Generally the women POWs fared better because many of the other prisoners gave them some of their food. Surviving for women became a bit more difficult when Stalin declared all Russians taken prisoner to be considered traitors who would be shot. German Field Marshal Gunther Von Kluge also ordered “women in uniform are to be shot” (North), despite the fact that women (snipers especially) were often tortured if they were captured. At one point, Hitler intervened on the demotion of an officer for shooting POWs saying, “We cannot blame lively spirits when they are convinced as they are that the German people are engaged in a unique battle of life and death, rejecting the Bolshevik world beyond all commandments of humanity” (North). Of the 5.7 million POWs taken, 3.5 million died in captivity, many of them shot. Nikolai Obrynba, a Russian POW, talked about how “a guard would kick a fallen prisoner and if he couldn’t get up in time, he fired his gun.” (North). These conditions did not stop women from wanting their share of the battle and glory of defeating Hitler, although only



Figure 5 WAAC Propaganda poster (Strebe).

Russian women were openly allowed on front lines. Other countries only allowed women to help in this conflict through auxiliary means, which were considered safer.

With Russia allowing women to hold combat roles nearly equal to men, Britain followed up, allowing women to join the military in non-combat auxiliary roles, including Queen Victoria herself, who joined as an ambulance driver. In the United States, although 16 women would die in combat, they were not allowed combat roles, and were only welcomed as Women's Airforce Service Pilots (WASPs) and Women's Army Corps (WACs). "Many [American] men were amazed that women could make adequate gunners despite their excitable temperament, lack of technical instincts, their lack of interest in airplanes and their physical weaknesses" (De Groot). With Eleanor Roosevelt as their champion in this country, American women simultaneously fought sexism and fascism, declaring, "This is not a time when women should be patient. We are in a war and we need to fight it with all our ability and every weapon possible. Women pilots, in this particular case, are a weapon waiting to be used" (King). The best compromise in this conflict was when American WASPs ferried planes from base to base, contributing to the Lend-Lease equipment sharing agreement with Russia, but this cooperation still did not influence American social policy into allowing women to fight alongside men. "If the nation ever again needs them, American women will respond. Never again will they have to prove they can do any flying job the military has. Not as an experiment. Not to fill in for men. They will fly as commissioned officers in the future Air Force of the United States with equal pay - hospitalization - insurance - veterans' benefits. The WASP have earned it for these women of the future" (Parrish).

“War is hell,” but it is even worse when you are not allowed to fight for your country. Women in all the Allied countries helped to defeat the Axis Powers during WWII, in one of the greatest conflict this world has ever seen, but due to social conflicts, women only gained a small measure of equality along the way. Women in Russia led their counterparts in Britain and America in the fight for equality, gaining the right to fight in combat missions that their American counterparts would not win for almost seventy-five years, a long-awaited compromise. Despite all of the hard work and advances women made during WWII, doing their part alongside men, women’s rights would not get a ‘V’ for victory for many years.

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